12-8-2014

Caught in the Middle: Chat(ting) about Black School Leaders

Demetricia L. Hodges

Georgia State University, dhodges3@student.gsu.edu

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to "chat" about my experience using Eurocentric theories in racial and culturally centered qualitative inquiry. The challenge I face is that I believe researchers can use Eurocentric theories to conceptualize 'appropriate' frameworks to conduct rigorous culturally responsible and sensitive research that contributes to existing scholarly dialogue and empirical literature on culturally sensitive designs in the field of qualitative research. In this paper I use my research experience to address the question, "How can researcher(s) conduct culturally responsible and sensitive research?" I use autoethnography and writing as a method of inquiry to (re)present the multi-layers of within and in-between chats while being caught in the middle. Chat metaphorically represents introspective musings, scholarly dialoguing, analyzing, interpreting, (re)presenting and defending. I use Tillman's (2002) culturally sensitive research frame as an analytic tool to critically analyze my research design. I argue that qualitative researchers of ethnic, racial and cultural communities can conceptualize appropriate frameworks from mainstream theories to conduct culturally responsible and sensitive research that can help transform the traditional knowledge of fields in education, educational leadership, urban education, and policy.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Black School Leaders, Culturally Sensitive Research, Education Leadership, Reflection, Reflexivity, Urban Education, Writing as Method of Injury

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Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia, USA

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Caught Chatting in the Middle

I ask myself,

"How did I get here, caught in the middle, chatting about the use of Eurocentric theories to explore Black school leaders in urban contexts?

How did I get here, caught in the middle, chatting about how to navigate within and in-between spaces[1] of seemingly unspoken 'theoretical allegiance'[2] as Black and woman[3] in a field of predominately Whites and males?"

The purpose of this article is to "chat" about my experience using Eurocentric theories in racial and culturally centered qualitative research. By choosing to use not one, but two

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[1] Fournillier, J. B. (2011). Working within and in-between frames: An academic tourist/Midnight robber and the academy. *Qualitative Inquiry, 17(6)*, pp. 558-567.

[2] I was thinking about how such a thing, this notion of unspoken 'theoretical allegiance' can/does potentially (re)create another layer of institutional positivism embedded with tensions—a standard set of approaches that should be used when researching certain racial, ethnic and cultural groups that are accepted as valid/trustworthy approaches by the 'power(s)-to-be'. *"But who are the power(s)-to-be? Are they the majority mainstream academia and/or the special interest academic communities?*

[3] I, as Black, woman and working-middle class, am pursuing a PhD in a field persistently dominated by White middle-class men, who have similar demographic characteristics as the men (e.g., Engeström & Spillane) that I have proposed to take into urban school environments to chat with Black school leaders.

Eurocentric theories to frame my research study of Black school leaders, I positioned myself and research in the middle of "the mainstream." I was using them to help facilitate the move of Black school leaders' voices from the margins to the center of theory, research, practice, and policymaking. The challenge I face is that I believe researchers can use Eurocentric theories to conceptualize 'appropriate' frameworks to conduct rigorous culturally responsible and sensitive research that contributes to existing scholarly dialogue and empirical literature on culturally sensitive designs in the field of qualitative research.

In this paper I use my research experience to address the question, *"How can researcher(s) conduct culturally responsible and sensitive research?"* I use autoethnography (Ellis, 2004) and writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 1994) to (re)present the multi-layers of within and in-between chats while being caught in the middle. Chat is being used metaphorically in connection to one of the theories in my conceptual framework. In this paper, chat metaphorically represents introspective musings, scholarly dialoguing, analyzing, interpreting, (re)presenting and defending. I engage in multiple chats with my emerging scholar self, scholars of educational leadership, qualitative research and Black education. I use Tillman's (2002) culturally sensitive research frame as an analytic tool to critically analyze my research design and I present within and in-between interpretative chats about my experience using Eurocentric theories for researching Black school leaders in urban communities[4].

Conceptually Chatting

I ask myself again, *"How did I get here?"* and I remind myself that a scholar's self-awareness is paramount to carrying out rigorous, ethical, and culturally-centered research in natural settings that is accepted as trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As I designed my study, I struggled with identifying theory that would best inform the exploration of contemporary Black school leaders' perspectives of their leadership practice in urban environments. Although I was anxious to begin my work, I wanted to make sure that I designed an ethical, culturally-responsive and rigorous study that centered the voices of those traditionally silenced in the field of education generally, and specifically in educational leadership and administration.

I sit quietly and calmly at my home office desk. I relax my mind into an almost Zen state to replay the theoretical chat Dr. Fournillier, my dissertation Chair, and I had early today in her 4th floor office. During this chat, she shared how she developed her qualitative research framework. Then, in her ever so distinct and melodic Trinidadian voice she asks me,

- "How are you thinking about the thing, the phenomenon of Black school leadership?"
- "What are the things, the concepts, that frame you?"

As assigned, I create a visual concept map[5] of how I perceive contemporary Black school leadership in urban environments. My frame of reference includes the educational experiences of my parents as well as my own. I create a concept map that centers leadership styles influenced by cultural/ethnic affiliation, knowledge and power. The leadership styles in turn influence enactment of policies and procedures while simultaneously being influenced

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[4] I submit that this research is important for school leadership within and in-between urban spaces in the United States as well as internationally.
[5] I created the concept map, November 18, 2010.

by and influencing professional practices and the community in an effort to attain the goal of equitable access to quality educational and structural opportunities.

