

BLACK ACTIVIST MOTHERING
A Historical Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class

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Abstract

The prevalence of poor health among young disadvantaged Black mothers and their children has prompted a revival of maternal activism among Black middle-class urban women. A study of the California-based “Birthing Project,” founded in 1988, reveals that such activism is best understood as a modern-day version of Black activist mothering practiced by African-American clubwomen from the time of slavery to the early 1940s. This article demonstrates the legacy of “normative empathy” as a significant motivator for middle-class maternal activism and as a basis for a middle-class critique of Black mothering among the disadvantaged.

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For more than 20 years, reformative social policy and technological advances have done little to curb the unyielding threat of Black infant mortality. Although the overall infant mortality rate in the U.S. has been on the decline for many years, recent figures show that Black babies continue to die at more than twice the rate of those of whites (Fullilove 1993; Rowley et al. 1993; Singh and Yu 1995). This crisis, one of the most vexing problems for African America, was precipitated by a host of interrelated medical, sociodemographic, and psychosocial problems suffered primarily among the most vulnerable population: young African-American mothers of the "underclass" (Boone 1989; Fullilove 1993; Rowley et al. 1993).

While the root cause of elevated poor pregnancy outcomes among African-Americans lies in the historically oppressive conditions of Black women's lives, a popular argument is that this crisis, like many others, has been exacerbated by the restructuring of Black social capital. The persistence of poor birth outcomes for Blacks is often linked to the recent "Black flight" of the middle class from urban areas (Anderson 1990; Baca Zinn 1990; Wilson 1987, 1989). The resultant spatial concentration of disorganized, unskilled, and alienated "underclass" populations in urban neighborhoods is said to worsen the most negative features of Black mothers lives by effectively severing the long-standing link between Black middle-class maternal support and disadvantaged women.

Claims about the significance of the social class schism in the Black community are not

easily dismissed. For example, Black feminist theory has addressed, though scantily, the class polarization of the Black community and its potential to dismantle gender/ethnic solidarity.

Some authors openly admit that the strong Black maternal activist tradition is not immune to the problems of urbanization and the dislocation of women from the "once familial" character of social relationships within the community (Ladner 1986, 17). As Collins explains,

The entire community structure of bloodmothers and othermothers is under assault in many inner-city neighborhoods, where the very fabric of African-American community life is being eroded (1991, 122).

Nonetheless, while there has been a re-organization of social relations among African-American urban women, the exodus of middle-class women from urban areas has not necessarily resulted in an exodus of care, in the total removal of "an important 'social buffer' that could deflect the full impact of the kind of prolonged and increasing poverty that plagues [the inner city]" (Wilson 1987, 56). Modern Black activist women are concerned that the social degradation and isolation of young Black mothers has led to the perception that Black pregnancy and motherhood is not celebrated among the disadvantaged and that the Black community has failed to attend to the contemporary needs of African-American childbearing. They understand that social support that was common to Black pregnancy and childbearing among the poor and working classes from which they came is uncommon for many mothers today; strong, cross-class maternal support -- at least in the form they call to memory -- is not characteristic of modern Black urban life.

In assessing the damage, Black middle-class maternal activists have sought to rescue

disadvantaged mothers from their increasing social isolation. They have found it necessary to evoke a sense of gender/ethnic solidarity in creatively crossing class lines to positively affect Black pregnancy outcomes. Their main objective is to exploit the empathy of upwardly mobile community women in order to re-create maternal support for the disadvantaged of the urban community and help thwart the escalation of poor pregnancy outcomes. Contemporary “new” middle-class (Landry 1987) Black women believe that they possess a unique empathic motivation and ability to maintain ties with poor and working-class women. Furthermore, their strategy for intervention, born from a conscious, collective need to resist racist and sexist oppression, is one passed down for many generations by their Black activist foremothers.

This article revolves around two main tasks. First, it seeks to highlight sociologically cross-class maternal support of urban Black women and to politicize the community mothering practices of those from the middle-class. My analysis of this tradition is guided by a theory- and data-driven framework, “normative empathy”, constructed as a way of interpreting middle-class Black maternalist motivations to maintain cross-class networks among Black women in the 1980s and 1990s. The data were drawn via intensive interviews with volunteers from “The Birthing Project,” an organization established to service the needs of young and poor Black mothers. Second, this article argues that the struggle of Black activist women to evoke a sense of cross-class gender/ethnic solidarity in the provision of maternal support stems from a long tradition of maternal activism among middle-class Black women. One feature of this tradition has been the tailoring of activism to meet the needs of unique historical periods. Today, the women of the Birthing Project must confront an epidemiological crisis of Black childbearing qualitatively

different from that which embattled the Black community 50 years ago. The dislocation of urban Black women from one another has reached unimaginable new heights, resulting in an often difficult, frustrating struggle for gender/ethnic solidarity among the activist women. The research reported herein further elaborates a theory of social support (Cramer and McDonald 1996) which helps to expose the often unforeseen and unanticipated political and practical problematics of such support. Specifically, this article examines the contours of maternal activism among middle-class Black women; the ideological precedent for this activism; and how the consciousness of social class difference shapes the middle-class Black activist discourse and experience.

NORMATIVE EMPATHY:

FRAMING BLACK ACTIVIST MOTHERING

Social psychologists have identified two basic types of social helping behavior differentiated by the source of motivation. An actor, they contend, can be motivated to empathic helping behavior by a feeling for another's affective experiences; a personal, emotional response is summoned by a sense of connectedness to the condition of another person (Henderson 1984; Wood 1994). The actor's empathy is apparently not necessarily thought to jeopardize the selflessness with which activism is carried out and, therefore, it is possible for activism to fulfill non-egoistic *and* egoistic needs. An actor can also be motivated to normative helping behavior by general social norms -- the moral and ethical principles generated by members of a community who share a common social history and vision for social development (Montada and Bierhoff 1991). This distinction between types of activism and their motivation, however, fails to capture the unique and historically-driven experiences that have fed the Black activist mothering

tradition.

