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DOING CRITICAL RESEARCH IN MAINSTREAM DISCIPLINES

Reflections on a Study of Black Female Individuation

Joyce Ladner, an African American sociologist, introduced a tension in qualitative work in the early 1970s. In her ethnography of young Black girls living in the inner-city, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow* (1971), and an edited volume on theory and methodology, *The Death of White Sociology* (1998/1973), Ladner excited a new generation of minority and majority group social scientists when she insisted that "value-neutrality" was neither practiced by mainstream sociology nor should it be a tenet of activist minority social science. This orientation broke with the traditional insistence that researchers achieved "objectivity" and "validity" through being removed from their own influence or impact on the research act and context. The boundaries between self and other, researcher and researched, were seen to be significantly less rigid or pure than imagined or desired. In more recent years, other critical research traditions have taken up this theme (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). Charles Menzies (2001), reviewing this critical literature, identified one rationale for this radical critique of mainstream social science as its share in the maintenance of social inequality.

Critical scholars working as "insider" researchers—bound to the researched by shared identifications—have added "reflexivity" as a core quality informing critical research (Alridge, 2003; Chaudhry, 2001). Reflexivity is broadly defined as reflection on one's own share in the construction of knowledge, particularly how and why and with what consequences this knowledge has been produced (Johnson & Duberley, 2003).

In this essay, I elaborate upon these elements in my own work. My goal is to illustrate the kinds of reflexivity called forth when one seeks to "study" a phenomenon using mainstream social science but remain alert to the limitations of that scholarship for articulating the lived-experience of the studied. First, I will describe the context and process of the 1985 study. Second, I will address the methodological issues raised by the extant literature on commitment behavior. Finally, I consider some of the strategic maneuvers qualitative research allowed me in this thorny inquiry into the contradictions and casualties of racial, gender and class oppression against the backdrop of individual agency and voice.

THE STUDY

The 1985 inquiry was a qualitative study of fifty African American women's individuation behaviors in relation to race. As a study in psychology, it was conceived under certain disciplinary assumptions regarding both theory and method. At the time, experimental and quasi-experimental designs dominated the field; and research questions, unfortunately, sometimes were guided by methodology rather the reverse. The first research issue I faced pertained to how I would frame the inquiry. This was an especially important step in a study proposing to examine psychology and Black women. The historical denigration of racial minorities in social science research has cautioned both minorities and minority scholars in this regard (Engram, 1980; Guthrie, 1998). I did not want to implement the study from within the prominent deficit and pathology models that dominated the early decades of the twentieth century (Guthrie, 1998). Thus, I needed to frame the inquiry as a critical project.

The study was entitled: "Towards a Dialectical Psychology of Commitment: Black Women, Individuation and Cultural Contradiction." The concepts "dialectics" and "cultural contradictions" were strategic additions to the mainstream psychological perspectives on commitment and individuation. As critical concepts, they announced my intention, which could be a tricky proposition for a dissertation supervised by sympathetic but mainstream faculty, to take a radical or critical stance on positivist methodologies and epistemologies.

Preliminary Work: Theorizing the Study

Framing the inquiry within the critical perspective I adopted in the early 1980s meant that I had to deal with the core issues of racial oppression and the oppressiveness of the social sciences traditionally employed to study African Americans and other disenfranchised groups. The mandate/mission identified by Ladner, among others, required me to take an ideological, partisan position on the sociohistorical contexts informing the study itself and the phenomenon—Black women's racial commitment—I proposed to define, construct, and study. For me, a heuristic model of commitment among the oppressed under conditions of cultural contradiction was the answer. Designating them as collaborators was yet another critical act and ideological decision. Although the psychological literature had only partially began to consider "experimenter's bias" as a countertransference issue (Baehr, 2004), I partly recognized that I was going to be a participant in the construction or creation of "Black female commitment" by the very nature of the questions and interactions I proposed to introduce into the lives of these women. (Only later did I begin to see just how much I was a part of the process under study.) By naming Black women's commitment-related behavior as individuation, I was also shaping the way in which I proposed to access the *epistemology* (knowledge creation) and *ethical* (relational and moral) dimensions of inquiry. Epistemology in this instance pertained to what is or can be known and how this knowledge is achieved or constructed.

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With respect to African Americans, this was an issue of *agency* (Alridge, 2003; Gresson, 1995; 2004). It was, moreover, a matter of Black female voice and agency (Gresson, 1982; Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982). Both race and gender were factors driving my decision to pursue a course sanguine to critical feminist research (Hutchinson, 1988). Treating the Black women as collaborators in the study acknowledged the epistemological issue as one concerned with whose knowledge for whom? Women who participated as well as those who refused to participate in the study often addressed this aspect of the knowledge-producing role of research (Gresson, 1995). This concern with the ethics and morality of the study also pointed to other philosophical or theoretical aspects of knowledge: subjectivism and constructivism.