I enter my Chair's office for my weekly Tuesday 2:30 PM advisement meeting. I quietly sit in a wooden chair with burgundy fabric covered cushions that is not unlike most traditional office chairs except for the flower print seat cushion blooming with warm Caribbean colors. I move the chair closer to her desk. We chat extensively about my concept map. She then asks, *"Do you know CHAT?"*

- I reply, *"No."*
- She says, "Well, write that down. You need to know CHAT."
- I write Chat. I then ask, *"What is chat?"*
- She replies, "Cultural Historical Activity Theory. You need to know it for our next meeting."

I (re)write C-H-A-T=Cultural Historical Activity Theory to my memory as we continue chatting about the other items on our meeting agenda. I take advantage of a mental pause to chat with myself,

- *"Is this a sociological theory?"*
- *"Is this a sociocultural theory, a sociohistorical theory?"*
- *"What perspectives are embedded in this theory that align with my concept map?"*

My concept map led me to frame my study with Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Distributed Leadership Theory (DLT). I was excited because I believed that the theories would provide fertile ground for the study of Black school leadership. I had chosen two theories that are "related to one another rather than merely set side by side as comparable" (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). I also had chosen two theories that are considered Eurocentric to center Black school leaders' voices despite knowing that mainstream theories historically view traditionally marginalized groups from deficit perspectives. Although I was excited about my framework, I could not help chatting with myself to critically query my theoretical design,

> *"Why had I selected these two theories rather than one(s) from an African centered orientation?"*

Cultural Allegiance Chat

As I began to reflect I realized that I was in agreement with Tillman (2002, 2006), an African American professor of Educational Leadership. I remembered asking her,

- *"What are the theoretical expectations of a Black scholar researching Black communities?*
- *Can I use Eurocentric theories to frame my research of Black communities? Or do I need to use African centered theories?"*

Tillman (2002) replied, culturally sensitive research that centers Black communities can benefit from the cultural perspectives of "both the researcher and the researched as a framework for research design, data collection, and data interpretation" (p. 3). As we neared the end of this chat, she (re)emphasized that culturally sensitive qualitative researchers must have cultural knowledge of African American communities. Culturally sensitive researchers

use their own cultural knowledge to appropriately design, conduct, analyze, interpret, and represent African Americans lived experiences.

> *"Yes, I did exactly that Dr. Tillman! I used my cultural knowledge of Black communities and their experiences with educational structures and processes in the United States to conceptualize my research design. Thank you Dr. Tillman, you have helped to ease my angst of using Eurocentric theories in my research of Black school leadership in urban communities."*

Reflective Chatting

As I walk swiftly down the impeccably clean streets of the upscale downtown community of Vancouver, BC towards the Convention Centre, I have an internal chat about my impending proposed research presentation as a UCEA 2012 David L. Clark Scholar.

> *"Okay, my work was accepted. I have been identified as an emerging scholar in the field of educational leadership, administration, and policy. And today I am presenting my work to my peers, but importantly to leading scholars in the field. I am excited that Dr. Holden[6] is one of the scholars facilitating my group. I love his work, but will he like mine? His opinion really matters to me. He is one of the leading and respected African American male scholars in the field. I cannot believe that I have this opportunity to present before him and get his feedback. I have to take copious notes with my eyes and ears so that I can later transcribe everyone's feedback, Dr. Holden's especially."*

I continue to *"reflective chat"* while simultaneously taking in this beautiful city, the various upscale retail stores, different coffee shops and eateries that decorate this perfectly landscaped street with extremely well-dressed, yet hurried people, bold aromas of espresso, and fresh baked goods.

"Mm, I will definitely stop at this coffee shop on the way back to the hotel today." I tell myself,

> *"Okay, don't be nervous. You are here for a reason—feedback, feedback, feedback on your research to ensure that—you have identified a gap in the existing literature and your work will help to fill that gap, you have clearly outlined the significance of your study, you have developed solid research questions that align with your problem statement, you have constructed a conceptual framework from two theories that will work coherently together to inform your study and you have designed a rigorous study that will hopefully expand understandings of the critical role of racial, ethnic   and   cultural diversity in the field of educational leadership."*

As I cross the street along with other conference participants, I realize that I am just a few feet away from the Clark Seminar wing and my presentation. I also realize that engaging one's self in *"reflective chatting"* is a critically important and empowering qualitative analytic process that helps me to consistently (re)examine and (re)embody my role more deeply as an ethical and responsive researcher of racial, ethnic and culturally diverse communities.

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[6] I have changed this professor's name.

Some of the questions I asked myself were:

- *"Why have I chosen to use Eurocentric theories rather than theories from Black scholars, particularly in the field of educational leadership?"*
- *"How do I reconcile using mainstream theories to research nonmainstream participants?"*
- *"Is it still a mainstream theory if a nonmainstream researcher conceptualizes it as an alternative/conceptual frame?"*
- *"Is my research culturally responsible and sensitive?"*
- *"Is my research design rigorous?"*
- *"What culturally sensitive approaches and measures have I built into my proposed study to ensure that I appropriately represent, rather than misrepresent, Blacks as effective school leaders in urban contexts specifically, but importantly in the field of educational administration?"*
- *"What are the social, cultural, political, and even economic implications I may face when attempting to enter the academy, more specifically the Black academic community?"*
- *"Will the Black academic community accept me as a Black scholar and accept my research as culturally sensitive and trustworthy?"*

I present my proposed research to the UCEA David L. Clark facilitators and my fellow scholars. There seemingly is interest in my conceptual framework. I am pleased with their questions and feedback. Several of us take pictures together, exchange business cards, and plan to have dinner together later today. I feel the tension(s)[7] roll from both my mind and shoulders onto the floor as I stand here in the Convention Centre looking out at the amazingly aqua blue water of Coal Harbor. I exhale a sigh of relief as the lake's waves carry away some of the tension(s). I think to myself,

> *"I am glad that the presentational part of the seminar is over, but were there things unsaid, unspoken, unasked by my audience?"*

I am still unsure whether I have truly reconciled the contradictions seemingly embedded within my proposed research design.

