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An Autoethnographic Reflection from Two Black Women Ph.D.'s and Their White Woman Advisor on the Use and Impact of Sista Circle Methodology in the Dissertation Process

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Abstract

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Keywords

decolonizing research, doctoral education, advising, qualitative methodology

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An Autoethnographic Reflection from Two Black Women Ph.D.'s and Their White Woman Advisor on the Use of Sista Circle Methodology in the Dissertation Process

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Black Women doctoral students experience the journey as “outsiders within” (Collins, 1986), navigating how to excel and thrive while being on the margins (hooks, 1991). The authors of this manuscript reflect upon the impact of adopting a culturally relevant methodology and method, integrating various forms of Black Women’s art, and challenging tenets of traditional western research. An auto-ethnographic exercise illuminated the critical need for Nathan and Love to insert their Black Womanhood into their dissertation research process using Sista Circle Methodology, an active decision to decolonize research. Carlson provided a critical link to ensuring Nathan and Love graduated and provides her reflective learning about the methodology, methods, and advising Black Women using a Black Feminist lens.

Keywords: decolonizing research, doctoral education, advising, qualitative methodology

Introduction

Carlson wrote the following poem to capture her internal dialogue as she considered the experience of advising Nathan and Love. Further, in this poem, Carlson engages in reflection consistent with autoethnographic principles and calls upon advisors to question traditional western research as they support Black Women Ph.D. students in conducting research using culturally relevant methodologies.

I HEAR YOU

“I am not heard. I am invisible. I feel like an imposter,” the words I hear are not unfamiliar. “Understand me. Recognize me. Allow me to unlock my story,” continues the internal dialogue. Doubt accompanies my response; deep dread stemming from “I am not enough.”

Echoes in my head, eerily reminding me of the energy it will take to engage during grief.

Grace, remember grace; grace for her, grace for yourself, grace for the journey to come.

Wounds wielded by warriors fighting for the academic status quo.

Query questioning the system that quotes words from the few with voice to hush the voiceless. Vitriol hatred to vicarious trauma, the historical victor capitalizes on unearned privilege. Policy, process, and place provide power to those who have long held advantage.

Advisor an insufficient moniker; allow her to emerge, accept her experience – all of it.

Fresh ideas, flowing, freely finding form in a stream of consciousness. Carrying a message of decolonization, creative and careful crafting of lived experience. Listen, listen to the whisper, listen to the roar of my sisters, my brave Black sisters. Stories stemming from silence, searing pain of invisibility, it is time for them to be heard. Heralded, honored, and held in esteem for the generations of intellectual gifts given.

Between 2019 and 2021, Nathan and Love questioned their ability to center Black Women's experiences and culture in their dissertation research. Nathan, Love, and Carlson had never heard of Sista Circle Methodology until Nathan discovered it through a literature review and wrote a five-page document advocating for this methodology and explaining how it worked for her dissertation study. After approval from Carlson, Nathan told Love, "You need to use this methodology for your study." As the advisor, Carlson experienced challenges, yet grew in her own learning and knowledge of Black Women's experiences resulting in the successful dissertation defense of both Nathan and Love. Nathan and Love achieved self-definition and self-valuation (Collins, 1986) while simultaneously living their authentic Black Womanhood as a result of their dissertation research.

The relationship between the three authors grew to be one of commitment to decolonizing research and centering the knowledge and lived experiences of Black Women. To decolonize research and the research process means giving researchers and participants who typically exist on the margins the power to use their voices to tell their own stories (hooks, 1991; Kovach, 2009; McCaslin & Breton, 2014; Morgensen, 2012; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). In the spirit of decolonizing this manuscript, we purposely capitalize the phrase Black Women and do not capitalize white woman. We made this intentional choice to give power to the Black Women authors who combat the systems of racism and sexism (Eaton, 2022; Collins, 1986; Pérez Huber, 2010) embedded within the academy. Furthermore, "us," "we," and "our" are used to describe the relationship the three authors have with each other and our shared cultures. Using "us," "we," and "our" centers on elements of Black Feminist Thought where Black Women exude knowledge because of their lived experiences (Collins, 2000). Whether you are a doctoral student or doctoral advisor, we invite you into our journey of transformation, liberation, and emancipation from what historically and systemically constitutes "good research" to "what research can and should be."

