2-26-2024

The Mirror Project: Reflections on the Experiences of African-American Female Adolescents Experiencing Foster Care

Bahia Anise-Cross DeGruy Overton
Portland State University

The Mirror Project: Reflections on the Experiences of African-American Female

Adolescents Experiencing Foster Care

by

Bahia Anise-Cross DeGruy Overton

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Social Work and Social Research

Dissertation Committee:
Thomas Keller, Chair
Alma Trinidad
Samuel Henry
Eileen Brennan

Portland State University
2024

ABSTRACT

As the author Zora Neale Hurston says, "If you're silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it." The Mirror Project (MP) aims to break this silence by giving voice to Black women who have experienced foster care in Portland, Oregon during their adolescence. In focus groups and interviews, participants shared their stories. Racial identity development theory, phenomenology and Afrocentric feminist epistemology provided lenses for gaining insight into their experiences in a predominantly white city. The MP revealed six themes: lack of youth engagement in foster care decisions, the need for a cultural lens in social work, foster home abuse, the impact of placement decisions, the youth's locus of control, and healing and resilience. These insights from the participants can inform advocacy efforts and culturally relevant social work practices. The MP experience was cathartic and culturally affirming; also healing by the power of sharing one's truth. Amplifying these voices makes visible the social and emotional needs of African-American girls in foster care and provides recommendations for minimizing harm and maximizing healing and resilience. This research contributes to the field of social work and supports our growth as helpers in our community working towards inclusive and supportive systems of care.

DEDICATION

To my grandmother, Ollie Julia Alexander Cross, who always believed in me and encouraged me and is still sprinkling me with divine inspiration from the heavenly realm.

To my mother, Joy DeGruy, for inspiring my love for serving others and uplifting Black voices in my work. You have provided me with an invaluable education and are such an awe-inspiring example of Black brilliance personified. I am grateful to have you as my mother and friend.

To my father, Henri Cross, for always loving me with enthusiasm and reminding me to always "come back to myself". It is because of you I see the beauty in everything, the bright side and the limitless possibilities for my happiness. I feel good!

To my bonus parents, Zhalih Taefy-Cross and Lateef Baaset for your love, positivity, humor and encouragement! You are blessings in my life!

To my children, Nasir, Naime and Isaiah, you are the reason I am committed to doing my very best and giving my all in service to humanity. Because of you I am always inspired to be a light and to be a Baha'i. I love you more!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the African-American women who participated in this study. I am so grateful that you were willing to trust me and one another in this process. Thank you for being open and sharing such personal experiences with me.

To my dissertation chair, Tom Keller, who has been so positive, encouraging and thoughtful throughout my extended process!

To my dissertation committee members, Sam, Eileen and Alma, thank you for all your insights and for encouraging me to center my cultural experience and voice and experience in my writing.

To my amazing cohort! We have come a long way, and I am so thankful to have developed such beautiful and enduring friendships during our journey.

To my friends and family, especially Patrick- thank you for never letting me give up and always beaming light into me. It made all the difference.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Early in my career, when I was working as a Child and Family therapist, I would seek out opportunities to serve youth of color because I knew that in Oregon it was unusual for children experiencing foster care to have a social worker or therapist of color. It was highly unlikely in their entire experience in the foster care system for them to experience cultural representation in any aspect of their lives. Black girls seemed to struggle with finding healthy ways to develop a positive Black identity or to cultivate relationships with other Black children in a way that didn't reinforce negative stereotypes. I would see similar scenarios playing out with each African-American girl I worked with; they would self-report that they were known to be loud, aggressive, hood' or ghetto'. After developing a relationship with them, I realized that they were just reflecting the negative narratives that they were given by their foster parents, society, their social workers, teachers, physicians and therapists.