Individuation, as a guiding conceptual dimension of the study of racial commitment, started from the assumption of subject primacy: the women as agents on their own business as well as that of others were the active part of this project. Related to their being active was their own *lived experience* as the basis for understanding choices, including commitments. The kinds of choices open to them as women and African-American were grounded in real day-to-day experiences. Sexuality, religion, class, and other multiple identities (Merchant & Willis, 2001) also figured in their lives.

Subjectivity and constructivism also introduced another philosophical concern, one pertinent to the methodology with which I was constructing the design. I refer here to the social construction of reality. Reality, an ontological and epistemological matter, had been popularly recognized as socially constructed in the social sciences, if not psychology per se, since the seminal essay by Berger and Luckmann (1966). Recognizing that individuals purposefully put forth realities for others about both themselves and their relations with others had been popularly described in Erving Goffman's classics, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963). These works helped create a scholarly atmosphere responsive to the discussion of purposeful activity even among the socially oppressed. Applied to African American women, these ideas—subjectivity and constructivism—pointed to the next questions about the theoretical and methodological design of the inquiry.

The Literature Review: Individuation and Black Women's Commitment

Only after addressing these broadly philosophical issues was I ready to delve into the mainstream literature on individuation and try to relate its core and pertinent aspects to the question of Black female individuation as a racial commitment issue. From this view, how these women differentiated or separated from former or assumed group identities and then reintegrated with or against them were the issues under study. In psychology, "separation individuation" is the concept used to describe the dialectical processes of separation and reintegration. Little research or theorizing had been done on this topic using non-White, middle-class subjects (Akhtar & Kramer, 1998; Gresson, 1995; Pena, 2003; Pinderhughes, 1995). Thus, hypothesis-testing the relations of individuation and minority identity and commitment, generally, and Black women, in particular, was not a meaningful way of

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accessing my interests in racial commitment as an issue in individuation. My goal was not to prove something; rather, I wanted to understand something more fully. I wanted to get beyond some of the more partisan aspects of the so-called "Black male/female sexism" and "betrayal" debates of the late 1970s (Gresson, 1982).

Previous inquiry on Black female attitudes and personal growth had yielded dialectical and incomplete descriptions (e.g., Gilkes, 1982; Myers, 1980; Rogers-Rose, 1980). Gilkes' ethnography of Black female leaders in a southern town led her to posit important enhancements of aspects of Rosabeth Moss Kanter's (1972) commitment study of communes. Gilkes found that Black women made important decisions about family and community that were complicated by their assessment of their lives at specific times in the life span. She additionally found that although class, education and various life events might take them down different initial paths, these women often ended up sharing related roles as community leaders.

Qualitative studies by Cheryl Gilkes and theoretical work by Audre Lorde and other Black feminists (Gresson, 1995) guided my thinking about the importance of agency and voice in the lives of Black women and their ongoing dialogue with Black men around each others' "racial uplift" obligations. Narratives were assuming an increasingly strong relevance in the lives and communicative initiatives of Black women activists. Mary Helen Washington, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and bell hooks were at the forefront of a cascade of Black female storytellers. Narrative had come to have some currency in psychology as well with the influence of Jerome Bruner, Kenneth Gergen, and others. The convergence of both grassroots and academic interest in narrative method was fortuitous in this regard; it proved relatively easy to get my committee to let me attempt to work with narrative methods although this was fairly new to Counseling Psychology research, especially minority focused and conducted inquiry.

At the time of my study, very little scholarship existed on minority individuation processes. But a major new area of research was under way at the University of Michigan where Patricia and Gerald Gurin and James Jackson (Gurin, 1975; Jackson, McCullough, & Gurin, 1988) headed up research teams looking at various aspects of African American mental health and identity. James Jackson and Gerald Gurin, in particular, shared their findings with me regarding the role of reference and friendship groups on the differences in Black identity dynamics. They had begun to find, through multiple regression analysis, that African Americans revealed heterogeneous and sometimes contrasting patterns of identity. This was crucial when thinking through some of the coding analysis discussed below under methodology.

Commitment theory and certain principles from ego developmental psychology, family theory and individuation psychology were only helpful in formulating a broad backdrop to the study. The dearth of solid research on racial commitment meant that a different set of theoretical ideas was needed to guide the study design and research proper. For example, the notion of culture, from a radical and Afrocentric perspective, meant alertness to the *cultural contradictions* (Bell, 1978) shaping or driving individual and group agency in ways that forefront confusion, ambivalence, even helplessness (Pinderhughes, 1982).

While psychological theorizing often neglects these structural and cultural forces, their importance was evident in Black feminist (e.g., Engram, 1982) and Afrocentric (e.g., Nobles, 1986; Stewart, 2004) scholarship. For example, methodologist Eleanor Engram (1982) wrote a path-breaking critique of the literature on the Black family, exposing the "mythic" underpinnings of alleged scholarly works. Like Ladner's earlier studies, Engram's work pointed to the significantly ideological underpinnings of social science scholarship, especially which focused on African Americans.