Purpose

Engaging in the form of "me search" (Gardner et al., 2017), we used a reflective, action-oriented, and transformative process to construct this manuscript. The purpose of this manuscript is to reflect on the journey and impact of centering Sista Circle Methodology within the dissertation process. The manuscript also aims to illuminate the importance of decolonizing research by centering the lived experiences and knowledge of marginalized groups; in this instance, Black Women.

Further, both Nathan (2021) and Love (2021) aimed to emancipate and liberate Black Women student affairs administrators through their work. Love centered the experiences of Black Women multicultural directors, and Nathan illuminated the experiences of racism and sexism that Black Women mid-level administrators experience from both supervisors and direct reports. Both works challenged traditional forms of collecting and analyzing research using Sista Circle Methodology, a unique qualitative method designed by a Black Woman for research with Black Women that engages participants and researchers in "sista circles" (Johnson, 2015).

This manuscript utilized autoethnography, a “form of me-search that implies a personal connection to the subject or object of study” (Gardner et al., 2017), connecting our identities in our positions as two Black Women former Ph.D. students and a white woman advisor. Together, we constructed four guiding questions to provide reflective direction and ensure that this manuscript captures our experience within the context and culture of dissertation research.

1. Why do we believe decolonizing research is important?
2. Why did we choose to utilize and support Sista Circle Methodology for completion of these studies?
3. Who are we because of our experiences with this research methodology?
4. What would we tell other Black Women doctoral students and advisors who are considering using Sista Circle Methodology or other emerging methodologies that aim to decolonize research?

We used various forms of communication (including poems and song lyrics) to share our reflections. We offer our insights on each guiding question as an invitation for advisors and Black Women doctoral students to re-conceptualize advising and decolonizing research, leading Black Women to thrive in the doctoral process.

Literature Review

Given the purpose of our manuscript, we approached the literature review by providing a short synthesis of the two main topics of our article: decolonizing research and the impact of advising on Black Women Ph.D. students. Included in our synthesis of decolonizing research is an explanation of and justification for Sista Circle Methodology (Johnson, 2015). Additionally, advising literature led us to encourage advisors to use the Bertrand Jones et al. (2013) advising framework that incorporates a Black Feminist Theoretical Framework when advising Black Women.

Decolonizing Research in Higher Education

Research is rooted in western and Eurocentric ideals, and to decolonize it means to break down white western ideas and knowledge that perpetuate oppressive systems and processes (Asante, 2019; Mohammed, 2019; Smith, 2012). As “outsiders within” (Collins, 1986), the dissertation research process challenged us (Nathan and Love) to consistently navigate the experience of living on the margins as Black Women Ph.D. students while also proving to ourselves, our cohort, our program, and society that our research is worthy. Marginality (hooks, 1991) inspired and reminded us of our value as Black Women Ph.D. students.

Marginality is a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse—it is found in the words, habits, and the way one lives.... It is a site one clings to even when moving to the center ... it nourishes our capacity to resist.... It is an inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonizer/colonized. (hooks, 1991, pp. 49–50)

To engage in practices and policies of decolonizing research, students, advisors, and institutions should be aware “there is no single ‘how to do’ decolonization” (Lipscombe et al., 2021, p. 9). We agree. Nathan (2021) and Love (2021) sought to decolonize research in their dissertation process by eliminating the power dynamics between the research participants and

themselves as researchers. Nathan and Love were active participants in their qualitative studies by sharing their own stories and responses to their research questions within the sista circles (Johnson, 2015). The qualitative approach, in conjunction with Sista Circle Methodology, allowed them to conduct their research in a more intimate way that uniquely honored Black Women. Nathan and Love also sought to illuminate the strengths and knowledge (Collins, 1990; 2000) that Black Women mid-level administrators (Nathan, 2021) and Black Women Multicultural Directors (Love, 2021) bring to student affairs. Black Feminist Thought served as the theoretical framework, selected in support of Howard-Hamilton's (2003) theoretical understanding. Howard-Hamilton stated, "Theories for understanding the needs of African American Women should be based on their cultural, personal, and social contexts, which clearly differ significantly from those who have not experienced racial or gender oppression" (p. 20). Utilization of Black Feminist Thought as a theoretical framework not only guided Nathan and Love in the research and writing process, but also offered Carlson a meaningful theoretical foundation as she engaged in the advising relationship.