Thinking about my own experience as a Black adolescent girl, I recalled how difficult it was to align myself with all the positive and affirming aspects of my culture and identity. Developing a healthy and accurate self-concept was challenging even though I had positive models inside my home, with extended family and friends, and in my community. Society's low expectations and constant reinforcement of negative stereotypes became yet another challenge to my development in addition to the standard struggles experienced by teenage girls. As a therapist charged with assisting youth in foster care with creating healthy practices and positive ways to engage in society, I found that this was almost impossible to achieve if I only used the traditional training methods I

was taught. I saw that real influence and inspiration came from within me, a Black woman who shared a secret with these girls. We could see each other and could reflect to one another, a special way of affirming our experience as Black people, and a way of knowing that is unique to African-American women. I decided to research how experiencing foster care impacts how Black girls develop their identities and the potential shifts to practice and policy the field of social work could make to create a more supportive and culturally affirming experience. I wanted to explore if the themes so prevalent in my everyday life as a teen were also present in the lives of these women, to investigate ways that experiencing foster care created changes and challenges to their ability to develop a positive identity, and to see whether they were able to merely survive or thrive under those circumstances. The aims of my study reflect my curiosity about how these women were impacted by their experiences in foster care and how their stories may suggest new pathways for culturally relevant and affirming, identity enhancing interventions and approaches for working with African-American girls.

Cultural Gaps in Social Work Literature

There is currently a gap in foster care literature and research regarding the difficulties that African-American adolescent girls experience in foster care placements, their level of self-determination in how they are assigned therapists, and their control over the types of homes and programs they are placed in. These decisions impact their ability to adequately assess themselves and force them to adopt the perspectives of child welfare, which do not reflect their cultural identities or experience. Reviewing past and

current literature revealed that this gap can only be understood by looking at the ways that African-American women and girls have been socialized both intra-culturally and from white dominant culture. The field of social work has contributed to this void through its historical and contemporary racist and biased paradigms which devalue their voices, pathologize their skin color, and often substantiate media stereotypes. This project will elevate the voices of Black women and allow them to use their direct and unfiltered voices to tell their stories and make meaning of their collective experience.

The field of social work needs to reflect diverse voices and experiences. This is my contribution to this effort. My goal is to use the Mirror Project as a method for combatting the currently accepted, deficit-based narrative that continues to negatively impact African-American girls as they navigate their way through the foster care system and lose their opportunity to develop a positive racial identity. Additionally, there are very few studies that focus on transition issues related to the impact of the removal of children from their biological homes or the devastating effect of cultural isolation on the development of cultural identity for youth in foster care (e.g., Kools, 1997).

Disparities in foster care Removal and Placement

According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, during the time that the Mirror Project participants were in care, 23% of the children in the foster care system were identified as African-American while African-American children represented only 13% of the US population (DHHS, 2003). According to a report from the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, there are two primary root causes for this

disparity: sociodemographic factors and racial bias factors. Sociodemographic factors include Race and ethnicity, which means that having a racial status of "Black" is an identified factor that explains the disparities seen in economically disadvantaged communities and contributes to the overrepresentation of Black youth in care. Gender is also a factor related to demographic disparity as Black girls are more likely to be placed outside of their biological homes. Considering the combined factors of limited access to quality education, income disadvantages, limited employment opportunities, and geographic location, being Black compounds these disparities in child removal rates (Cenat et. al. 2020).

The disparate rates of removal for children from Black homes in comparison to the rates of removal for white children also indicate that the root cause is racism and racially biased home evaluations and removal recommendations. Economic, social, political, environmental factors, race and ethnicity are complex societal interactions that impact determinants of health for families and communities. Dettlaff and Boyd (2020) summarized the main causes of racial disproportionality in the child welfare system and found that Black children are among the most negatively impacted of all groups by this system. Racial bias was identified as a key factor contributing to racial disproportionality in child welfare by Harris (2021). Her examination found that African-American children represent 37% of children placed in American foster care even though they comprise 15% of all children in the US. Additionally, children of color are more frequently removed from their parent's custody than white children, and spend more time in the system. Black children in care receive a disparate amount of time with their care workers and

spend longer terms within the system when compared with white children in care (Harris, 2021).