The analyses of Black women's maternal activism conducted for this study suggest that "normative empathy," a synthesis of both personal and social motivation, is a more appropriate framework for analyzing the community mothering practices of African-American women. Black women's activist motivations derive from a conjunction of empathy for other Black women who suffer or have suffered similar social disadvantage and of African-American norms of solidarity, responsibility, and accountability. That this moral obligation to enhance gender/ethnic survival inherently has egoistic as well as other-oriented bases demonstrates that existing frameworks for interpreting their activism are too simplistic for a full appreciation of this tradition.

Scholarship on Black women's social history is laced with references to Black women as important intergenerational resources in the African-American community (Christian 1985; Collins 1991; DuBois 1939; Giddings 1984; Gilkes 1989; McDonald 1995; Rodgers-Rose 1980; Sudarkasa 1988; Joseph and Lewis 1981). According to Giddings, educator and clubwoman Julia Cooper identified the special role of women's activism as "the fundamental agency under God in the regeneration... of the race, as well as the groundwork and starting point of its progress upward" (1984, 81). From a very young age, Black women are reportedly socialized to yield to the call of responsibility to "hold the Black community together" (Joseph and Lewis 1981, 106) and preserve the race and gender.

Central to the sociological framing of Black women's community activism is a unique gender/ethnic motivation. Black women's gender identities help distinguish their motivations for social activism from that of Black men; their community activism is driven by their shared,

gendered experience of slavery and has developed primarily out their mothering practices (Jones 1990). Furthermore, Black women's motivations for activism are distinguishable from white women's motivations. Their unique race/gender status has strongly influenced how they define family and community and how they determine which political strategies are best suited to meet the needs of Black women, their families, and the race as a whole (Gilkes 1988; Hine 1990; Morgen 1988; Morgen and Bookman 1988; Naples 1991 and 1992). This norm of solidarity and collective survival through community mothering practices has been characterized as Black "activist mothering" (Naples 1992) or community "othermothering",¹ a transplantation of traditional African tribal principles (Peterson 1992). The community work of Black women, like that of other women of color, is a complex practice of biological mothering, community othermothering, and political activism (Naples 1992).

Normative empathy also emphasizes the significance of social class in politicizing the task of Black women to serve their community. It is frequently noted that middle-class status compounds Black women's sense of "social debt" to the community (Higginbotham and Weber 1992, 430; McDonald 1995; Naples 1992). The "races as families" analogy promoted by the "race school" of sociology for decades, and founded upon the philosophies of W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington (Dawson 1994), strongly elevates race obligations over those of class. Individual women of the middle class are said to be held "morally culpable" (Lawson 1992, 94) if they do not live up to the expectation that successful Black women should help their less fortunate "sisters. Every woman's middle-class success story must also be a tale of how she fulfilled her moral obligation to uplift others of the race less fortunate than she (Collins 1991; Dawson 1994).

The analyses of Higginbotham (1993) and Boris (1993) speak instead to an intersection of social class and Black activism that produces a variety of maternal activist strategies operating at different levels of class and reflecting varying, class-based expressions of normative empathy. Normative empathy appears more likely to find expression among the middle class as an obligation and duty *to* the disadvantaged; by virtue of belief in their superior moral upbringing middle-class women would be inclined to teach lower-class women to be more like themselves. Normative empathy among middle-class women serves not only as motivation for social activism but also as a basis for critiquing the mothering practices of the disadvantaged.

Far less attention is paid to how class intersects with the community practices of disadvantaged Black women. While it could be understood that their access to fewer material resources would place restrictions on what poor Black women offer as community othermothers, the historical literature suggests that their reverence for and political commitment to solidarity is no less than that of their middle-class counterparts. In contrast to that among the middle class, normative empathy among the disadvantaged appears more likely to be formed from a view of all Black women and mothers as the source of uplift and to take the form of intra-class social support.

Additionally, the practice of normative empathy is temporally sensitive to the conditions of Black women's lives. The form and content of Black activist mothering have changed somewhat with the increasing polarization of Black social classes. As the problems suffered by the most disadvantaged women of the community worsen, middle-class Black activists step up their efforts to lift *them* up, and perhaps in doing so overshadow the maternal activism still operating among

the disadvantaged and focus a biased lens on the mothering practices of poorer Black women.

This study seeks to understand the motivations of the Birthing Project volunteers who are overwhelmingly middle class. No data were collected from disadvantaged populations or about them other than that which is offered from the perspective of the middle class and, therefore, this particular study does not speak to the experience of being the recipient of middle-class maternal care. It demonstrates how strongly middle-class Black women cling to the legacy of their foremothers and to a middle-class display of normative empathy.

THE BIRTHING PROJECT: RE-CREATING MATERNAL SUPPORT

The research site for the observation of contemporary, middle-class Black maternal activism was "The Birthing Project," a volunteer organization founded in Sacramento, California in 1988. The Project grew out of a resurgence of African-American women activist groups after their decline and suppression around the late 1940s (Giddings 1984), a decline that may have reflected the African-American intelligentsia's failure to embrace the broad spectrum of racial uplift efforts in the Black community (Gaines 1996). A recent survey of 22 Black women leaders representing eleven different African-American voluntary associations revealed that today there are many formal and informal Black organizations that claim to provide moderate or extensive support to Black women (Dickerson 1994).

Founded by Kathryn Hall, a health administrator, the Birthing Project offers the opportunity for young pregnant African-American women at risk for low birthweight and infant mortality to increase their chances for delivering healthy Black babies. It strives to re-create

informal social support lacking or nonexistent for many young mothers and to do so in the spirit of their activist foremothers. Early Black clubwomen were well known for having been instrumental in laying a Black communal infrastructure to "re-create the intimacy of village life they left behind" (Mathews 1992, 192).