Sista Circle Methodology (SCM) and Sista Circles

Sista Circle Methodology "expands beyond traditional methodology because it includes practices that draw on social relations and the wisdom of Black women that extends beyond national boundaries" (Wilson, 2018, p. 60). Sista Circle Methodology (SCM) was created by a Black Woman for Black Women (Johnson, 2015). To honor the origins of SCM and sista circles, only Black Women researchers can use SCM as a research methodology, and only Black Women can participate in sista circles (Green, 2017; Johnson, 2015; Lacy, 2017; Lewis-Flenaugh, 2021). Sista Circle Methodology decolonizes the research process by bringing the researcher and study participants together (Collier, 2017; Dillard, 2006; Johnson, 2015) to create opportunities for open dialogue regarding Black Women's "truths" (Dunmeyer, 2020). The Black Woman researcher who uses sista circles to collect data must be intentional and ensure that they embed sista circle traits within the data collection process (Johnson, 2015). Johnson's sista circle traits encourage the researcher and participants to (a) communicate authentically and openly using African American Vernacular English, (b) empower one another, and (c) take on active membership in the study by sharing lived experiences and stories.

Arts-Based Research to Convey Findings and Understand Participants

Nathan and Love empowered and affirmed sista circle participants' experiences through an arts-based approach. According to Flicker et al. (2014), "the very strength of using arts inquiry is that it reveals multiplicities, strengthens intersectional identities, creates accessibility, and tells the stories of those who have often been unheard or whose stories have been erased" (p. 29). Various researchers have used art to bring about meaning while transforming, changing, healing, and acknowledging the culture and gifts of Black Women and other historically marginalized groups (Bochner & Ellis, 2003; Corley, 2020; Keith, 2019; Ohito & Nyachae, 2019). Nathan and Love used song lyrics, poetry, and visual artifacts to influence change, engage in solidarity, and invoke emotion while writing and presenting their research. These forms of artistic media were specifically chosen to reflect and honor the oral traditions and vibrant artwork represented in Black Women's culture (Collier, 2017; Lenzy, 2019; Wilson, 2018). In summary, art enriched the experience for Nathan and Love as researchers, the colleagues who participated in the sista circles, our advisor, our committees, and those who open their hearts and minds to reading our research.

Advising

Central to understanding the importance and impact of advising for Black Women doctoral students at predominantly white institutions, advisors and doctoral programs must be aware of the distinct challenges for Black Women doctoral students. Therefore, we synthesized literature related to the myriad of challenges, followed by a definition of advising we suggest using to support the lived experiences of Black Women. Finally, we recommend doctoral advisors of Black Women implement an advising model infusing Black Feminist Thought as a framework (Bertrand Jones et al., 2013).

Challenges Black Women Doctoral Students Experience

Data suggests that while Black Women are earning more than 65% of the doctoral degrees awarded to Black people, they remain the “most dissatisfied and isolated students on campuses” (Shavers & Moore, 2014, p. 15). A myriad of challenges and roadblocks exist for Black Women doctoral students. Such roadblocks and challenges include institutional racism and sexism (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991), being seen as “outsiders within” (Collins, 1986), and not seeing themselves in faculty, research interests, cohort mates, opportunities, or reading materials (Bertrand Jones et al., 2013). Further, Black Women’s experiences, including knowledge and intellect, continue to be devalued in the academy (Cooper, 2018). Exposure to varied methodologies and frameworks that center the identities of Black Women doctoral students becomes crucial in how Black Women doctoral students conduct research. Nathan and Love experienced a lack of research paradigms, methods, and frameworks centering Black Women in their Ph.D. learning. We (Nathan and Love) believe that had we not discovered Sista Circle Methodology on our own, we would have engaged in traditional forms of research, fundamentally changing our experience and the knowledge gained through our studies.

Black Women Doctoral Students and Valuable Advising

McClure (2018) stated, “Advising is an essential part of the graduate school process, and the advisor should be thought of as the ‘face’ of the program, or the liaison between the graduate student and the institutional structure” (p. 11). Black Women complete their doctorates at higher levels when successful and helpful advising is involved (Ellis, 2001; Matthews et al., 2021). We thrived within our advising relationship; however, we were unaware that we were engaging in elements of the Black Women doctoral student-advising framework designed by Bertrand Jones et al. (2013).