Multiculturalism educator-researcher James Banks (2002) pinpointed the sociological or ideological roots of the various scholarly works on racial and ethnic education. Banks argued, in the sociology of knowledge tradition, that various scholars largely approached their research through lens very much tainted by the dominant values and ideas of their period. Like Engram, Banks saw the values orientation of this scholarship. These philosophical orientations informed my method in important ways. In particular, they encouraged me to empower the collaborators over and against traditional ways of separating self as researcher from other as researched. They also led me to seek to identify dominant cultural values being renegotiated to accommodate the lived realities of the women. Michele Fine (1994) crafted a useful essay on this dynamic and challenge using the metaphor of the hyphen. For me, like other "native" researchers (e.g., Chaudhry, 2001; Mehra, 2001; Menzies, 2001), the hyphen also entailed resisting the potential of over-identification and fusion with the collaborators. Methodology was useful in this regard as well as the primary function of guiding data-collection, analysis, and interpretation.

THE METHODOLOGY

Given the paucity of research and theory on minority separation-individuation, an exploratory approach seemed the best strategy. This approach required a minimum of intrusiveness from a theoretical perspective. I could let the women, their thoughts, sharing, and actions guide both theory and interpretation or understanding. Thus, the inquiry sought to develop a theoretical framework capable of explaining aspects of the observed shifts in some aspects of Black female behavior around issues such as education, marriage, sexuality, and politics. Because I was concerned with understanding a phenomenon—racial commitment as core actions, themes and concerns—I considered grounded theory, phenomenology, narrative, ethnography, and the case study as ways of approaching the research design (Merriam, 1998).

Grounded theory development was especially attractive to me because of my own clinical and theoretical interests: I wanted to do effective interventions in the minority community, but I realized too little theory was related directly to the minority communities and circumstances I wanted to engage. A major limitation of the field was the assumption regarding the relationship between psychological healthiness and the dynamics undergirding individuation in the United States. M.D. Fishbane has noted in this regard: "… cognitive processes of differentiation take place for everyone everywhere, since every person is aware of being a separate entity. However, [the] 'individuation-separation hypothesis' goes beyond that into

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the psychological construal of self-other relations, defining healthy and pathological functioning" (2001, p. 1).

Because individuation theorizing had taken place within a class and culture bound context, it was not readily apparent to me how to frame a set of hypotheses that captured what Black women perceived their behaviors to mean. The ideas they gave for what they were trying to manage around traditional racial matters were therefore important clues to understanding the processes and dynamics involved in separation and integration behavior. The method that seemed most useful for me was one that allowed me to access their worlds with a minimum of preconceived assumptions.

Grounded theory, focusing on inductive methods of theory development, called "theoretical sampling," allowed me to enter the realm of Black female cognitions about self-other relations and conceptualize commitment in terms of their culturally derived evaluations. Their acceptance, rejection and renegotiation of these cultural-contrived values pertain to individuation. These processes and the meanings placed on them became the focus of the study.

In addition to grounded theory, other methodologies I used included ethnography, object relations theory, Afrocentric and Black identity theory, symbolic interactionism, Black feminist theory, and radical feminist theory. I also relied on a knowledge orientation I called "minority epistemology" (Gresson, 1977) which emphasized the lived experiences and shared fate realities of the oppressed. Specific methods were guided by assumptions associated with these theoretical and political writings.

Methods: Sampling, Interviews, and Participant Observation

The data-gathering techniques reflected the over-all methodological stance: collaboration with purposeful, self-other oriented women operating within conditions of cultural contradiction. Four methods were central in this phase of the study: sampling; interviews/narrative histories; ethnographic participation; and critical interpretation.

Sampling. Sampling methods were approached from the perspective that homogeneity and representativeness, while important, were less critical in this instance than heterogeneity as a critical affirmation of the live-experience and political announcements of minority scholars like Ladner whose methodological anthology, *The Death of White Sociology*, signified the collapsing of the bold line between theory and method.

The theory/concept-driven sampling criteria I used thus included: Afro-American, female, willing participant, diverse racial identifications based on life choices regarding traditional categories such as marriage, motherhood, schooling, employment, intimate interracial relationships, and so forth. I wanted to tell the stories of Black female racial identity that went beyond the surface; by allowing them to flesh out their own stories and restory themselves as racially committed women, I was both affirming and, in a way, impelling them.

In 1980 when I began this study, sampling for *heterogeneity* was an "iffy" affair: some did it ritualistically; others begged off after acknowledging the limitations of generalizing from a homogeneous—privileged, White, college student—sample. The idea of heterogeneity was then radical. I chose as diverse a sample as possible because I wanted to respond to specific theoretical and methodological assumptions or premises. First, "sampling for maximum variation" (List, 2004), meant I wanted to reach a broad range of women. So, even though I interviewed several females in interracial relationships, for instance, they varied across class, education, and religion. The goal was not to isolate one of this category or one of that; while I did not seek to exhaust or saturate my pool with "maximum variation," I did want to tap possible nuances in the stories and constructions of women around a delimited number of stimulus themes.