Risk factors for children and families need to be equitably evaluated if we are going to change these statistics. However, outcomes for families engaged in the child welfare system are greatly impacted by racially biased social workers, researchers and systemic policies (Harris, 2021). To adequately address racial disparities, independent and unbiased research must be completed regarding critical factors impacting child welfare and child removal statistics (Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013). In a study conducted by Kokaliari, Roy and Taylor (2019), African-American parents were interviewed about their experiences with child removal and child custody battles with the state. The goal was to better understand factors contributing to the disproportionate number of African-American children that enter the child welfare system. Six themes emerged from those discussions: profound lack of trust (for the child welfare system and its workers), overwhelming trauma, severe and persistent poverty, health and mental health, socio-economic conditions and social isolation. Parents also suggested that having a better system for family support, economic opportunity and improved, respectful communication on the part of social service advocates would improve the current child welfare system. Ultimately, racism, punitive child welfare practices, anti-poverty measures and insufficient preventive mechanisms were the greatest contributors to the high removal rates of Black children (Kokaliari, Roy & Taylor, 2019).

The Ohio Office of Child Care and Family Services developed a culturally specific rites of passage program to begin to strengthen ethnic identity and improve

independent living skills for youth in care (Gavazzi et. al, 1996). The findings of this study strengthened the argument that African-American youth in foster care have additional cultural needs that should be addressed for them to thrive. Unfortunately, the system focuses on outcomes and less on the actual experience of the youth in foster care. Further, the foster care literature generally discusses dangers for how children will turn out as adults based on their lack of connection and familial isolation (Hoffman, 1963), or how adolescent females tend to have difficulty setting healthy social and emotional boundaries as adults and struggle psychologically due to the stress associated with being female and in care (Dowdell, et. al. 2009). In some cases, there is a focus on the issues of identity development and cultural isolation for African-Americans youth in care (McRoy, 2001). However, research rarely specifically addresses the lived experience of African-American girls in foster care from their perspective. The literature consistently remarks on the perception of American writers and clinicians about the experiences of African-American women and girls in foster care rather than on the recounting of their life experiences as expressed by the girls themselves or retrospectively from the women they have become (Tajima et al., 2022). The same can be stated historically regarding African women raised outside of the foster care system.

In a study conducted by Anita Thomas and Constance King (2007), the authors explored how, traditionally, African-American mothers socialize their daughters to face racism and sexism. These messages are usually rampant with religious overtones, and include message of self-determination, self-respect and dignity. This communication style was positively associated with creating positive self-concept and esteem in Black girls.

This is in stark contrast to the messages that African-American girls in foster care in predominantly white cities receive. Receiving critical cultural messaging regarding structural and societal expectations and perspectives regarding Black girls supports their development into women (Thomas & King, 2007). Similarly, an exploratory study on Black, female identity by Shorter-Goodsen (2006) revealed that among African-American women ages 18-22, there were 7 key areas of daily life that impacted their identity development: these included race, gender, sexual orientation, relationships, religious beliefs and political beliefs. Race was reported as the most impactful of the identified areas. This further suggests that culturally affirming, racial socialization is an essential factor in healthy identity development for Black females (Shorter-Goodsen, 1996).

Challenges for African Americans/females in care

"Everyone that's ever been to Africa writes about African women, but rarely do we see African women become storytellers of their own narratives." (Mekgwe, 2020).