The Black Women doctoral student-advising framework (Bertrand Jones et al., 2013) is a strategy to ensure that Black Women doctoral students do not just survive their program, but complete and finish their doctorate. Rooted in Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1988, 1990, 2000) and Black Feminist Epistemology (Collins, 1990, 2000), Bertrand Jones et al. (2013) offer a framework for all advisors regardless of race, ethnicity, and gender. The framework describes the responsibility of the advisor, the functions of advising, and the characteristics of the advisor/advisee relationship.

Advisor Responsibilities. Bertrand Jones et al. (2013) explain that advisors help students decode the hidden curriculum and develop as researchers and professionals. When decoding the hidden curriculum, advisors must inform advisees of the various parts of the institution (i.e., campus culture, politics, norms, and how to connect with other faculty in and outside of the department). As they develop into researchers, Black Women should have the opportunity to co-present, co-research, and co-teach with their advisors and faculty. Additionally, advisors have a responsibility to do “their own work” around understanding and

gaining knowledge pertaining to the research interests of their Black Women doctoral students. Finally, Bertrand Jones et al. suggest that advisors connect their Black Women doctoral students with other Black Women in the academy.

Advising Functions. Bertrand Jones et al. (2013) describe the four functions of advising as developing awareness, validating, advocating, and educating. These specific functions center the key elements of Black Feminist Thought in supporting and understanding the experiences of Black Woman doctoral students at predominantly white institutions. “Black feminist thought consists of ideas produced by Black Women that clarify a standpoint by and for Black Women” (Collins, 1986, p. 16). Collins explained four tenants that make BFT unique: (a) Black Women are deemed the creators of BFT, (b) Black Women share common experiences because of being *both Black and Women*, (c) Black Women possess other social identities (socioeconomic status, age, sexual orientation, ability) and experience discrimination in different ways, and (d) one of the main responsibilities of BFT is to provide many experiences of the diverse collective called Black Womanhood.

Developing awareness centers the advisor’s need to understand the experiences of Black Women doctoral students (Bertrand Jones et al., 2013) and highlights the seminal work of Collins (1986, 1990, 2000) in understanding the main tenets of BFT. As advisors and doctoral students continue to develop awareness of the Black Woman experience, “this awareness undergirds all of the other advisor functions and will assist the advisor in understanding the student’s experiences with racism, sexism, and classism in academe, without discounting them” (Bertrand Jones et al., 2013, p. 333).

When it comes to validating, the advisor/advisee relationship is a mutual and equal relationship (Bertrand Jones et al., 2013). Within this relationship, advisors recognize Black Women doctoral students as knowledgeable experts, intellectuals, and valuable researchers. It is the advisor’s responsibility to advocate for Black Women students and help lessen the unique challenges these students will face. Such challenges include limited financial resources/access to assistantships, limited ability to publish or present at conferences, and difficulty finding committee members (Bertrand Jones et al., 2013). True understanding leads to an equal partnership where a Black Woman doctoral student can trust her advisor. Once trust is established, Black Women doctoral students believe their advisors will support them when dealing with individual and institutional practices and policies rooted in racism and sexism (Bertrand Jones et al., 2013). Finally, Bertrand Jones et al. (2013) assert it is the advisor’s responsibility to inform their doctoral students of all policies and practices embedded within the process so Black Women can graduate and obtain their degrees.

Characteristics of the Advisor-Advisee Relationship. The advisor-advisee relationship significantly influences academic and professional outcomes for students (Barnes et al., 2010). Black Feminist Epistemology (Collins, 2000) enhances the knowledge gained between Black Women doctoral students and their advisors. Bertrand Jones et al. (2013) offered the following practices and beliefs as essential to the advising relationship:

1. Ethic of Community: A relationship built upon a communal dialogue, reciprocity, mutual respect, and equality; the advising relationship is bidirectional and non-hierarchical in nature.
2. Ethic of Empowerment: A relationship that de-centers the traditional power and authority structure; embodies agency and collectivity.
3. Ethic of Caring: A holistic advising relationship that considers the academic, personal, and community responsibilities of the advisee; provides advisee with a sense of caring and empathy to show up authentically.
4. Ethic of Accountability: A relationship that is honest and candid; advisees are regularly held accountable for their work and progress.