Collaborators were selected after initiating contact with female psychologists, community and organizational leaders, and friends. Using this reputational approach, I informed potential participants of the purpose of the study and invited them to participate. Several persons were recruited by collaborators who, after being interviewed, felt that a particular person would provide an "interesting" interview. This recruitment process illustrates the collaborative aspect; it also indicates how many of the women provided behavioral clues to their own issues around and perceptions of commitment. For example, a fifty-five-year-old mother suggested I interview her youngest daughter, a twenty-six-year-old, indicating that she did not understand why her daughter dated so many non-Black males. The mother reported that she had once dated a White man but found that she did not like White men as intimates. The daughter, in turn, suggested that I interview her cousin, whom she considered particularly interesting: the cousin did not date Black men at all; she was engaged to a White male (she later married him).

Interestingly, each of these collaborators revealed her sense of propriety and the boundaries of enlargement: the mother could deal intimately only with Black men; the daughter could date White men (she later had her first child by a White man and then married a Black man) but would not abandon intimacy with Black men; the cousin would not deal at all with Black men and chose a White mate. In short, I used the sampling procedures discussed here to expedite the theoretical work and to join the growing number of researchers who challenge the adequacy of classical research techniques for answering certain types of questions, particularly with minority populations or individuals (Engram 1982).

Interviews. I interviewed more than fifty women, but retained only fifty as formal cases. Most were interviewed between June 1982 and July 1984. Some were referred to me by friends and families, and others were self-selected because of an interest in the study or because they wanted an opportunity to share their thoughts. All were living in the New England region. Conversations with fifteen additional women about various parts of the study enriched and broadened my understanding of the initial interviews.

The women were interviewed in various settings: homes, offices, parks, shelters for battered women, and mental health settings. The interview schedule was an open-ended instrument. The interview questions were broad, focusing on background, their challenges, thoughts about Black male/female relations and the no-

tion of racial commitment—define it and how it relates or does not relate to their lives. Semi-structured, the interviews were conversational, even supportive. Some of the women were interviewed only once; others were interviewed on repeated occasions as issues arose that bore on their perspectives and stories. Because the research was collaborative, they often initiated a conversation or sent a person to be interviewed. The crucial criterion for sending them was the collaborator's perception of racial commitment as a pertinent issue occurring in the life of the new recruit. For example, one woman whose dating patterns had enlarged to include Latino and White males, wanted me to interview her cousin who had stopped dealing with Black men and was about to marry a White male. Interestingly, the rationale for sending her cousin to me was a belief that the cousin was confused about herself as a Black woman. The next interview with the initial collaborator focused on her thinking about confusion in Black women. This process is discussed further below as part of "theoretical sampling" used in the interpretation and enlargement of the data.

Ethnography and Participant Observation. I saw many of the women in social and professional situations outside of the interview per se. Because of the collaborative and relational issues we covered during the interview, we often continued aspects of their narratives in other places. For instance, I was called to Eartha's mother's home late one evening as a friend and therapist because another sister was in marital crisis. After the crisis had quieted down, Eartha and I were talking in another room about Black male-female relationships generally when she reinitiated part of her narrative, explaining some of the choices she was making in terms of the present incident.

This incident also points to the issue of phenomenology in ethnographic work. Phenomenology, particularly the work of Alfred Schutz (Gresson, 1978) on "contemporaries" and "consociates" influenced my approach to the subjective experiences and interpretations of these women and the people in their lives, including myself. Schutz viewed "contemporaries" as people bound by the same sociohistorical context; and "consociates" were people who actively co-constructed the realities to which they ascribed value. Thus, as a 21st African American male, I am a contemporary of, say, Michael Jackson. However, I am a consociate of the editor of this volume, Joe Kincheloe. Whatever the experiences I have similar to Jackson's as an African-American male, they are only imagined or imputed. However, Kincheloe and I have actually struggled against various forms of oppression in direct ways. We are consociates.

This distinction between consociate and contemporary is important to note because more and more critical and postcritical ethnography (Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004) has taken on this complex dimension as researchers seek to identify their audiences as well as their subjects. This is to say, what *knowledge* are you as researcher not only identifying/gaining an understanding of, but what *knowledge* are you also helping to create and how will you talk and write about it?

For example, one participant in my study, Akia, felt I was misunderstanding and violating the tricky relationship I had assumed with these women, and Black women, generally. As she said, "Damn it, Aaron, if you who read feminist literature, do this, what hope is there?" Her comments exposed the fact that so

much sociological and anthropological fieldwork in the past failed because of a built-in betrayal potential. It wasn't so much an issue of bias in this case, as a divided loyalty—the continued commitment to the disciplines in which we were working and seeking to gain power, prestige and wealth (Menzies, 2001).

Akia's comments spoke to the vulnerability created for those we research when they choose to trust us. I made one critical assumption about the shared or modal experiences of these women—that is, those who agreed to talk with me: they had some experiences that they wanted to work with and felt drawn to share themselves and their concerns with me. Since these women all had both the personality and position to refuse me access, as a few did, they were not controlled by me; they were comfortable relating to me. They accepted the vulnerability of openness and relatedness.