> *"How did I get here? Will I ever be able to move from being caught in the middle?"*

I continue to reflectively chat with my emerging scholar. I tell myself,

- *"You need to call upon the ancestors."*
- *"Summon the words and work of your mentor. She and her scholarship are a part of who you are now. They, too, help shape who you are as an emerging scholar."*

I recall a chat about epistemological racism I had with Dr. Fournillier. She talked about how she was able to reconcile her own personal struggles of theorizing Black culture with Western

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[7] Tension(s) are multi-layered. I am feeling physical tension because my body muscles are twisted into knots. I am also experiencing mental tension, which I can best describe as internal contradictions—regarding using mainstream rather than African centered theories for my study.

knowledge (2011). The corners of my mouth begin to arch upward, my face softens, and my body becomes lighter as I declare firmly to my emerging scholar, that like Fournillier (2011), "the fact that these two white scholars[8] were from a different social and historical era and context did not strike me as much as what I was learning from them" (p. 563).

This chat helps to confirm that it is appropriate to take them along with me to chat with Black school leaders about their effective school leadership practices. I remind myself that

> *"In this research, Black school leaders' voices are privileged. European perspectives are used solely as a frame, thus moved to the margins and silenced in the field. We, Engeström, Spillane, and myself, enter the urban context to learn from Black school leaders' perspectives and experiential knowledge bases. It is important to my research premise that traditional theorists, practitioners, and policymakers experience education and administration from perspectives and daily activities that are influenced by ethnicity, race, and culture. So I will bring foreign and maybe not so foreign scholars into urban contexts to learn from Black school leaders. Done!"*

He approaches me.

> *"Absolutely,"* I say with a gracious smile.

I happily accept his offer to chat privately about my research proposal. I think to myself,

> *"What things will be said, spoken and asked of me that were not after my presentation this morning? What guidance and support will be offered to help improve and further develop my scholarship?"*

I am anxious and nervous about the impending mentorship chat session. I arrive early to the same wing that hours ago bustled with conference participants, wait staff, conversations, clinging water glasses, and laughter. He introduces me to one of his mentees, a young Black female professor of educational leadership. My internal struggle returns[9] "within" my elation to sit "in-between" and intentionally chat with two well-respected scholars of the field and Black academic community. I am literally caught in the middle chatting with two Black researchers about the need for rigorous racially and culturally centered empirical studies from nonmainstream orientations, specifically African centered lenses. We discuss my proposed research, particularly the conceptual framework. I am grateful for the critical mentoring, scholarly critique, and recommendations. Their intentional mentorship solidified the value and importance of my proposed study. However, my level of anxiety, internal conflict, and uncertainty about my conceptual framework increases as they take turns asking questions:

- "Why did you choose these theories to frame your research?"
- "What other theories did you consider?"

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[8] I research between Engeström (1987, 1999) and Spillane (2005, 2006), whereas Fournillier (2011) researched between Wolcott (1991) and Goodenough (1970, 1976).

[9] Internal contradictions of using mainstream rather than African centered theories. "Consciousness of contradictions is essential to enact substantive changes in an activity system. Conscious individuals tend to enact creative activities to resolve contradictions that perpetuate discrepancies between their current and envisioned realities" (Hodges, 2012, p. 20).

- "Did you consider any from Black scholars like Beachum, Dillard, Gooden, Hilliard, Lomotey, Tillman or even Dr. Holden?"

He walks away and Dr. Brownlee[10] and I continue to chat.

"Where is spirituality in your framework? Spirituality plays a major role in every Black community and especially in the work of Black educators, yet I don't see spirituality represented in your theories."[11]

He returns. They both ask,

"Who are your dissertation committee members?"

I am sweating, profusely. I prefer to perspire, if I have to do either. I need to take my jacket off. I need a glass of ice water. Where are the clinging water glasses? Compose yourself and your thoughts. I attempt to concisely explain that although I had researched African centered theories, particularly Kershaw (1992) and Lomotey (1989), I did not believe that they fully encapsulated the phenomenon of Black school leadership, particularly in contemporary urban environments. I mention some of the Black scholars (e.g., Anderson, 2004; Dantley, 2003, 2005; Dillard, 1995; Gooden, 2002; Hilliard, 1995, 2003; Lomotey, 1989, 1994; Obiakor & Beachum, 2005; Walker, 2000, 2003, 2009) whose work I use to inform and shape my design. I am embarrassed and I am humbled. I take ownership of my scholarship and/or lack thereof. I admit, while frantically jotting notes, I have not heard of and/or read the works of several Black educational leadership scholars (i.e., McClellan, 2010, 2012; Peters, 2010, 2011; Reed, 2008; Terrell, 2009), with whom they both strongly recommend I become acquainted.