5. Ethic of Diverse Knowledge: A promotion of inclusive epistemological standpoints and knowledge claims; ensuring that divergent (non-Eurocentric) perspectives or ways of thinking are respected, validated, and legitimized.

Through engaging in this framework, Love and Nathan thrived while Carlson became an activist and transformer. Together, we transformed our research into a process that is accessible and illuminates historically marginalized groups.

Answering the Guiding Questions

The authors designed guiding questions to reflect upon as we advocate for Black Women doctoral students, doctoral advisors, and anyone engaging in culturally relevant methodologies, methods, and non-traditional ways of writing research. In addition, we designed these questions to intentionally highlight the impact of using culturally relevant methodologies for Black Women doctoral students. To reiterate, Nathan and Love were never exposed to Sista Circle Methodology or sista circles in their doctoral program and Carlson was not familiar with the methodology prior to Nathan and Love presenting her with a document articulating why Sista Circle Methodology was critical to their research. Highlighting the possibilities and impacts of our intentional choices as Black Woman doctoral students and a white woman advisor to decolonize research supports what we believe to be our calling.

Why “We” Believe Decolonizing Research is Important

The goal of academic research and writing is to contribute new knowledge to the field. Academic journals are brimming with studies that examine the same topics in the same ways. As an educator for the last 40 years, Carlson understands that not all students learn in the same way, and it follows that new knowledge and understanding should come from diverse methodologies that match the topic and experience we seek to understand. There is so much rich information that has historically been absent from academic publications because of a “Westernized” and “Colonized” view of what is important and how it should be explored. This became personal for Carlson when, as a doctoral student, she was encouraged not to pursue research related to her experiences as a lesbian student in a rural, conservative school system. The experiences and insight that she would have been able to bring to her research regarding how to support LGB students in the late 1990s was lost to the field because of the colonized view of research held by faculty. This experience has stayed with Carlson to this day and has periodically undermined her confidence as a researcher. It has led her to strive for collaboration when advising young researchers, and she is particularly committed to offering research voice to historically excluded and marginalized voices.

To decolonize research is to intentionally illuminate the perspectives, experiences, and ways of knowing of those historically marginalized and excluded. In doing so, we establish a more comprehensive analysis that accounts for the lived realities of those who are rarely, if ever, centered. If, as researchers, we hope to gain genuine insight about the lives and experiences of those who participate in our studies, then we must be willing to use frameworks and methodologies that contextualize their experiences in an authentic manner. Love is not interested in reproducing a different version of what already exists. She is interested in creating a new version that empowers, inspires, and highlights the need for change. Research that can hold multiple truths and engage the reader in an interplay between dominant and counter-narratives provides a more holistic perspective. As a Black Woman who has engaged other Black Women in research regarding shared experiences as Multicultural Directors, Love understands how Black Feminist Thought and Sista Circle Methodology enriched the research

process. According to Love, “It allowed us to both see ourselves and be ourselves.” Decolonizing research is important because it does not require that you fit yourself, your study, or your participants in a pre-established box based on white, western knowledge claims. Instead, you get to create a much bigger box that holds a broader reality wrapped in the challenges and triumphs of those who might otherwise go unheard.”

Decolonizing research is, in its purest form, resistance; pushing the envelope, taking chances, doing what has never been done before to make public the gifts, talents, ideas, and thoughts of those who live on the margins. Nathan asserts that decolonizing research is particularly the responsibility of non-Black Women scholars and practitioners (specifically white women, white men, and men of color) because whiteness and patriarchy rule the academy (Dlamini & Adams, 2014). As shared by Nikole Hannah Jones (2021) in her statement on declining tenure at the University of North Carolina and going to Howard University:

The Board of Trustees wanted to send a message to me and others like me, and it did. I always tell college students and journalists who are worried that they will face discrimination, who fear that they will be judged not by their work but for who they are or what they choose to write about, that they can only worry about that which is in their own control: their own excellence. I tell them all they can do is work as hard as possible to make themselves undeniable. And yet, we have all seen that you can do everything to make yourself undeniable, and those in power can change the rules and attempt to deny you anyway. (p. 4)

Decolonizing research is important because it provides the okay, the go ahead, or the permission for myself and other young Black Girls and Black Queer Women who have been told they are not enough and will not amount to anything that in fact, *WE ARE* enough, and so is our research. Decolonizing research is important because if we do not do it, whiteness, patriarchy, and white supremacy research traditions will prevail. As captured by the words of Tuhiwai (2012),