Another collaborator, Regina, felt fear that the things I might discover might poison my affection for and faith in some Black women. She was raising, in a different way, Schutz's ideas of the difference in perspective that marks a consocrate versus a contemporary. This Black woman recognized that I am potentially able to "act like a Black man" and to disidentify with the collaborators when their beliefs and behaviors cross my own identity matrix. This actually happened when I began analyzing and writing up the field notes.

Interpreting the Narratives. Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is a method of analysis that builds on the assumptions of collaborative research, especially the interpersonal relationship between myself and the collaborators. Because I was caught up in the cultural context under study, my own values, views, and beliefs had to be noted and often set aside, although I strategically introduced these when appropriate. The monitoring of my own "stuff" is referred to as "bracketing" in grounded theory (Hutchinson, 1988).

Grounded theory is a method for generating an over-arching theory about a phenomenon. In this instance, "Black female racial commitment" was the phenomenon in question. The paucity of existing data in the 1980s and the ideologically charged nature of most social science research on African Americans at the time (i.e., the "Black matriarchy") and even now (i.e., "crack mothers") influenced my decision to use this methodology. Briefly, the stages in grounded theory included:

The Research Question—this was initially "How do Black women understand their own and others' racial commitment and the influences on it?"

Data Acquisition—using interviews and participant observation.

Data Coding—analysis of the interviews and recorded observations and reflections—coding—followed the three-stage process characteristic of grounded inquiry: open, axial, and selective coding. In the open coding phase, I essentially identified the variables—factors influencing and relevant to—racial commitment. These included such things as family history, group expectations, friendships, reference groups, political perspectives, definitions of race, racism, and self-other dependence. These ideas were labelled, categorized, and related to each other in a heuristic, preliminary fashion.

Axial coding involved the use of a "coding paradigm." This is a system of coding, guided by playing with the data in new ways, aimed at identifying possible causal relationships among the categories. Here, I was trying to understand the

sense these women made of inherited and received notions of "racial commitment" and their own growth, changes, and positions. For example, the middle-aged, divorced mother who told a story of a single date with a White male in the context of raising her own concerns and questions about her daughter's almost exclusive dating of non-Black suggested several categories: exploration as commitment; rejection of choices as commitment; renegotiation of choices as commitment. Her story also indicated that choices—whether approaching or withdrawing from traditional values of "racial uplift"—were ultimately viewed as commitment and the ground for assessment. Thus, commitment to self was itself an expression of racial commitment; one marked by a shift from others' expectations and definitions to a personal definition constructed on subjective needs, experiences, and values.

The exciting moment came as these various stories rehearsed each other in terms of some of these recurrent themes/categories/relationships. Additional excitement for me occurred as I saw overlaps and reinforcement for the categories and flow of the emerging picture with earlier cited work by Gilkes, Kanter, and Jackson; and literary scholarship by Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Mary Helen Washington and others. This was all happening during a period when there was very little overlap between racially radical and critical theories, especially around the ideas of dialectics, difference, and indeterminacy. So few established concepts adequately captured the subjective energy in these women's stories.

Selective coding, the final stage, involved the identification and selection of the core category and relating it to other categories. Trevor Barker and his colleagues (undated) have observed regarding this process: "The core category is the central phenomenon around which all other categories are based. Once this has been identified, the storyline is generated as a restatement of the project in a form that relates to the core category. Validation is done by generating hypothetical relationships between categories and using data from the field to test these hypotheses. Categories may be further refined and reclassified and the storyline may be further refined. This completes the grounding of the theory."

For example, during a particularly heated moment in her narrative, Eartha declared that she wanted to leave the planet; I refer to this as the "alien" or alienation theme or code. I later coded her material at higher levels of abstraction, describing the level one codes. So the "alienation" code shifted to "earthling" after relating it to another incident in which she referred to herself as an "earthling," while explaining her approach to people across cultures, races, classes, and sexualities. I coded these incidents as "earthling," and later, after further analysis of other incidents and her analysis of them, saw the major category of "earthling" as an expression of her separation-individuation journey or narrative: through various incidents—identified by me as incidents involving losses with specific Black men—she reached an understanding of her essential difference from stereotyped "traditional Black women." She embarked on a journey, travelling with a Jazz festival and reading fortunes, during which she met and engaged all sorts of unique, highly independent people. Throughout this journey, she continued to encounter and resist racial oppression both from within and outside of the African American context. Refusing to be defined into notions of racial commitment characteristic of this cultural context with respect to certain relational choices, she identifies herself as an

"alien" ("earthling") and views her racial commitment as self-care and modelling options to others like her.