In 1985, Hall became agitated by the statistical data circulated within the state health office where she worked which showed that the mortality rate for Black infants (age one and younger) in California was 16 per 1000 births; the rate for whites was 9 per 1000. Paralleling these statistics were the related figures on low birthweight, an equally disturbing phenomenon. Hall's experience in state health administration made her keenly aware of the limitations of maternal health and family research and policies in removing this peril from the African-American community. Frequently, state and federal administrators concluded that the problem was related to the poor "viability of black genes"; therefore, nothing, they said, could be done to lessen the racial disparity. Hall, who had herself lost a child that she believed could have been saved with proper medical care, was understandably infuriated by this racist analysis, and she set out to warn the Black community of the widespread adoption of this perspective in the health community. Little assistance could be expected from within the official maternal health infrastructure; as earlier reformers had put it, the Black community had to be told not to wait for the deliverers (Gordon, 1994).

Hall explains that the mission of the Project is "to catch a [Black] baby and pay witness to the birth." The Project re-establishes a collective of witnesses to Black births in order to legitimate the children's existence and to ensure that elder women will be there to give them

guidance.² The Project relies on the willingness of middle-class "sister-friends" to offer intimate, informal social support to underprivileged young expectant mothers during their pregnancies and for a year or more postpartum. Its founders were confident that the capacity of activist women -- upwardly mobile women from poor and working-class backgrounds -- to restore gender/ethnic solidarity across class could assist underprivileged young urban mothers and, in particular, reduce the severe risks to maternal health faced by this population.

Hall put out a call to "the ten toughest sisters" in the Sacramento area to work with her in combating the black infant mortality problem from within the Black community. Eventually, nine women (and one man) formed the original founding "sister-friends (and "brother-friend") for the Project. Together, this group devised a plan to secure the future of the Black family and Black culture. They sought to utilize the maternal gifts of Black women by exploiting the resources and resourcefulness of middle-class women who were better situated socioeconomically to tend to the maternal needs of other African-American families and who could relate to the social disadvantage suffered in those families.

As is true for most charismatic founders of community organizations, Hall personifies the Project's ideals. Her word and tone are almost theological, resonating with that of many of her famous foremothers like Mary Church Terrell, who once proclaimed that Black women's "peculiar status in this country" called them to "the great firm of progress and reform."³ Hall's concern for the witnessing of a child's birth, literally and figuratively speaking, is a concrete demonstration of what Collins (1991) contends is a Black feminist "ethic of caring:"

Nurturing children in the Black extended family networks stimulates a more

generalized ethic of caring and personal accountability among African-American women who often feel accountable to all the Black community's children (129).

It is familiar folk talk among African-Americans that it used to be such that anyone witnessing a child's birth (i.e. either being attentive to the mother around the time of the pregnancy, physically present at the birth, or involved in some way with the christening/blessing) assumed the right later in that child's life to intervene in any way he or she felt was appropriate, Hall explains. This included rightfully disciplining the child when necessary, thereby showing community love and concern. Community members of all social class backgrounds accepted and desired this intervention and saw it as a natural extension of the family.

When there are no witnesses to a marriage the union is not valid; when there are no witnesses to a baptism one's salvation is not recognized by that church. Thus, Hall argues by analogy that when the only onlookers to a Black baby's birth are its mother, an impersonal county hospital staff, and perhaps a social worker or a prison guard, that child's life goes largely unattended. Hall feels strongly that by re-creating much needed maternal support in the African-American community, the Birthing Project re-establishes an inter-class collective of witnesses to Black births in order to legitimate the children's existence and to ensure that elder and more socioeconomically stable women will be available to give them guidance.

Prospective sister-friends are introduced to the Project first through printed media, through a public presentation by Hall, or through word of mouth. The formal introduction is made when the volunteer attends one of the official training sessions typically managed by the Project's chief administrator. Training sessions primarily are meant to instruct the volunteer to

regularly convey the importance of prenatal care to her “little sister,”⁴ to suggest ways to assist tangibly in her prenatal care, such as providing her transportation to medical appointments, and to emphasize the need for the volunteer to be readily available to assist her little sister in any other way she could, such as providing her referrals to other agencies for information and support. In the extreme, the volunteer is told, one could be called upon by the Project to intervene on the little sister’s behalf should an authority’s action (e.g. social worker, judge, teacher) pose a potential threat to the healthy progress of the pregnancy or to the little sister’s personal development overall.

During these sessions volunteers are also informed about ways to minimize the stress involved in befriending the little sisters. The limitations of what they should do in their relationships, such as to not lend money, and of what the Project can reasonably accomplish is explained in detail. These sessions were re-designed somewhat in the early 1990s to accommodate the volunteers’ need to better understand the nature of the social class tensions that was likely to emerge.

The training sessions are not only useful for dispensing practical materials and information, they are often one of the few opportunities, if not the only opportunity, for the administration to transmit the overall mission of the Project and its norms and values to the sister-friends. In some cases, however, volunteers by-pass the training session to help meet the overwhelming, immediate need to service prospective little sisters. Still, the Project estimates that 100 trained sister-friends were active each year,⁵ probably fewer in the first five years.

Although the Project is most frequently referred to as a mentoring program, its social service is better understood as one that provides young mothers a personal confidant. The sister-

friends opt for a more meaningful, reciprocal, personal relationship with the little sisters that, though ultimately intended to help ensure an uneventful pregnancy and birth, is shaped by the unique personal and social circumstances of both the young mothers and the volunteers. In sum, this relationship is intended to extend the kinship bonds and networks of both parties and to politically empower all members of the community.