One problem of being trained to read this way, or, more correctly, of learning to read this way over many years of academic study, is that we can adopt uncritically similar patterns of writing. We begin to write about ourselves as indigenous peoples as if we really were “out there,” the “Other,” with all the baggage that this entails. Another problem is that academic writing is a form of selecting, arranging, and presenting knowledge. It privileges sets of texts, views about the history of an idea, what issues count as significant. (pp. 83-84)

Choosing to Utilize and Support Sista Circle Methodology

Nathan and Love chose Sista Circle Methodology for their dissertation because it is a methodology that centers Black Women who are historically left out of the literature, gives researchers and participants permission to show up authentically and honestly in our Black Womanhood, and allows for researchers to actively be part of the research study by contributing to conversation, dialogue, and activities. To garner more depth into her choice to use Sista Circle Methodology, Nathan shared, “I often feel not Black enough, and not Black Woman enough as an emerging Black Feminist scholar researcher. These feelings of not being enough are wrapped up in a lack of knowledge - a lack of knowledge about my history; and an erasure of my knowledge in published research and in how research is conducted.” Sista Circle Methodology is about honoring the history and contributions of Black Women. Nathan shared, “In Sista Circle Methodology I am not seen as the expert; we are all seen as equals and

contributors to this research. In conducting my research, I was reminded that research is also personal. I wanted my dissertation to be an experience that acknowledges the struggle and is rooted in the redemption of Black Women. I honored who I am, who I am becoming, and who I have always aspired to be once my mother died.” As part of Love’s reflection, she illuminated having a space to talk about a common experience. Love explained,

I had been struggling to find a way to incorporate my personal experiences in the study without making it all about me. While the most egregious parts of my experience as a Multicultural Director had briefly become nationally known, I felt I had never truly been able to discuss how I perceived and had been impacted by the event. To do so with a group of Black Women who had also served in the role was cathartic... The methodology helped to erase the pretenses of professionalism and created a space where the sistas could feel heard and validated in all their emotions. We laughed (a lot), we shed tears, and we encouraged each other. Sista Circle Methodology provided a built-in space for those emotions, and Black Feminist Thought recognized them as valid. It was freeing to share our stories and to have them instantly understood without doubt or alternative reasoning. The feeling of being held by community was unlike any research project I had ever participated in.

To understand the impact of Sista Circle Methodology for us as researchers, we cite Johnson (2015):

Sista circle methodology is simultaneously a qualitative research methodology and support group for examining the lived experiences of Black women. It moves beyond traditional methodology to include research practices that draw on the wisdom and social relations of Black women transnationally. The history of Western educational research is disfigured by a near complete dismissal of the social and cultural relations of Black women, yet Western research methodologies continue to serve as the norm. (pp. 43-44)

Ultimately, Love chose to use Sista Circle Methodology because it provided an option to give back to her community in a healing and supportive way by unapologetically centering the voices and experiences of Black Women. Once she learned of its existence, she knew Sista Circle Methodology was going to be the best way for her to conduct data collection, providing the means to engage authentically and to build community among a group of Black Women Multicultural Directors who until recently (Johnson, 2021) had not had their voices heard. Ultimately, Nathan chose Sista Circle Methodology because it reminds her, “I am needed, I am worthy, I deserve greatness, and I am greatness just as my other Black Women sisters. Sista Circle Methodology gives me voice and validates our experiences.”

Carlson reflected, “Honestly, it was easy for me to see the importance of supporting this methodology.” As an undergraduate, Carlson majored in English education with a focus on creative writing, and treasures stories of lived experiences. She loves language, particularly language that is expressive and honest. As a licensed counselor with group counseling training and experience, Carlson also recognizes the power that comes from shared stories. Reflecting upon what appeals most to Carlson about Sista Circle Methodology, she shared,

I knew in my heart that such a methodology would yield powerful insights while honoring the rich history of Black Women in community through oral tradition. I have always struggled with the parameters of traditional focus groups where

researchers seek to separate themselves from the experience in pursuit of objectivity. I believe that when it comes to lived experience, all experience is valuable and should be shared. I knew that the rich lived experiences of my students needed to be present in their research.