This construct developed in this sequence:

Level 1: alien

Level 2: relational self-concept

Level 3: commitment identity (relationship with self-other)

Description of self as alien is coded as feeling toward the world she experiences as oppressive and contradictory. "Alien" is a construct for the concept of alienation which includes ideas of normlessness, helplessness, powerlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement (Seeman, 1959). This relational self-concept was important. As one of the most detailed narratives, Eartha's material was a springboard for much of the initial theoretical sampling. Searching the narrative material for other representations or instances of relational self-concepts, I found a master category: earthling. This explained her identity, and her relationship as a committed Black woman to herself, the racial grouping, and the world at large.

Level three codes, illustrated in this case by "earthling," were theoretical constructs that drew on more than the data: they also included knowledge I brought to the project, emic (insider) and academic knowledge, etic (outsider). Working with codes in this way enabled me to both organize the data itself and to begin to relate the data in ways that promoted theory building. Theoretical sampling, a principal feature of grounded theory, was implicated in this coding. As the continual collecting, coding and analyzing of data in strategic ways, it enabled my accounting for all of the data gathered. By working with what data are collected in this way, one is able to identify new questions, pursue new data, and make additional refinements in the theorizing.

For example, I did not fully recognize initially the theoretical significance of the fact that most of the women who actually chose to participate in the study were engaged in racial commitment work with me. This is an important point: late in the study I realized that most of these women were not only clarifying, refining, and renegotiating their understandings and positions on "racial commitment, they were also trying to help me as a Black male to understand and communicate to my ultimate audience—the "Black Community"—the interactive, dialectical and shifting character of racial commitment in American society.

As my understanding of this larger dimension of racial commitment among these women expanded, I asked other questions and looked for other evidence in their narratives or lives that helped me understand this collusive feature of commitment processes. Interestingly, Audre Lorde had seen precisely this feature when, in an interview with Adrienne Rich, she spoke about the collusive bond forged by minority men and women (cited in Gresson, 1995). Her point was that racial oppression set up certain structural and relational conditions that encourage particular forms of shared narrative creation. These become racial narratives such as described by Blacks, Jews, Irish and other related groups. Something akin to racial narratives regarding racial commitment was co-constructed during the interviews and participant observations.

The theory of Black female racial commitment/individuation consisted of a core category, "self-other advocacy," that incorporated reflection, existential events,

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crisis, and investment of the self on behalf of self and others. Among the categories this core was related to were: social oppression (within and without group); self care/survival challenges; and enlargement of the community of concern. Variations among the collaborators' "self-other advocacy" were related to the nature of the experienced within group care, the pressures to remain constrained by traditional beliefs about racial uplift, opportunities for sharing and exploring alternative scripts and stories of self-other care as racial commitment.

Classical formulations of commitment theory have lacked a dialectical understanding of the integrative role played by women and its consequences for the psychological state of commitment. Black female individuation behavior is significantly integrative: it seeks to be inclusive of both personal and collective (in and out-group) conflicts and contradictions. Because of this tendency, Black female integration efforts, especially during periods of increased cultural upheaval, may tend to reflect the contradictions embedded in the culture as a whole.

The contradictions implicit in oppression seem to modify the popular description of commitment as a process of moving toward the in-group and away from the out-group. Among the oppressed there is a dual approach-avoidance process—one toward the in-group and one toward the out-group.

DISCUSSION: THE RESEARCH AND THEORY

The issues generated by the construction of a theory were twofold. First, did the "theoretical sampling" –the constant comparing of categories and themes— sufficiently play through with the sample and data collection methods chosen? The "core category" or variable has to be a social psychological process which explains most of the variation in the data. The idea I found that met this requirement was "self-other advocacy." It occurred often in the stories; it linked much of the other material together; and it also explained much of the variation in the data.

I was able to relate this process—advocacy as rationale and agency on behalf of self and other—to categories created by the various coding stages. But how could I ensure rigor and ground the study empirically? My task was not to meet the experimental design (positivist) criteria for rigor or tightness; it was to show that the women's beliefs and behavior could be understood in non-pathological, non-recriminating terms. Moreover, I wanted to show that the continued experience of Black female racial commitment claimed by some of the more prominent Black feminist and progressive leaders was empirically grounded, at least in subjective terms. The degree of fit among the coded data or categories gave some credibility to this possibility and perspective.

The theory also seemed to work; it had relevance to some identifiable relational or social psychological process. In this instance, the self-other advocacy embedded in the choice to differentiate from the societally-forced notions of racial commitment was an act of commitment on the behalf of self and others who also had experiences and circumstances that might lead them to prefer to make similar choices.

Among the oppressed there is a dual approach-avoidance process—one toward the in-group and one toward the out-group. Beyond a scholarly interest in com-

mitment issues, there was a personal concern: I wanted to learn more about the scope and content of Black female thought about racial matters. In my book, *The Dialectics of Betrayal: Sacrifice, Violation and the Oppressed,* I had focused on the scholarly discussions then occurring among Black academics and activists about in-group relations. This served as a theoretical context for the new inquiry. Before getting to this, however, let me explain the strategy of the study in terms of (1) theoretical and conceptual issues and (2) methods and methodology.