The Birthing Project is but one component of a larger self-help effort by community women to supplement government agency programs or to provide services nonexistent in Sacramento County. This multifaceted enterprise addresses a wide range of social and political issues, revealing a Black feminist vision of welfare akin to Black women and other women activists of an earlier era (Gordon 1994; Hamilton 1978; Harley and Terborg-Penn 1978; Jenkins 1984; Lerner 1974; Neverdon-Morton 1989; Townes 1993). Under the umbrella of the Center for Community Health and Well-Being, Inc., are parallel programs: “Imani”, which provides support to women who engaged in or who are potentially at risk for child abuse and/or substance abuse; the Economic Development Program, which trains and employs women to provide in-home support services to families; and the Comprehensive Perinatal Services Program, which offers maternal health care. The Birthing Project is acknowledged as the heart and soul of the Center, and in 1993 it became Birthing Project USA with its program replicated in 15 cities around the country. A program module produced by Hall has been used by social service agencies across the nation as well. Between 1988 and 1997, Project-related programs were established in 48 U.S. cities and one Canadian city; thirty of these program remain active.

DATA COLLECTION

The primary data collection I method used at the Birthing Project was intensive interviewing of 19 of these sister-friends in 1993. Each of these women served as a sister-friend one or more times since the organization's inception and were selected from virtually the full population of African-American sister-friends who had ever served at the Project.

Limited operating funds and personnel made it difficult over the years for the small staff at the Project to keep good, reliable records on each volunteer; age, level of education, occupational, marital, and maternal status were not recorded consistently. Though it was impossible to construct an accurate demographic profile of the sister-friends, I made a deliberate attempt to derive a study sample of 40 volunteers that cross-cut each of the sister-friend cohorts. Of the 90 women who could be identified as sister-friends, approximately 50 percent could not be reached due to insufficient or missing contact information.

Of those sister-friends who could be reached, ultimately 19 responded favorably to the invitation and completed the interview. They range in age from 17 to 61. Four were married, five divorced, one widowed, and eight had never married. Only two had no college experience (one, a 17-year old high school student), one possessed a law degree, and another was pursuing a doctorate. Nine of the women were employed in administrative staff positions with the State of California, three were college students, one was a postal worker, and five others were clerical workers or homemakers. Thirteen had biological children. With the exception of the four students, these women were either explicit or implicit in stating that their social status had once been as precarious as many of the little sisters. Sister-friend Pam (age fortysomething) summa-

rizes the latter point well:

I can see myself in those women. They can feel that; they know that I can relate to what they're going through, because a lot of what they're going through, I have been there.

An unstructured, open-ended interview guide was developed for this portion of the research, and the interviews lasted for one to two hours usually in the woman's home. The names of the respondents have been changed to protect their privacy. In addition to the interviews, I took field notes periodically at the Project from 1991-1994. I met with the organization's founder and chief office manager and visited the administrative office where a variety of everyday Project activities are undertaken. A collection of numerous published materials on the Project secured from sources on and off the site were also reviewed.

Post-World War II "Black middle-class" women are generally defined as those who work in white-collar occupations, who have higher than average levels of education, an annual income equal or greater than the median income for whites (Dawson 1994; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Wilson 1980), a community reputation based on their socioeconomic achievement (Benjamin 1991), and a lifestyle that reflects their relative economic and political power as community leaders (Dawson 1994). In light of this, I am comfortable classifying each of the sister-friends in the sample as middle class.

Secondary literature sources were consulted to help trace the history of middle-class Black maternalist activities. Black activist women of the late 19th and early twentieth centuries formalized their activist roles in establishing a nationwide self-help agenda to advance and uplift

Black womanhood and Black families from racist and sexist subordination, and to redefine Black motherhood as a political as well as a cultural strategy (Boris 1993; Shaw 1991). Documented evidence traces the formal expressions of Black maternal activism the Black Women's Club Movement to at least 1793, though its informal expression was observed earlier among female slaves and freewomen. ⁶

None of those interviewed at the Birthing Project identified the organization as middle class; rather, the Project was referred to simply as a Black, Black women's, or Black (or African-American) community organization. Noteworthy, though, is the fact that the founders and those since recruited were from the new crop of middle-class African-Americans and share many of the same social characteristics as the Black clubwomen who preceded them and also engaged in maternalist activities.

THE LEGACY OF NORMATIVE EMPATHY AT THE BIRTHING PROJECT

[The Project's founder and I] both have a passion and interest in the African-American community, particularly women, the strength, the ties that bind involvement, the burden, responsibility we take and share... for ourselves and for our kids, no matter who gave birth to them. They're all ours.

-- sister-friend Loretta

Motivations

Black maternal activism in the present day is ideologically grounded in a tradition begun

by free, slave, and later newly emancipated Black women (Christian 1985; Collins 1991; Martin and Martin 1985; Sudarkasa 1988). Half a century ago, Black clubwomen were challenged by the devastating poverty and pervasive health problems that plagued the Black community after Reconstruction as its population became more physically mobile and scattered between the North and the South (Jones 1985). In recent decades, the urban dislocation of many African Americans from middle-class support has intensified. As Pam, a sister-friend, notes, “Before, we had the extended families. And with the moving around - people moving around - we don't have the extended families anymore.”

A sense of gender/ethnic consciousness that once fueled widespread political and social cooperation and support among Blacks has been largely supplanted by individualism, mistrust, and competition as strategies for survival in the cities (Anderson 1990). The breeding of these alternative strategies has paralleled the increasing disparity of urban social resources and life chances. Government intervention for poor inner-city Blacks has been implicated, though poorly supported empirically, as a contributor to the undermining of normative empathy in the Black community (Martin and Martin 1985).