Our Experience With This Research Methodology Changed Us

Conducting research using Black Feminist Thought and Sista Circle Methodology helped Love to become a true contributor to Black Women's culture as it provided the opportunity to create a study for other Black Women that placed Black Woman experiences in the appropriate context (Collins, 1986). Collecting and framing data in an artistic way made Love feel proud – like she wrote something that people who looked like her and who have had similar experiences to hers would care about and want to read. Grounding herself in Black Feminist Thought for her dissertation resulted in Love seeing and hearing the Black Women in her life differently. Specifically, she now thinks about all the ways Black Women are constantly redefining themselves and valuing themselves when others do not. She also views Black Women whom she does not know differently. Love has a better understanding of how identities and life circumstances affect how we experience Black Womanhood. Many Black Women (Dr. Love included), deal with an enormous amount of imposter syndrome throughout their time in academia. Using Sista Circle Methodology and Black Feminist Thought helped Love feel like her experiences were valid, a valuable lesson for academia.

Because of this research, Love is now able to articulate her experience as a Multicultural Director in a way that she was unable to before. She can articulate the power dynamics that were at play and has a more complete understanding of why things happened the way they did. In other words, Love realizes that things at a predominantly white institution worked exactly “the way they were designed to work” (Nathan, 2021, p. 111) for a Black Woman Multicultural Director. Writing this dissertation has provided Love greater awareness of her own power and the power and strength of Black Women in general. Being in community with other Black Women Multicultural Directors, and writing about common experiences, helped Love to identify the behaviors and situations she will no longer accept from individuals in life and at her workplace.

As a final way to achieve self-definition and self-valuation (Collins, 1990; 2000), Nathan and the sista colleagues in her dissertation study wrote individual “I AM” poems during the final sista circle of the data collection process. While Nathan did not include her “I Am” poem in her final dissertation, she shares with you what she wrote in that final sista circle:

I am a believer that my lived experiences do not make me crazy.
 I am on a continued journey of newfound self-love.
 I am proud of this research study I have designed.
 I needed sister circle methodology to exist, and I found it.
 I am committed to engaging and putting this research out into the public so that everyone can know our experiences.
 I am reminded of the talents that I have and bring to supervision.
 I am reminded that while this research is based in higher education, it needs to be shared within all industries; no matter what industry we are talking about.
 I am reminded that I am MORE THAN ENOUGH in all capital letters.
 I am reminded that part of my responsibility is to uplift Black Women.
 I am a sister, friend, wife, confidante, and colleague.
 I am a scholar who is not afraid of doing things my own way...I need to figure out what that future looks like.

I am and will always be the product of two loving parents that shed their guiding light on me.

I am who I am in part because of the two-month data collection process with these extraordinary Black Women sista colleagues.

Carlson feels deeply enriched because of supporting doctoral students in this methodology. She has learned that she can grow as much from the dissertation advising process as she did from writing her own dissertation. Carlson is now a doctoral advisor, who for the first time after advising 15 students in 21 years through dissertation completion, can say what it feels like to be a co-learner – someone who trusts advisees and looks forward to learning something new every time she reads a draft. The methodology and process just feels “right” with who she is as a person and a professional. Carlson was able to immerse herself in the experience and let go of some of the “shoulds” that have always accompanied her advising. This does not mean that she has abandoned the critical aspects of ensuring quality work; instead, it means that she has learned how to see “quality” in a more expansive way. Carlson has learned that creativity and raw voice do have a place in advancing knowledge. Because of this experience, Carlson not only has a deeper sense of the lived experiences of participants, but she also has a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of students and colleagues.

Our Message to Prospective Students and Advisors

When Kamala Harris accepted the nomination to be Vice President of the United States, she walked out to a song Nathan had never heard before, “Work That” by Mary J. Blige. “Work That” became Nathan’s mantra of gratitude and self-love for who she is: a Black Feminist Scholar who centers Black Women and who uses Sista Circle Methodology. As such, it is only fitting that Nathan reminds other Black Women who are considering Sista Circle Methodology that you have all you need in yourself to “*Work That*” as you engage in and obtain your doctorate degree.