Thankfully, there are exceptions. In a qualitative research study focused on understanding the impact of foster care on the identity and social development of African-American girls, Laura Daughtery explored the traditional practices of social work, the experience of being African American, and practice wisdom to better understand the perspectives and insights of African-American women experiencing the foster care phenomenon (Daughtery, 2011). Likewise, in an exploratory qualitative study by Lakindra Mitchell Dove in 2018, Black hair and its connections and influence on the

self-concept and esteem of African-American female adolescents in foster care were examined using interviews with eleven Black female adolescents. Mitchell Dove found that perceptions of hair, the influence of society on hair choices, the foster care system and personal hair care experiences were the most common themes that emerged. The findings indicated that not only was hair considered important to Black girls, but it was also strongly connected to their identities, feelings about their appearance and shaped how they viewed themselves as young Black women (Mitchell Dove, 2018).

Silencing of voices of African Americans/females

Historically, African-American women have been silenced in social discourse and social work literature, even in feminist ideology. Feminism as a social movement often sidelined issues of race in the US, and African and African-American women have consistently been relegated to colonial depictions, ideals and expectations. Analyzing the unique perspectives of Afrocentric feminist thought and feminist discourse is the first step in gaining true insights into the experiences and spoken perspectives of Black women. To that end, African Feminists and scholars have encouraged researchers and writers to use "African Feminisms" as alternative language to describe a body of ideas that come directly from Black women (Mekgwe, 2020).

> "No matter how backward and negative the mainstream view and image of
> Black people is, I feel compelled to reshape the image and to explore our
> many positive angles because I love my own people. Perhaps this is
> because I have been blessed with spiritual African eyes at a time when

most Africans have had their eyes poked out…. So, like most ghetto girls

who haven't yet been turned into money-hungry, heartless bitches by a

godless money centered world, I have a problem: I love hard. Maybe too

hard. Or maybe it's too hard for a people without structure— structure in

the sense of knowing what African womanhood is. What does it mean?

What is it supposed to do to you and for you?" (Sistah Souljah, as cited in

Richardson, 2003)

This again speaks to the necessity of bringing an authentic voice to research being

conducted in communities of color. How can we make assumptions and complete

assessments of the needs in communities when we as researchers rarely ask these

communities to tell us the truth about their experiences from their lived perspectives and

using their own choice of words, inflection and nuance? So much is lost from our

collective humanity when we erase the knowledge and expertise of entire communities

because we think we know best as a profession. Therefore the Mirror Project is so

important. It brings to life and to the light, the truth of what it means to live the

phenomenon of being female, Black and living in a foster placement.

The beauty and unique cultural attributes of African-American women and girls

have historically been regarded as negative and in some cases indicative of aggressive

and violent tendencies. The way these women and girls communicate is misunderstood

and often silenced. Language, both in how African-American girls speak with one

another and in the way they address their community members, family, fictive kin and

elders is extremely complex and holds many meanings in those spaces. When addressing

non-African-American individuals in positions of authority, the way they communicate is often characterized as sassy or disrespectful. They are commonly regarded as "loud" or described as having an "attitude."

The word "attitude" has many meanings, among which are, disposition, and posture, adaptation and an outlook on the world. These meanings are most appropriately applied to a general understanding of this word by White dominant culture. In the African-American community "attitude" means much more than just an outlook. African Americans from the AASC (African-American Speech Community), the term is made manifest in language and by one's ability to use attitude in the way they walk, talk, act and be. These interpretations are created via racial socialization and social learning (Troutman, 1982).

In 2012, a phenomenological study of Black girls talking with an attitude was authored by Jacqueline Koonce. The goal was to explore Talking with Attitude (TWA), a lingual phenomenon commonly attributed to Black females. Koonce used phenomenology and Afrocentric feminist epistemology as her methodological and theoretical approaches and conducted interviews with middle school-aged girls. Koonce found that TWA was a form of resistance and positively associated with self-determination and personal social justice when the girls perceived that they were being mistreated. In this way, TWA is used as an act of resistance to the hostility and disrespect they were reportedly experiencing from their teachers (Koonce, 2012).

"I want a girl with extensions in her hair, bamboo earrings, at least two

pair. A Fendi bag and a bad attitude. That's all I need to get me in a good

mood. (Lyrics from Around the Way Girl, L.L. Cool J).