I thank them for their mentorship. He tells me that he appreciates my humble receptiveness to their critical critique of my proposal. I reply that I am humbled by their willingness to take time to mentor me. I smile, quickly wipe the sweat from my right hand onto the side of my black dress slacks, and extend my hand with sincere gratitude. I walk slowly and then increasingly faster towards the Centre's front entrance exit. I need uninterrupted time to have an internal chat about their questions, my responses, their advice and how to proceed with my proposed research design. I am across the street now. I slow my pace toward the eclectic coffee shop that I mentally bookmarked earlier this morning. I tell myself,

- *"I need more time."*
- *"Don't panic Chell[12]."*
- *"Remember, you are here for a reason—feedback, feedback, feedback. You have received good feedback! Now you need to decide how to proceed, ensuring a culturally responsible and sensitive research design."*

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[10] I have changed this professor's name. I am grateful for our chats as they have been invaluable to my scholarly development.

[11] Hodges (2012) Black School Leadership Conceptual Framework recognizes spirituality as one of the many tools Black principals can/do use to transform the activity system of principalship, specifically the Black principalship in contemporary urban communities. As Dantley (2003) explains, "spirituality informs the process that African Americans use to interpret, transcend, and transform life…it establishes and prods our sense of justice and fairness and it constructs for us our notions of calling, mission, or purpose" (p. 6).

[12] Chell is the name that my family, friends and colleagues refer to me.

I reschedule dinner plans with my new cadre of fellow scholars. They send text messages of support and encouragement. They understand that I need to dine privately this evening with the literature of Black educational leadership scholars. I also need to network with them while in this academic space. I want to (be)come a scholar who (re)presents culturally responsible and sensitive research as trustworthy. However, in my efforts of (be)coming, I find myself caught in the middle—chatting with mainstream theories about the value of nonmainstream school leaders, specifically Black principals.

Chatting to Get "Uncaught"

Okay, I keep asking myself,

"How did I get here?" How did I get caught in the middle chatting about whether my research design is racially and culturally sensitive for Black communities[13]?"

But now I must critically chat with myself about how to get uncaught.
So, I ask Dr. Tillman,

"How can I use your Culturally Sensitive Research Framework as a research design analysis tool?"

The framework, she replied, is comprised of cultural resistance to theoretical dominance, culturally congruent research methods, culturally specific knowledge, culturally sensitive data interpretations, and culturally informed theory and practice (2002, 2006). She continued saying, "individually and collectively the components of the framework are representative of epistemological and methodological possibilities that have the power to produce culturally informed research, theory and practice" (2002, p. 269). I smile and exclaim,

"Great! I really want to conduct rigorous culturally responsible and sensitive research. So, I will chat with all five tools although Dr. Tillman (2002) has indicated that there are no rules guiding the use of the tools. Researchers can use one or all of them within a study. I am going to use all tools to critically assess my research design to ensure that it is a culturally responsible and sensitive approach to studying Black communities."

Cultural Resistance to Theoretical Dominance

I ask myself,

- *"Okay, so where should I begin?"*
- *"Without a doubt, the first chat needs to be cultural resistance to theoretical dominance, especially given the ongoing tension(s) around using Eurocentric theories to frame[14] Black lived experiences."*

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[13] Black communities in this question attempts to consider the research community of Black school leaders and their stakeholders in urban and inner city communities as well as the Black Academic Community.

[14] I believe that the traditional frame(s) cease to exist given that I have conceptualized the theories into an educational leadership framework influenced by models of Black principals leading with high expectations of closing gaps in education and expanding structural opportunities for all students, particularly Black, brown and poor children.

I pick up the first tool to take a closer and more critical look at my frame, Black School Leadership Conceptual Framework[15] (Hodges, 2012). I ask myself,

> *"How does the framework challenge traditional theories that marginalize cultural groups?"*

Black School Leadership Conceptual Framework is a racial and cultural conscious approach for conducting qualitative research of Black school leadership in urban contexts from the perspective of Black principals. For the past 2 decades, dialogue about the role of diversity in the field has been promising. However, the field continues to rely predominately on traditional ideologues, paradigms, and practices. This overreliance on traditional canons has rendered the field deeply entrenched in a rhetoric of diversity, which continues to marginalize racially and culturally diverse voices, experiences and knowledge bases, specifically Black school leaders (Gosetti & Rusch, 1995; Rusch, 2002; Tillman, 2003). Our knowledge of leadership, Gosetti and Rusch (1995) confirm, "comes from an embedded privileged perspective which largely ignores issues of status, gender, and race and insidiously perpetuates a view of leadership that discourages diversity and equity" (p. 12). This privileged perspective perpetuates a field that continues to resist theories, policies and practices constructed by nonmainstream leaders. This perspective makes relevant educational reform elusive. If the nation-state's overarching objective is to improve *all* students' academic outcomes, especially those persistently marginalized, then the educational community needs to include racial, ethnic, and culturally diverse educational leadership perspectives and practices (Dantley, 2005; Dillard, 1995; Hilliard, 2003; Tillman, 2003). Therefore, I have chosen to reach back into history, culture and the Black community to ask,

> *"What can we learn from contemporary Black principals about leading schools in urban environments that could help others and potentially (re)stimulate Blacks entry in the field?"*

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is a theoretical perspective designed to help researchers, like myself, "understand human activity situated in a collective context" (Yamagata-Lynch, 2007, p. 453). It helps researchers transcend pervasive dichotomies and develop a deeper understanding of current social transformations (Engeström, 1999, 2000). CHAT binds the individual to his/her sociohistorical context. By doing so, CHAT integrates multiple perspectives and multi-voicedness into the activity system[16] (i.e., research phenomenon[17]). I use CHAT, generation three, to explore the joint activity as the unit of analysis[18] with emphasis on social transformation, undergirded by internal contradictions[19]

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[15] The Black School Leadership Conceptual Framework includes two theories, Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Distributed Leadership Theory (DLT).