Work your thing out

Work your thing out
 Work your thing out
 Work your thing out
 Work your thing out
 There’s so many-a girls
 I hea’ you been running
 From the beautiful queen
 That you could be becoming
 You can look at my palm
 And see the storm coming
 Read the book of my life
 And see I’ve overcome it
 Just because the length of your hair ain’t long
 And they often criticize you for your skin tone
 Wanna hold your head high
 Cause you’re a pretty woman
 Get your runway stride home
 And keep going
 Girl live ya life

I just wanna be myself
 Don't sweat girl be yourself
 Follow me
 Follow me
 Follow me
 Girl be yourself
 That's why I be myself
 And I'm gonna love it
 Let em get mad
 They gonna hate anyway
 Don't you get that?
 Doesn't matter if you're going on with their plan
 They'll never be happy
 Cause they're not happy with themselves
 Na na work what you got
 I'm talking bout things that I know
 Na na work what you got
 It's okay show yourself some love
 Na na work what you got
 Don't worry bout who's saying what
 It's gonna be fine
 Work what you got
 Feelin' great because the light's on me
 Celebrating the things that everyone told me
 Would never happen but God has put his hands on me
 And ain't a man alive could ever take it from me
 Working with what I got I gotta keep on
 Taking care of myself I wanna live long
 Ain't never ashamed what life did to me
 Wasn't afraid to change cause it was good for me
 I wanna I just wanna be myself
 Don't sweat girl be yourself
 Follow me
 Follow me
 Follow me
 Girl be yourself
 That's why I be myself
 And I'm gonna love it.

Sista Circle Methodology made Love's dissertation an amazing experience. It provided a way for her to complete her dissertation while also supporting and building community with other Black Women. Love shares, "It feels like a reciprocal contribution in which you give and gain so much from those who choose to go on the journey with you. For me, it made the research come to life. It allowed me to involve my heart in the research process. The relationships that I built with the women in the study also served as motivation. I was driven to finish so that others could read our stories and better understand our experiences." Love invested in representing the sistas in a way that instilled pride.

Sista Circle Methodology allows for creativity. There are no rules regarding what sista circles must look like. You get to decide how to set them up, how to facilitate them, and what to do. For Love, this included playing and discussing music, sharing words from Black

Feminist writers, and encouraging sistas to ask questions of each other. Using Sista Circle Methodology can be a lot of work (depending on how you choose to do it) because it generates a large amount of data. It can take significant effort to organize the data in a way that is useful. We recommend being intentional in your organization from the start, so when you start writing, it is more manageable (i.e., sista circle one, these journal prompts, and these questions from the pre/post interviews all align with research question one). Generally, we encourage Black Women to consider using sista circles for any research project in which they find it important to emphasize both the individual and collective voice. Utilizing sista circles allows the researcher to create a community of support that will serve to empower long after the study is completed.

Carlson encourages advisors to be prepared for a refreshing and unique experience. Intentional decisions to support unique and decolonizing research requires trust and vulnerability. Carlson writes,

Trust that your student is enough. Trust that the lived experience of your student is critical to a deeper and fuller understanding. Trust that your student knows who they are and what they need to engage in this hard work. Trust that you are enough. You do not need to share your student's lived experience to be open and understanding of their journey.

Carlson experienced her own feelings of insecurity regarding a lack of knowledge and ability to be present following the recent death of her mother. Carlson shared,

I was vulnerable regarding my place in the grief journey. I was unsure if I had the strength and energy to give all that I needed to give. Supporting my students in using this methodology that so perfectly fit with their topic and who they are, fueled me and gave me the energy and strength to not only survive as an advisor but to thrive. When students, participants, and even advisors thrive through the dissertation process -- that is amazing!

Conclusion

We could tell you our stories and you could view them the way you usually do. Reflected through a prism of patriarchy and whiteness that dehumanizes and dismisses us.

Or

We could tell you our stories and you could listen.

As we define and make real the experience of being outsiders

As we reveal experiences of intersectional oppression that you may find hard to believe and difficult to deconstruct

Do you want to remain in this place?

Or do you want to progress?

Do you only want some of us to be heard?

Or do you want all of us to be heard?

Let us take you on a journey that unveils truths unknown.

Move us to the center.

We will shine regardless.

Challenge yourself to move closer to the light.

- Love, 2021

We offer this poem to reinforce our stories as told in this contemporary article. It is our hope that you have come to a new understanding of why you should work to decolonize research, why Sista Circle Methodology is a critical addition to decolonized research, why advising Black Women doctoral students using the framework of Bertrand Jones et al. (2013) is a must in the academy, and why manuscripts such as this need to be published and shared.

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