In response to the harsh realities of contemporary urban America, middle-class Black activist women like those at the Birthing Project have stepped up their efforts to preserve the race and ensure healthy, productive lives for Black mothers and children of all social classes (Dickerson 1994). Speaking on behalf of herself and other founding sister-friends at the Birthing Project, Loretta - a 38-year old state worker who provided one of the most detailed interviews in the collection - describes the motivational rationale for joining in the re-creation of maternal support,

highlighting the obligation of the Project to revitalize the community structure of female extended kin:

What we wanted to do then was to have some demonstrable impact on the lives of these young people in terms of how we were raised and how we grew up. We all came from varying backgrounds...but there were certain commonalities within that, particularly our pride in ourselves, our ties with African history, our respect for Black family, for other adults, certain key things we felt these young people were losing. It was transferred right. They didn't have the advantages of sitting at grandmother's knee or talking to their mothers and having these things transferred to them orally or in terms of how they were told to conduct their lives because parentage just wasn't going on the way it normally did in Black families; they just weren't staying together. So we really wanted to disrupt this new pattern that was taking hold of our young people...we wanted to try and re-instill those traditional values that were so important to us and to our success and that we felt was a key to the success of any person, but African American young women in particular.

Like most of the other sister-friends, Sylvia, age 48, believed that offering herself as a living example of success and self-actualization attained despite the odds was invaluable to the little sisters. "Role modeling", she explains, imparts power to disenfranchised young mothers and is significant to fulfilling one's middle-class obligation to help uplift them to safer ground.

The sister-friends of this study furnish ample evidence of a recycling of feminist support among female family members generally in times of crisis. Moreover, they believe that their

Project activities are reminiscent of the type of maternal care they had once received from their own mothers and othermothers. Their desire to oblige the tradition of othermothering, to give something back to the community now that they were upwardly mobile, often stems back to a particular, significant act of caring. For example Charlie, a 37-year old state worker, spoke of her admiration for her "strong mother," a woman who transmitted the objectives of activist mothering through her courage and persistence in raising eight well-educated children on very few material resources:

I just thought that I had learned a lot from my mother in terms of survival, in terms of values and rewards and all of that, [that] I could share.

Joyce and Janice had similar recollections. Joyce is a 22-year old college student and Janet is a divorced mother and grandmother employed with the state:

Joyce: Just looking back at all the help I got [from my mother and others] when I was pregnant...I thought that somebody else might need the same type of support that I had. I was willing, you know.

Janice: My mother is my role model; my mother is a good role model...we're best friends so I've never had a problem. I've always had a good support system throughout my whole life...

Activist mothering at the Birthing Project is fueled by personal histories of racist and/or sexist oppression that the volunteers use to help make the initial connection with their little sisters. The concrete experiences of confronting racist and sexist individuals and institutions

informs the sister-friends' views about the need for strong maternal guidance of young Black women. Tales of the moments when Black womanhood was challenged, undermined, and distorted were recalled by the sister-friends. The dialectical relationship of oppression and activism reflected in such tales were occasionally offered as a partial cause for choosing the Birthing Project as an avenue for educating young mothers about the need to demand respect for themselves and their families. For example, Doris, a 43-year old divorced mother, had this tale to offer:

[I'll tell you] what I said to brothers when I do workshops, I say, "You know, brothers, only problem I have is you cannot adopt the rules of the slave master when you have been part of the game. How can you inflict on me the same sets of standards and rules that he inflicted on me and his women when you are not part of the system. He has so little respect and regard for you, how can you turn around and be a part of his group? And you know you're not of his group." And they say to me, "Cause [you] had and can't do this, and you women need to know your place." And I say, "What place? What place? What is my place? How dare you!"

Karen's story is equally powerful in pointing to the significance to her of sisterly intervention made by a non-Black political ally. Karen is a 61-year old public servant seeking a doctorate in theology:

... I went to [the local community college] four times before they would take me because I didn't have enough education. They said, 'Oh, you'd never make it nursing'... [The registrar] said that she couldn't take me because I had five children

and I didn't have anybody to help me with them and I would miss too many days out of school... So I went and told my neighbor (Miss Trula) who was a white lady [and] she said, "Why don't you tell her she [a] prejudice SOB and get it over with." And I said, "It's late and she just didn't have room for me." She said, "Watch my smoke"... So [later] I went back in and told [the admissions officer], I said, "You just took my neighbor and you told me that you didn't have any space." She said, "I forgot you were on the waiting list, Karen." I said, "It's obvious that you don't want me in the program." ... She said, "You? You couldn't be no RN...I tell you what. If you can get your books and your uniform and get in here by Monday I'll take you." I didn't have a penny. I had ridden over there with her (Miss Trula). So I was dignified and I told Miss Trula and she bought my uniform, bought me a watch, bought my books, and she said, "Go tell her you'll be ready."

Testimonies of success and support like this form the crux of the sister-friend component of the Birthing Project in that they portray hope in a world potentially debilitating for young expectant mothers who will undoubtedly meet with similar situations. They confirm that the sister-friends are determined to see that the young Black women they seek to support will also be successful despite their adversaries. Potentially, these stories are what draw young mothers to the Project and what facilitates trust between the two parties of the maternal friendship.

Education as a Primary Goal

In addition to highly valuing cross-class gender/ethnic solidarity, putting Black mothers in contact with educational institutions (what Higginbotham calls "assimilating apparatuses" (1993,

28)) has always been related to “a very pragmatic concern [among activist women] about the relationship among training, the purity of the home, and economic survival” (1984, 101). About one-half of the volunteer women interviewed for this study made some mention of their concern for, or assistance with, their little sister's education. Julie, a fortysomething divorced mother of two adult children, said that the biggest concern for her 16-year old little sister was getting her back in school after having dropped out. Charlie would frequently “go over and help the kids [of one little sister] with their reading lessons” and made a point of “exposing” another little sister to things that would help her “be aware of how intelligent she is and realize that she has a lot to offer.”

Joyce was adamant about her little sister's right to a good education:

...she talked about going to college and she was talking about how the counselors are at school, how they don't encourage the Blacks to go school or to take college prep courses or anything like that. And I told her to demand, make sure you are put in college prep courses because if you're not then you will not get into college.