[16] CHAT positions an activity, instead of an individual, group or entity, as the unit of analysis. This coincides with the distributed perspective of focusing on the interactions of the collective activity of leadership (Spillane, 2006).

[17] Black school leadership is the research phenomenon.

[18] Black school leadership the activity and thus the unit of analysis.

[19] Contradictions are structural tensions of opposing forces that eventually motivate participants to (re)construct, transform and/or sustain the activity system. Roth and Lee (2007) argue that contradictions are often overlooked and unexamined as an accumulation of historical contradictions. It is unfortunate particularly since they are "the primary driving forces that bring about change and development within and between activity systems (Roth & Lee, 2007, p. 203).

and tensions inherent of the whole activity system (Daniels, 2008). I believe that exploring contradictions can help broaden our understanding of

a) Black principal's perspectives of how they practice leadership and are motivated;
b) the sociohistorical structures of urban communities in which they work, governing belief systems and role distributions; and
c) the cultural tools/artifacts they use to achieve collective object-oriented outcomes.

Like CHAT, a distributed leadership theoretical perspective transcends a focus of an individual separated from the context. A distributed leadership perspective foregrounds leadership practice and assumes that it is "constructed in the interactions between leaders, followers, and their situations" (Spillane, 2006, p. 26). It is an alternative to traditional leadership theories that "equate leadership with the gallant acts of one or more leaders in an organization" (Spillane, 2006, p. 2). This theory moves beyond the "what" to understand the "how" of school leadership. Understanding leadership practice from a how perspective is "imperative if research is to generate usable knowledge about and for school leadership" (Spillane, 2005, p. 143), especially for those leading schools in urban contexts. Researchers using this approach recognize the context (i.e., situation, culture, history, and tools) as a mediating and defining element of how multiple people collectively practice leadership within and in-between systems[20] to improve learning and life outcomes for stakeholders— within and in-between urban school communities.

The Black school leadership framework is a culturally responsive and sensitive approach. The framework allows researchers to explore the complex system of leadership and the systemic contradictions that influence how contemporary Black school leaders collectively make meaning of their principalships in urban environments. I argue that the Black School Leadership Conceptual Framework is an appropriate approach researchers can use to "reveal, understand, and respond to unequal power relations that may minimize, subjugate, or exclude the multiple realities and knowledge bases of African Americans" (Tillman, p. 6).

"Yes!" I exclaim as I enjoy feeling empowered by my own voice and scholarship. I feel the tension(s) roll from my mind and body as I begin to move from a state of being caught to an intentional positioning of self and research in the middle of traditionally silencing structures—towards building alternative theories, practices, and policies influenced by racial, ethnic, and culturally diverse experiences and knowledge bases.

Culturally Congruent Research Methods

I chat myself up to confidently take hold of the next tool, culturally congruent research methods. I tell myself:

> *"Okay, I will use the next chatting tool to rigorously exam the 'appropriateness' of the qualitative research methods I use to explore and capture Black principals' experiential knowledge and voices of leading in urban communities."*

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[20] The activity system of Black school leadership is multi-layered—education is compounded by social, political and economic systems.

I begin this chatting task by questioning,

> *"In what ways are the research methods culturally congruent?"*

Methodology is equally important as research methods. Methodology is a research theory a researcher uses as a guide in conducting a study (Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 2001). I want to conduct rigorous culturally responsive and sensitive qualitative research that is accepted as trustworthy. I use multiple case study methodology to explore the leadership of 4 Black principals in urban and inner city communities. Multiple case design helps me develop a rich descriptive understanding of contemporary social phenomenon that is indistinguishable from its context, such as Black school leadership in urban environments (Yin, 1993; 2009). Importantly, this research methodology "allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (Yin, 1994, p. 3). Experienced educational researchers like Dillard (1995), Lightfoot (1983), Lomotey (1989) and Tillman (2005) used case study to produce important findings and ideas that advanced educational research, theory building, policy, and practice (Yin, 1993). Case study methodology allows researchers to employ multiple measurement methods. Multiple methods strengthen case study design. The data collection methods I used for my multiple case dissertation study included interviews, shadowing as observation, document analysis, on-line discussion board, field journal, separate reflection and reflexive journals, digital images, and memos. I selected each method to help construct a deeper understanding of the contemporary Black principalship in urban environments from insiders' perspectives, multi-individual coupled with the collective. I quiet my mind so that I can hear Dr. Tillman's (2002, 2006) assessment of my methods. I lean in closer so that I do not miss her teachings and assessment of my methods. I hear her. I heard her tell me, *"Yes me, Demetricia, the emerging scholar,"* that my methods can/do equip qualitative researchers with appropriate tools to "investigate and capture holistic contextualized pictures of the social, political, economic, and educational factors that affect the everyday existence of African Americans, particularly in educational settings" (Tillman, 2002, p. 6). My confidence increases in my research design. I smile at Dr. Tillman and my emerging scholar. I lower my head, gently close my eyes, breathe a sigh of relief and quietly chat:

> *"Thank you Dr. Tillman for confirming the cultural congruency and thus sensitivity of my research methods."*

Culturally Specific Knowledge Facilitates Culturally Sensitive Data Interpretations

I chat intently with myself about the cogency of affixing tools together, especially those that tend to work cohesively together within and in-between the research process. I consciously design my study to center participants' perspectives, the data I use to construct multiple truths of their lived experiences leading in urban contexts. I use culturally specific knowledge and culturally sensitive data interpretations as overlapping tools to continue the assessment of my research design.