I began this study before critical discourse on "racialized" identities; that is, the obvious differences within socially defined groups was given less attention—we assumed despite evidence to the contrary that "Black" and "White" referred to some *essential* core. The ideology of essentialism dominated much scholarship and activism. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, only a few social and behavioral scientists concerned with racial identity issues were addressing in a sustained way the socially constructed nature of race (e.g., Gresson, 1995). While it was well understood that heterogeneity or difference was characteristic of Black communities, most still resonated to the idea of a "Black core."

"Difference" was seen as a choice to not relate to the core assumed to be there. At this point, the long tradition of intra-racial discord, called racial self-hatred by early social psychologists, had not been studied by scholars like psychologist William Cross (1991) or rhetoricians Mark McPhail (2002) or Dexter Gordon (2003). Influenced by some radical Black feminists (Ladner, 1973; Rogers-Rose, 1980; and Myers, 1980) and White Marxist feminist like Zillah Eisenstein (1979), I proceeded to formulate a research strategy that emphasized the twin notions of heterogeneity and agency-as-work.

These formulations contained decisions that were conceptual, theoretical, and ethical. Among design concerns I faced were sampling, data collection, analysis, and presentation. Within this study, I wanted to tell a holistic story—to find the unity within the diversity. This was my bias; this was my pain: fear of the loss of Black women to Black men in the face of tremendous critical—structural, material, cultural, and psychological—obstacles to the maintenance of the myth of racial oneness both imposed from without and embraced from within—during the early centuries of Euro-American oppression. My social responsibilities were to both these women and the fragile "Black community"—including me—that they had traditionally sacrificed on behalf. This social responsibility, as one researching from within, however, introduced issues of an intensified, if not altogether different, order than that associated with White researchers. Moreover, emancipatory action as an objective was equally as challenging for me to address in terms of researcher bias, contamination, and trust (Lather, 1986; Merchant & Willis, 2001).

I approached this study as an interpretive effort; I wanted to understand. This is important because I later evaluated what I understood. This happened because I became a participant and found myself being forced to split. I did not yet see my perspective as emancipation. By approaching the problem of Black women's racial commitments from these perspectives, I sought a research design that allowed me to collaborate with these women, as supportive to Black males and the community. I had a good deal of success: I gained the support of professional women who put me in touch with prospective interviewees; talked with me about my findings and

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experiences; and a number of interviewees returned to talk further with me or gain support me for other initiatives. For example, one woman who had been in therapy with me, asked to participate in the study in order to tell stories of women who had been battered, forced to give their children to their fathers, and seek shelter in mental health facilities while they regained their strength and made plans for the future. This woman called me a year after we had interviewed to come to an inner-city shelter for women and their children to provide counselling—not as a part of the study, but as a friend and ally—to a particular family. This former informant also wanted support in gaining better and more services for women like those in the shelter.

Writing to Communicate and Validate. This research was featured in my 1995, *The Recovery of Race in America*. Interestingly, this research proved more amenable for interpretation and presentation within communications rather than psychological or social science paradigms. In communications, I was able to talk about their communications as persuasive or non-persuasive to others and themselves. However, efforts to discuss the women's narratives as psychological phenomena drew me and the analysis into somewhat more essentialist, psychological evaluations. This was not my goal, but the effort to force my work and purpose into even a narrative paradigm was problematic because I was drawing on etic as well as emic resources.

These women's narratives were strategic for yet another reason. Historically, according to Kenneth Mostern (1999), autobiography was especially pertinent to the construction of racial identity. Since the categories ascribed to people defined as "Black" were constructions or abstractions, it was up to specific African American people to negotiate their identities in the contexts of their evolving, concrete—lived—experiences. The women, relating to me among others, were doing precisely this. Like more famous figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, Malcolm X, and Angela Davis, these narratives attempted to construct and transform the shared meanings of racial commitment. What emerged from the interviews and encounters with these women were themes and issues and reasons that ultimately assumed the shape of a redemptive narrative.

The collaborative dimension cannot be overstated, nor the feeling that the fact that I was a Black male talking about these issues took us into very special places. Collusion as a researcher-researched notion assumed an unanticipated but crucial place in the forging of a story. I realized that racial commitment was expressed in the very decision to participate or not participate: those who participated reacted to me as a *Black* male, assuming a connection and commitment; those who ultimately refused, five in all, did so because of the visible pain and, sometimes, anger interaction with me had stimulated. I had some nerve: trying to understand/study Black women. Only years later did I see/feel fully my own enmeshment with these Black women. I did, however, have glimpses of the peculiar bond I had forged with them. One night during a gathering with a group of Black male friends at the home of one of my closest friends, I spoke on the topic of Black male sexism and the hurtful ways we sometimes treated our women: two of the males there actually wanted to fight with me for saying these things.

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On another occasion, when I was temporarily unemployed while writing up my dissertation study in Atlanta, my late mentor, a famous Black male gerontologist and University administrator, chided me gently: 'Aaron, you worry about these Black women, but if you were a Black female instead of male, you would have a job right now.'