While their educational backgrounds no doubt made the sister-friends good role models, it was not clear from the interviews how much the little sisters knew about the volunteers' educational accomplishments; this was not a subject systemically covered in the interview. Nonetheless, like their foremothers, the middle-class women of the Birthing Project see educational advancement as the key vehicle for helping young Black urban mothers avoid the abyss of inner-city life.

The Issue of Social Class

I've had my car vandalized. I've been called out of my name [spoken to vulgarly].

These are not my people. I've never been afraid of my people, but I'm intimidated with the people who are over here with their gang (implying "low class") mentality.

I want to say, "You don't know how much I love Black people." They don't care because they don't have a sense of community.

- sister-friend Charlie

Working to transcend social differences is the proud centerpiece of traditional Black women's community activism. Early clubwomen fervently promoted the principle of mutual respect for all Black women who, regardless of the quality of their personal and social attributes, were equally deserving of the opportunity to move forward (Boris 1993; Higginbotham 1993⁷). According to Giddings (1984, 98), "In many instances, the lessons of their own lives had taught them that it was opportunity and environment - not circumstances of birth or previous experience - that separated them from the masses."

Even as they sought to maintain a gender/ethnic solidarity across class, however, many believed that the "moral recovery" (Boris 1993, 226) of disadvantaged Black women from their social condition was the primary substance of Black maternal activism.

Similarly, while normative empathy and middle-class obligation provide the political motivation for combating oppressive social forces that have contributed to the contemporary urban crisis, they also frequently call upon the middle-class sister-friends to take a moral stand against what they see as self-defeating values and behaviors exhibited by some members of the

little sisters. Their willingness to condemn personal irresponsibility among the young mothers has added to the tension between the parties, as has been the case among classes of African-Americans in the community at large (Lawson 1993). Hence, the maternal activists at the Project are not immune to the interpersonal effects of the increasing social dislocation of many young Black mothers in the inner-city, and their testimonies help to illustrate the complex ways in which the activists struggle to maintain their commitment to racial uplift in the midst of a deepening class schism in the Black community.

Extensive community and family involvement is common among Black middle-class women who typically view this as part of a strategy for maintaining a certain detachment from the demands of their professions and a strong attachment to the Black community and its interests (Gilkes 1983). Nevertheless, the busyness of this middle-class lifestyle is a major contributor to a heightened awareness of difference between the women. Vanessa, a 39-year old university employee, explained that she simply could not preserve enough energy to give to yet another person at the end of the day:

It was too much for me to be going to school, to be working 40 hours, [taking] care of my mom, and trying to deal with "the smoker"...Until I could drop two of the items that I had, I just called it quits...

Though she clearly recognized the potential negative consequences of an overburdened community life, Charlie failed to adequately protect herself from extreme emotional and physical burn-out. Factoring in other issues, like the time it took to commute to and from home and to paid and unpaid work sites, was also a challenge for several of the sister-friends. Janice, for

instance, commuted about 3-4 hours round-trip to work everyday which made it virtually impossible to see her little sister during the week or to attend any of the group functions held at the Project. In sum, time constraints posed by the multiple career and social obligations of these middle-class sister-friends appear to have created at least some of the reported tension between the women and may have resulted in lost opportunities to bridge social differences within the dyad. Of particular note is the fact that only 5 of the sister-friends said that they were able to be present when their little sisters gave birth.

According to the sister-friends, tension was also a consequence of the little sisters' perceptions of at least some of them as different, presumably because of their inexperience with living on "the street" and of their being materially well off. Rachel (a 26-year-old widow), for instance, found that she had to convince her little sister that she was not a "snob": "you don't know, I come from the same background [as you do]. It's just I got out of it; I was one of the lucky ones."

Some of the little sisters thought it was "strange," as Doris puts it, that middle-class women would go to such lengths to help them and not expect anything materially in return; they didn't know whether they should fully trust the volunteers or whether they themselves could ever be seen as fully trustworthy. Doris' own little sister once said to her, "You know, you don't have to do this. Nobody's paying you to do this."

The little sisters generally believed the volunteers were naive about how disadvantaged young women like themselves adapt to their oppression by learning to exploit social relationships. Pam, whose administrative position at the Project made her privy to the perceptions of both

parties, thought the young mothers' opinions on this matter were well founded:

I think [it's] what you call a socioeconomic background [that] makes a difference.

People who have been sheltered all their lives, what you call "do gooders" ... want to do things for people, but they don't understand what is going on in the life of a woman who has had to struggle and maybe had to do things that were illegal or immoral, but they had to do them to survive. People wouldn't be expected to understand that.

Limited knowledge of these survival skills may have been the basis of complaints by some of the volunteers about their little sisters' needs being too great. The seriousness of the young mothers' problems was in many instances severely underestimated:

Beatrice (25-year-old college student): I went into [this] not knowing, you know, how needy she was or what it was that she needed. And come to find out she's very needy, and I don't know that I've been there in every way that I could have been for her, but I did what I could.

Phyllis (44-year-old postal worker): The reason that it didn't work out for me with her was I felt she was too dependent, too needy. She wanted me almost as a financier and she was more dependent on me than I wanted in our relationship...there were just some things that seemed to be going on that I just didn't want to get involved with.

Volunteers expressed that they grew weary of what they characterized as deceitful,

"street-wise" ways in which some young mothers sought sympathy and material goods from their sister-friends. Pam implied that the tools of such deception are sharpened on "the street" and the behavior is reinforced each time it yields the rewards the young mothers seek. As Anderson's research (1990) reveals, "street wisdom is largely a state of mind" developed and refined as one negotiates the uncertainty of urban life (5); to be "streetwise" is to understand "how to behave" in uncertain social spaces (6). His analysis suggests that the sister-friends who were confronted with unanticipated expectations should not expect that their show of committed friendship and sisterhood will eliminate the young mother's feelings of mistrust, nor preclude the mother from employing tools of deceit to maximize the benefits she could receive from the maternal support relationship.