> *"I am personally and professionally committed to improving educational outcomes for all students, particularly traditionally marginalized groups— Black, brown, and poor students."*

So I ask myself,

> *"How does my research design maintain and (re)present the cultural, personal, and professional integrity of my participants and their communities[21]?"*

Integrity is beholden to research credibility. Credibility is the most critical measure of firmly establishing trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Wolcott, 2005). It is the process of ensuring that the findings are congruent with the participants' perspectives of their lived multi-realities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). I select several qualitative research strategies to increase the potential of high credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I employ prolonged engagement, member checks, reflexivity, and crystallization. I use the strategies to sustain the integrity of my participants and their communities. I also utilize the strategies with the hope that as participants and diverse audiences read the final manuscript they will nod, affirming its credibility.

Therefore, prior to conducting interviews, I immerse myself into a case site (i.e., school and community) by shadowing each participant for approximately 4 weeks, sometimes longer. I follow the school leader's daily schedule, which includes activities within and in-between the school, community, district office, family events, and dinner with colleagues, friends and family. Most days I began shadowing as early as 6:30 AM until as late as 7:30 PM or later depending on the school leader's schedule of activities. On September 10, 2012, for instance, I began the day at 7:45 AM shadowing a participant at his school site until we left at 4:55 PM to attend a community event from 5:30 PM to 10:30 PM and subsequently returned to the school at 11:00 PM where I had left my vehicle. I find that as I shadow Black school leaders in urban communities that the nature of their daily work bleeds into evenings and weekends. I consciously commit to this in-depth engagement strategy and form of observation.[22] Thus, I am able to build acceptance, rapport, and relationships with the principals, staff, students, parents, district officials, business constituents and family members within and in-between each of the four researched school communities. Importantly, I am able to learn the cultures, allay misconceptions, and build trusting relationships towards ensuring credibility and sustaining integrity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

However, I am reminded of a chat with Lincoln and Guba (1984). They told me that member checks "is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). I chat a tantric recitation,

> *"Member checks, member checks, member checks!"*

While meditating, I consciously welcome a chat with Dr. Walker (2009). She confirmed the invaluableness of member checks. She shared with me that Dr. Byas' meticulous reading and careful critique of the *Hello Professor* (2009) manuscript helped to facilitate reevaluation of her interpretations and thus reorganization of the final manuscript. In between tantric chants of "Om," I chat,

> *"Thank you Dr. Walker for your model transparency. I will definitely ask my participants to provide member checks of each draft throughout the research*

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[21] Communities here include all those that they are associated with through personal and professional affiliations, both public and private communal affiliations.

[22] I was working on a state funded grant as a Graduate Research Assistant when I entered the field. However, once I entered the research field I decided to resign from my position at the end of the fiscal period to consciously commit to strategies of prolonged engagement and shadowing, which required physical, emotional, and financial commitments. I was in the field for one academic school year. I entered the field August 2nd, 2012 and exited July 9th, 2013.

process. I will ask them to participate in this process to ensure that I use specific experiences they self-identify as defining, like Professor Byas expressed towards Fort Valley College."

Dr. Walker's smile is supportive and encouraging. I chat briefly with my emerging scholar self and return to my tantric recitation,

"Om, Member checks, member checks, member checks!"

I am in the field. I have conducted my first of three rounds of interviews. I transcribe verbatim. I email each participant a copy of the respective transcripts. I type:

"Greetings, I hope this email finds you having a wonderful week! Your interview transcript is attached. Please read through it to ensure that I have accurately captured your voice, words, and perceptions. I look forward to seeing you later this week."

I conduct informal and formal check sessions to establish credibility and the inherent value of Black principals' perspectives in education, leadership, and policy.

"I am engaged in the field and reflexivity!"

Reflexivity involves writing a daily "reflection on self, process, and representation, and critically examining power relationship and politics in the research process, and researchers' accountability in data collection and interpretation" (Sultana, 2007, p. 376). It is an ongoing process that I engage through daily journaling in quest of constructing what it means to (be)come a qualitative researcher, particularly of race, ethnic, and cultural communities.

I use crystallization to help facilitate my ongoing process of becoming a qualitative researcher (Ellingson, 2009). Qualitative researchers who use crystallization engage the qualitative continuum with fluid rather than static thoughts, methods, and genres (Ellingson, 2009). As emerging researcher and scholar, I use this approach to break down traditional qualitative boundaries by blending multiple methods and genres that creatively and credibly (re)present participants' multiple truths of lived experiences (Cugno & Thomas, 2009; Ellingson, 2009; Vik & Bute, 2009). I will construct a quilt of their multiple truths. The quilt represents a method of capturing "the bigger picture of the participants' internal and external experiences" (Cugno & Thomas, 2009, p. 113) to holistically examine and represent the phenomenon. African American scholars have traditionally used similar analysis and representational methods (i.e., storytelling and narratives) to privilege others' voices in traditional qualitative works (Anderson, 1988; Lightfoot, 1983; Tillman, 2005a, 2006; Walker, 2003, 2009). I believe quilting is an appropriate method to represent the phenomenon of Black school leadership, thereby sustaining the cultural integrity of the African American community. I chat with myself about the power of quilting,

"Quilting was a social activist strategy used during the abolition movement to end enslavement of Blacks in the United States. Crystallization, like those quilts of liberation, affords me a practical and creative way to tell the stories of contemporary Black school leaders."