The stories I shared with women, such as the above, helped enlarge the scope of their shared storytelling and often revealed some of the processes/events pertinent to commitment issues. For example, my candor about my own painful experiences with domestic violence as a child, led one collaborator, whose mother had asked me to interview her because she stopped dating Black males, to tell me a powerful story: her last Black boyfriend had threatened to beat her with his belt once just around the time that her sister had been killed by her husband with their toddlers present. She described in vivid detail how she had told him that if he did not kill her, she would kill him if he did beat her. Narrative episodes such as this were pertinent to gaining a greater understanding of individuating behaviors, especially when these experiences were presented by the collaborators as clarifications of their ongoing renegotiation of commitment dynamics such as family disapproval of interracial dating.

This particular collaborator's narrative and my frequent involvement with the family yielded a massive amount of material. Her case was one of the richest sources of the data used to develop the categories and directions giving shape to the theory. Over involvement with the collaborators, enmeshment in the cultural context, and overwhelming by the massive amounts of collected data are all issues in this kind of semi-ethnographic, open-ended, and phenomenological investigating. I struggled with all of these; and the results were not always satisfactory. But it helped immensely to have chosen grounded theory as the principal methodological strategy.

CONCLUSION

Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was the primary method informing my data analysis. The idea of "theoretical sampling" allowed me to play around with ideas drawn from the Black feminist and broader feminist scholarship on identity and personal agency. Black women literary scholars, in particular, were writing about the need for Black women to find and/or raise their individual and gendered voices (Gresson, 1995). This was the theoretical and conceptual context informing my formulation of a strategy that might uncover the lived-experiences—as self-understandings, rationales, and desires—of the women as their reflected upon their differentiating and reintegrating activities.

I began with some core theoretical concepts—notably self stories of fidelity and betrayal to traditional female loyalty—that were emergent at the time. These ideas were taken from my research on Black scholars' debates marking the 1970s and early 1980s (Gresson, 1982). I did not know where these issues fit precisely in the lives of the women I identified, but the issues themselves were clues to sampling. In grounded theory, which can be a complex process, the gathered data are constructed into concepts and tentative linkages are made between these and new,

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gathered data. In my study, I was not so much concerned with evolving a holistic picture as I was obtaining an enlarged vision of the "enlarged space" Black feminists like Mary Helen Washington, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Joyce Ladner were seeking for representing the lives of Black women as self-referential and normative.

I did gradually move toward a core category, *the self-other recovery metaphor*, that allowed me to talk about these women as individuated—separated yet engaged and related—in their racial identities around matters seemingly divisive to the notion of a solitary Black community and racial core. The essence of this core concept was the collaborators' efforts to bring their own emergent race identity-experiences into some conscious harmony with the idealized or imagined Black male/community as materialized by me.

I did not fully see this process at the time, lacking the "native" researcher perspective that was just beginning to be articulated in some anthropology scholarship (Kuhuna, 2000). More precisely, the relationships I had established with these women did not lend themselves to the more detached, interpretive work I was required to take up in the formulation of a grounded theory. By becoming an integral part of the process, I was not able to detach myself in ways that allowed me to probe or dig deeper into their worlds in an "objective" rather than "subjective" way. This resulted in a truncated discourse and opened the way for biased and other evaluations on my part. These were evident during the interpretation and presentation phases.

This study was an important one to me personally and professionally. Personally, I was very much interested in better understanding the Black female-male relationship that I was living in 1980s New England. Professionally, I wanted to better prepare myself for clinical work with both Black males and females; and to strengthen my qualitative research skills. This study helped me achieve both goals. When the study was finished, I was able to successfully defend the thesis before my committee. I had produced an acceptable, if more than a little disquieting, product.

This was 1985. Grounded theory and consensual interviewing and related techniques were not common approaches in studies focused on minority subjects. Publication of my work was another matter. For mainstream journals, my work was too loosely rigorous for a field trying to affirm its place along side clinical psychology and the more experimental sociobehavioral sciences. The other possible outlets, the newly emergent feminist book series, were interested but very fearful of appearing insensitive to attributed Black female proprietary rights to talk about Black women. A Black male was especially anathema in this context since this group was then the major conflict point for many feminists (Gresson, 1982). It was not until 1992 that I first published any of my results. This was a painful experience because I chopped up so much of my narrative material and critical perspective in order to fit the material into the format of the anthology in question. Suffice it to say that the over-arching point to be made here is that one be very careful in the writing phase.

In sum, qualitative research methods can be very helpful when studying complex, racialized, sexualized phenomena within mainstream disciplines where little

empirical and theoretical work exists to guide one in formulating hypotheses for testing. It is even to be preferred over quantitative methods in some instances where the enhancement of voice and agency are primary interests. There are cautions to using these methods, however; a major one, the one I encountered in my own work, is "going native" or getting too enmeshed in the phenomena under study. An emergent literature on "the native in qualitative research" (Merchant & Willis, 2001) can be helpful in this regard.

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