Closely related to their frustration with alleged deceit and manipulation is the sister-friends' displeasure with the young mothers' opportunism. The volunteers spoke frequently about the tendency of the young mothers to "take as much as they could" while the getting was good. Because the little sisters have so few resources of their own and because they know so little about how to obtain those resources, they at times lean heavily on their sister-friends for things they truly need as well as for things the sister-friends do not believe are necessary. At one point, Vanessa clearly felt that her little sister had gone over the line when, after the sister-friend agreed to take the mother shopping for baby clothes, the mother suggested that the next time they should include her biological sister and travel to another city where the "shops are better."

Displeasure about the little sisters' materialism and opportunism - particularly when it was overt - eventually turned into resentment in some instances. Their behavior fostered negative

impressions among the sister-friends about the young mothers' sincerity in developing a meaningful, quality support system based on more than material gain. Loretta's assessment of this particular dilemma is a good summary of the kinds of negative sentiments expressed:

...the young lady I got was a real opportunist. She came in thinking that she'd get in this project and I would be her taxi and I would be her benefactor and I would take her out and do all this stuff for her. And, boy, it was a real eye opener for her that that's not how I saw my role. We really had to work on that...[she is] really streetwise and, like I said, a survivor. So she was going to take whatever advantage she possibly could, which most of us - the brighter of us- will do anyway... [My little sister] was very clever - a bright young lady, potentially. Well, bright period. She had the potential for learning so much, but so much time had passed and so many other habits [had] kind of settled.

Willfully embedding oneself within the social support network of a disadvantaged urban mother necessarily involves subjecting oneself to the fierceness of the "streets" where the young woman lives. There were occasions when the sister-friend made involuntary, direct contact with the violence and hostility frequently associated with lower-class, urban existence. On such occasions, befriending across social class posed real threats to personal security, and this in turn restricted the sister-friends' ability to render maternal support. In Vanessa's case, the threat to personal safety came from the little sister's husband who Vanessa characterized as "very, very militant," extremely protective, and suspicious of the relationship his wife had with the new stranger:

I just felt like he would just as soon cut my throat...you'd walk up and knock on the door and they'd both kind of look at me. It was like [he'd say], "No, you cannot go anywhere without [me]." So we'd stay there.

Vanessa's fear was not simply of a possessive husband's hostility - domineering, hostile husbands exist at all levels of social class - but of the fact that his hostility seemed to reflect the mood of "a lot" of other people who would be at the house when she would come for the young mother.

Charlie also felt uneasy about the groups of men she would have to wade through when she went to visit her little sister; the residents were openly resentful of her because they perceived that she was "successful."

Of all the menacing situations identified by the sister-friends, stumbling into illegal drug activity and the violence surrounding it was the most frequently mentioned. Few of the young mothers connected with the sister-friends were untouched by the proliferating drug culture and drug economy in the city. In retrospect, some volunteers seemed to feel that they should all have been more fearful about entering into their befriending contracts given what knowledge they did have about drug abuse and trafficking among the Project's constituents and their families. Their obligation to befriend across class thrust them into a world far different than most of them had known:

Loretta: Many times I went to visit and walked in and didn't realize that some of the activity (drug dealing and gun toting) was going on. And I've heard a lot of things. I probably put myself at risk a number of times of being shot and didn't know it. I found out only later... a lot of us ended up, I think, in real precarious

situations that normally we would not have been in...what I did find was that most people weren't really - in their minds - prepared for the kinds of young women that we were getting - the people who really needed our services, or needed our attention, or needed our time or energy - [who] are most at risk.

Collette (49-year old state criminal justice employee): My biggest concern was her being in that type of environment and I just wanted to take her out of it...I'm trying to figure out how I can get her [to live in my duplex] with me. So I just prayed about it and prayed about it, and it just wasn't to be. So I just had to let it go and just call and check on her.

Among numerous other misfortunes, the pervasiveness of the urban drug problem has waged a vicious assault on the lives of young Black mothers and on those who want the opportunity to befriend them on their own turf. As Collins (1991) explains, the entire community structure of bloodmothers and othermothers in many inner-city neighborhoods has been eroded by the infiltration of illegal drugs alongside virtually every other aspect of African-American community life.

The fulfillment of the promise of Black activist mothering and the normative empathy that motivates it is evidenced by the successful placement of middle-class women volunteers within the maternal support networks of disadvantaged young mothers at the Birthing Project. Sister-friends engage in a wide range of maternal care activities that promote strong possibilities for good physical and psychosocial health and social mobility for the young mothers, their

children, and their families and great emotional satisfaction for the volunteers. Of the 19 sister-friends who took part in this study, all were sure that at least one word of advice, one act of assistance with prenatal care, or a single provision of some much needed material good had helped to better prepare their young mother for a healthy delivery and first year of mothering. The Project boasts that only one infant death to a little sister has occurred in the Project's history. Except for noting the quality of infant's health at birth, no consistent, official follow-up on the little sisters was conducted at the Project, but about one-half of the sister-friends reported that they had maintained contact with the mothers and their children one to five years or more after delivery. In these cases, both mother and children appeared to highly value the maternal relationship and to have incorporated the sister-friends to some degree into their familial network. The Project's evaluation is that it is highly likely that a long-term, positive effect was made in the lives of these families.