I visit Dr. Tillman (2002) for another assessment chat. I ask:

> *"Dr. Tillman, are my credibility strategies appropriate for maintaining and (re)presenting the cultural integrity and experiential knowledge of Black school leaders?"*

I listen carefully to Dr. Tillman's (2002) assessment. I submit that I heard, the credibility strategies appropriately "use the particular and unique self-defined (Black self-representation) experiences of African Americans" (p. 6) essential for data analysis, interpretation, and (re)presentation of findings.

> *"Thank you Dr. Tillman. I also would like to submit that the credibility strategies can persuade diverse audiences, through the use of multigenre, to accept African Americans' multiple truths as unique but typical, particularly the Black principalship."*

The strategies position Black school leaders' cultural standpoints to others as credible, which is at the crux of qualitative researchers (re)presenting trustworthy endarkened[23] perspectives of African Americans' lived realities (Tillman, 2002, 2006; Dillard, 2000).

Culturally Informed Theory and Practice

I anxiously prepare to use the final assessment tool, culturally informed theory and practice. I proudly exclaim to my emerging scholar and qualitative researcher,

> *"I aim to generate substantive theory that aptly fits data collected from participants' cultural standpoints in their natural settings."*

However, I remind myself that,

> *"This is an assessment of a research design. Therefore, researchers cannot solely make claims, they must also present evidence to support the professed claims."*

I continue this self-chat, I ask my emerging qualitative researcher:

> *"How have I designed my dissertation research to develop substantive concepts and theories for the fields of education, leadership, and urban education?"*

Qualitative researchers enter the field with a methodological approach to analyze collected data. They select an analytic method that they believe fits the framework of their study to manage and analyze vast amounts of collected data and generate concepts and theories to help explain the studied phenomenon. I use grounded theory analytic methods to guide the data collection and interpretation processes of my dissertation study. I recall one of many methodological chats with Charmaz (2000) in which she explained that grounded theory analyses help qualitative researchers, tell "a story about people, social processes, and situations" (p. 522). It deviates from the objectivist stance of reality to foster an interpretive

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[23] Dillard, C. B. (2000). The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen: Examining an endarkened feminist epistemology in educational research and leadership. *Qualitative Studies in Education, 13 (6)*, pp. 661-681.

understanding of meaningful knowledge as socially constructed and contextually emergent from participants' perspectives (Charmaz, 2000). Therefore, to keep participants' lived realities the central focus of my inquiry, I use their voices to create categories that best capture the phenomenon of Black school leadership in urban contexts. I follow the traditional grounded theory methodological guidelines of coding, constant comparison, memo writing, and theoretical sampling. In doing so, I believe that adhering to the guidelines improves my potential to generate an explanatory framework of effective school leadership from Black principals' perspectives that is grounded in the collected data. I assert that this analytic perspective relates well with my epistemological stance, conceptual framework, methodology, methods, and quest to conduct culturally responsible and sensitive research.

I reach out to Dr. Tillman (2002) for a critical assessment chat about my use of grounded theory methods as a culturally sensitive approach. She reiterates that researchers, like my emerging scholar, who "rely on participants' perspectives and cultural understandings of the phenomena under study to establish connections between espoused theory and reality" (p. 6) can/do develop substantive theory from endarkened perspectives that leads to educational change. I feel like my team has made the winning game point! I excitely jump up and down like a high school cheerleader! I chat a cheer of victory to the instrumental track of *Started from the Bottom*[24],

> *"Started in the middle being caught*
> *Started in the middle chattin' Eurocentric theories,*
> *Started in the middle being caught*
> *Now I'm in the middle to get uncaught*
> *Started in the middle being caught*
> *Now I'm in the middle centering Black perspectives*
> *Started in the middle being caught*
> *Now I'm in the middle centering Black perspectives."*

Presenting My CHAT

As I prepare for my prospectus presentation, I reflectively chat with my emerging scholar about the uncomfortable, yet familiar position, of being caught in the middle. I think about each committee members' body of knowledge to anticipate potential questions and concerns they may have about my proposal. I have a dissertation committee of Black scholars—two African American women, one African American man and one Afro Caribbean woman. I would be remiss if I did not ask myself,

- *"How will they respond to my Black school leadership framework conceptualized from Eurocentric theories?"*
- *"What will be their critique and ultimate suggestions for how I should frame the research?"*
- *"How would I respond to their queries, concerns and suggestions, especially those about my use of Eurocentric lens to conceptualize a racial and culturally responsive framework to explore Black school leaders?"*
- *"Would it be a concern for them?"*
- *"Would they recognize the conceptualized design as an alternative to traditional theories?"*

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[24] Drake (2013). Started from the bottom. *Nothing Was the Same, album.*

I present my proposal.[25] I sit down to listen to their critical feedback. I leave the room so that the committee can talk about my proposed research. I sit on the flower embroidered wooden bench in the hall. I am surprisingly relaxed. I reflectively chat with my emerging scholar,

> *"I am grateful that Dr. Tillman (2002) allowed me to use her culturally sensitive research frame as an analytic tool to critically assess my design. I have presented how a researcher can use Eurocentric theories to conceptualize a culturally responsible and sensitive framework to explore Black communities."*

I am invited to reenter the room. My committee members are standing around the table with smiles on their faces as they continue to engage in conversations. I stand quietly and intentionally in the middle of the room. They turn their attention to me. I am comforted by each of their smiles, especially my Chair. I hear Dr. King say,

> *"Chell, I am so proud of you. Well done, well done, well done!"*

Dr. King continues to smile at me. She carefully cradles a small stack of folders with her left arm and hand and holds a bottle of water with her right hand. She then says with the voice of a loving mother,

> *"Now go get me a switch off a peach tree!"*

We all laugh.

Implications of Chatting In the Middle

Qualitative researchers can use culturally sensitive research approaches to help transform the traditional knowledge of the field, which comes from a systemic institutionalized privileged perspective that historically marginalize issues of diversity—ethnicity, race, culture, class, sex, and gender. The traditional canons of the field purport diversity, equity, and social justice yet consistently fail to put in place institutional structures that implement, model, practice, and sustain these endowed egalitarian rights. The implementation and knowledge gaps in the field will persist in the absence of ethical and culturally responsive researchers who consciously seek to expand understandings of education from diverse perspectives. Tillman (2002) argues culturally sensitive research that centers Black communities can benefit from the cultural perspectives of "both the researcher and the researched as a framework for research design, data collection, and data interpretation" (p. 3). I am a Black woman raised by working-class parents who were a part of the Second Great Migration in the United States. Although I bring my cultural perspective, which overlaps within and in-between research participants, it is their cultural standpoints that are privileged throughout the research process with the hope of affective substantive educational change.

As I prepare to begin my career in academia and policy, it is important that I pause to chat with my emerging/scholar(s) about the significance of researching school leadership

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[25] I presented my prospectus, An alternative perspective of effective school leadership: Contemporary Black school leaders' perspectives of leadership in urban environments, May 1, 2012 to committee members Dr. Janice B. Fournillier, Dr. Hayward Richardson, and Dr. Joyce E. King.

from contemporary Black principals lived experiences. I think about why their perspectives are important to the field of education in general, and specifically to the fields of educational leadership, urban education, and policy. I immediately identify five areas of significance that this research could impact. First, Black principals' perspectives could improve our understanding of how best to help schools in urban environments flourish, thereby leaving no child behind — academically or socially. Although their leadership may not warrant implementation of a new theory or policy, it may provide a conceptual framework of effective leadership for current and prospective principals of urban environments. Second, conducting this study could contribute to existing literature that explores Black principals' capacity to effectively lead diverse staffs in urban environments. Today, Black principals most likely lead racially and culturally diverse staff with a majority White teacher population. This study may help diminish assumptions lingering around Black principals' leadership capacity, shed light on how they sustain committed diverse teaching staffs in urban environments, and encourage Blacks to (re)consider the field of education as a promising career endeavor. Third, their perspectives may prove to be important not only for those in traditional urban environments, but also those leading suburban schools[26] undergoing dramatic transformations shifting towards an embodiment of urban characteristics. Fourth, this research would extend current literature discussions around the role of racial, ethnic and cultural diversity in the field of educational leadership. Fifth, this study builds on the invaluable work of other Black scholars (Anderson, 1988; Dillard, 1995; Hilliard, 2003; Lomotey, 1989; Rodgers, 1975; Savage, 2001; Sowell, 1976; Tillman, 2004; Walker, 2009; Ward Randolph, 2009) to tell stories of effective contemporary Black school leadership in public schools within the United States.

I perform a mental cartwheel from my office desk and exclaim:

> *"Yes! Researchers can design culturally responsible and sensitive research studies. Such research can provide substantive counter narratives and alternative theories to transform traditional education ideologues, practices, and policies."*

However, I assert that as qualitative scholars of ethnic, racial, and cultural issues, we are morally beholden to our research participants to (be)come creative in the construction of 'appropriate' frameworks. I argue that scholars of race and cultural issues should not be tethered to 'theoretical allegiance', but rather to an ethical responsibility to use frameworks that provide appropriate lenses and concepts for understanding, interpreting, and (re)presenting endarkened perspectives for substantive change. Doing so can improve the educational and life outcomes for traditionally marginalized groups which inextricably impacts all humans at-large.

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[26] Their perspectives of how to effectively lead could also be invaluable to educators in rural areas as well as international spaces that face similar challenges of affording students educational equity and equality in sustainable ways.

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Author Note

Demetricia L. Hodges is an Educational Policy Studies doctoral candidate and part-time instructor of Urban Education at Georgia State University (GSU) in Atlanta, GA. She is majoring in Educational Leadership with concentrations in Social Foundation and Qualitative Research in Education. Her research interests include racial/cultural diversity in educational leadership, urban and rural education, history of Black education and qualitative research methodologies. As an emerging scholar, Demetricia is the recipient/participant of various awards and scholars programs of which the most recent is the 2013-2014 Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Doctoral Scholars Program and a 2013-2014 Center for American Progress Leadership Fellow. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: Demetricia L. Hodges, Georgia State University, Department of Educational Policy Studies, P.O. Box 3977, Atlanta, GA 30302-3977. Email: dhodges3@student.gsu.edu.

Article Citation

Hodges, D. L. (2014). Caught in the middle: Chat(ting) about Black school leaders. *The Qualitative   Report,   19*(97),   1-20.   Retrieved   from http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR19/hodges97.pdf