Yet even as maternal needs and race/gender/class obligations appear to be successfully met in a good many instances, there are obvious threats to the continued success of befriending across class. The reports from four of the sister-friends were more heavily laced with negativity and frustration than with satisfaction; and only one sister-friend appeared to be completely satisfied with the befriending experience she had. Like Charlie, whose exasperation about the deteriorating conditions of the urban poor is heard throughout this analysis, many have grown weary of the growing, inescapable violence and hostility of the city. Drugs and other related urban menaces contribute to the widening gap between social class groups in the Black community, a schism based both on real and perceived observations of difference.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to broaden an understanding of the tradition, nature, and significance of social class among Black, maternal activist women by employing the notion of normative empathy. The sister-friends of the Birthing Project share a concern for the plight of young, disadvantaged urban mothers and their children with their foremothers -- the Black clubwomen of the late 19th and early-twentieth centuries -- who were equally conscious of the fact that their relative social progress separated them from the masses of Black women and obligated them to play a significant role in relieving the strain on Black urban mothers' lives.

In modern times, however, the social dislocation of middle-class women from lower-class women has sharply increased, and the quality of life among the urban "underclass" mothers has rapidly deteriorated. The effort to "uplift" the race has been undermined by an increasing divergence of experiences, resources, and interests in the Black community along class lines. This divergence is realized for today's Black maternal activists, like the sister-friends at the Birthing Project, in the "burn-out" they suffer in trying to meet the demands of upwardly mobile work, family and community life; in the differentiated "street wisdom" exhibited by lower-class versus middle-class Black women that fosters resentment between them around issues of materialism, opportunism, and trust; and, most importantly, in their fear of, and frustration with, drugs and drug-related crime that is too often associated with urban Black existence. Though first-hand observation of the historical documents generated by Black clubwomen is necessary for conclusiveness on this point, cross-class experiences to maintain gender/ethnic solidarity, such as those attempted through the Birthing Project, are much more difficult today than they were for

early Black clubwomen.

In effect, the sister-friends' expressions of disillusionment about the delivery of cross-class support make a strong critique of the lower class and lack of reverence for Black motherhood and for cross-class maternal cooperation. Reports of little sisters "too needy" for the level of support the volunteers were willing to give appear to be an indictment of the mothers and not, perhaps, of the volunteers' unrealistic expectations. The volunteers' upward mobility from disadvantage seems to be insignificant in the development of a close sisterhood with young mothers who encounter them now as the "other" class of Black women. Furthermore, helping to empower the young mothers through assistance with arranging intra-class cooperation and support was never mentioned; preoccupation on the part of the volunteers with lifting them up diverted attention from the possibilities for empowering the young mothers to collectively chart their own course for success through intra-class cooperation. Together, these observations suggest that normative empathy among contemporary middle-class Black women might be no more effective in alleviating the problems of the underclass than the benevolence of well-meaning middle-class white women. Systematic study of the sister-friends' practices over a longer period of time would provide for a more complete analysis of the Project's successes and failures. Such a research effort would be greatly enhanced by data from the lower-class young women for whom these practices are intended on their views of normative empathy and their perceptions and experiences with middle-class maternal activism.

Nonetheless, the fact alone that contemporary maternal activists are willing to accept the difficult challenge of offering support to underprivileged urban mothers under these conditions

calls into question the claim that self-interested middle-class Blacks have retreated from the inner city. The mere existence of the Birthing Project demonstrates that the analysis of Black middle-class flight fails to recognize that many members of the middle class are attempting to transcend the social class gap. The work and experience of Project women strongly suggests that while class consciousness may be strong among Black women, gender/ethnic solidarity also remains strong.

I have proposed that activist mothering of this sort is best explained by a strong sense of normative empathy that historically has been shared among Black women, particularly those of relative privilege. Their consciousness and experiences as Black women bind them to one another, and their privileged status as upwardly mobile women compounds their sense of obligation to the disadvantaged. Thus, this study re-emphasizes the significance of race, gender, and class in the socialization and political interaction of urban Black women.

Finally, I believe that the evidence of class tension supports a view of cross-class social support that de-romanticizes support relationships and exposes the often unforeseen realities of providing support under difficult social conditions (Cramer and McDonald 1996). Social support providers are frequently subject to inflated expectations and may suffer emotionally when support arrangements fail to produce the results intended. In the case of the Birthing Project sister-friends, for instance, the expectations were sometimes inflated by the ideals of gender/ethnic solidarity and Black activist mothering. Therefore, I am committed to further research that helps determine the extent to which continued and increased urban social class tension threatens the survival of normative empathy and Black maternal activism as traditional, gender/ethnic-specific

tools of community resistance and self-preservation.

NOTES

1. In citing Troester (1984) and Collins (1987), James (1993) defines "othermothers" as "...those who assist blood mothers in the responsibilities of child care... They can be, but are not confined to, such blood relatives as grandmothers, sisters, aunts, cousins or supportive fictive kin.
2. **The Project originally discouraged cross-cultural matches, specifically the placing of white volunteers with Black young mothers. Recently, it has expanded to incorporate the needs of young mothers of other ethnicities, but the focus remains on recruiting and training African-American sister-friends and on the preservation of Black life and tradition.**
3. From unpublished speech (1897). First presidential address to the National Association of Colored Women; reprinted in Jones (1990), 133-138.
4. "Little sisters" are the Project's clients; the use of the title "clients" is discouraged because it unduly stresses a hierarchical relationship. In actuality, "little sisters" range in age from 14 to 44, but the title is used most often in referring to those under 30.
5. To date, the Project estimates that approximately 3,000 sister-friends have been trained nation-wide.
6. By World War I, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) -- the product of a club merger -- had grown to 50,000 members in twenty-eight federations and over one thousand clubs; hundreds of other clubwomen were members of clubs that did not join the NACW. It is highly probable that because so much of the published scholarship on the Black Women's Club Movement has been narrowly focused on the creation of the most

formal and nationally oriented federations of clubwomen, there is a biased view of the movement as being one purely developed and directed by the middle class. Generally, where the middle-class activist women organized clubs (the least prevalent and most secular form of Black women's organization), the working-class women were more likely to arrange mutual aid programs and the poor women were highly concentrated within church organizations (Gordon 1994; Scott 1990).

7. Burroughs, *National Baptist Union*, 192, 208, 289.

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