In the song above, L.L. is speaking intra-culturally about the unique and attractive attributes of Black women. He is not using the word "attitude" in a disparaging manner. The community he is communicating with understands this meaning and is affirmed by it. Contrast this notion with the general understanding of dominant White culture. How many young African-American girls are disproportionately disciplined in school and social service situations due to their perceived negative attitudes? How might having approaches that are constructed with a culturally relevant perspective enhance the positive impacts of the relationships established in these spaces?

Need for Research telling their stories

Providing a culturally responsive setting in which African-American women may discuss their experiences using language that feels comfortable and authentic to them is affirming. As African-American girls in foster care, speaking in their own style of voice is a potentially liberating act and, doing so in a cohort of women who have had similar experiences may yield even greater catharsis and liberation. The act of telling one's own story using one's own unique voice is one of the greatest ways we can ensure that we are truly being heard. Storytelling is central to Black/African culture. Historically in a every African and African-American village, hood' or community, there is a Griot, Mande Jeli,

Jali, Wolof gewel, ole' timer, Big Mama, Elder, Pastor, "Mayor", neighborhood historian

or a person who has "all the stories." Storytelling is central to human experience. That is

why there are so many nursery rhymes, parables, scriptural lessons, Anansi tales and

cultural mythology passed down from generation to generation. A story from one's

grandparent can give way to practices, beliefs and superstitions for generations to come.

In the field of social work where we, as researchers, are often trying to find meaning and

understanding to promote growth, positive change and healing in communities,

storytelling is critical to that process (Lewis, 2011).

The MP allows authentic Black female voice to be heard. This goes beyond

simply listening to a story from another participant; it also allows for each participant to

be transported back into that familiar experience, moving through the story with the

storyteller so that she is not alone in her journey. Collectively we sat with one another,

fully present and offering a sense of belonging that cannot be adequately conveyed in this

paper. These spaces, though often rare for girls in care, represent a freeing aspect of

intracultural feminine connection. These connections were explored in a detailed

reflection and analysis of "sister-friends" by Bryant-Davis (2013). Bryant-Davis found

that not only did these close relationships enhance women's health and wellbeing but also

assisted Black women in facing and overcoming major life transitions and especially

transitions related to trauma and traumatic stress. Sisterhood is seen as therapeutic and

the author recommended sisterhood as a valuable component for some clinical

interventions (Bryant-Davis, 2013). The connection between Black women and the

restoration that accompanies a shared experience; collectively unpacking traumatic

histories and using a universal language to express oneself is invaluable and was an essential component of the Mirror Project.

In Toni Morrison's book, The Origins of Others she asks, "How does one become a racist? A sexist? Since no one is born a racist and there is no fetal predisposition to sexism, one learns Othering not by lecture or instruction, but by example." Morrison (2017).

Black children in foster care not only struggle to find cultural affirmation in their foster homes, but they are also unlikely to find positive and culturally affirming representation outside the home. These children are inundated with stereotypes and racist tropes in nearly every aspect of their lives. Accurate representation using real and authentic Black voices on television, in books, in their school lessons or in social clubs, arts and sciences and extracurricular activities is virtually non-existent. The stories of these children, as told by them and as explained by them would not only be empowering, but it would also add a level of authenticity to relevant literature and contemporary research.

In her book, *Recovering Black Storytelling in Qualitative Research: Endarkened Storywork*, S.R. Tolliver posits that storytelling isn't just a cultural nicety—it has been vital to Black survival. Storytelling offers life lessons, admonitions, strategy, inspiration, motivation and healing when facing hardships and government sanctioned violence and oppression. The need to hear from Black (Endarkened) folks about how they view and experience life in Black skin is critical to our growth and development in our profession

as social workers and researchers, but even more it is an ethical imperative for us as human beings (Tolliver, 2021).

Importance to the Field of Social Work

The field of social work espouses the highest moral integrity when addressing the needs of vulnerable populations and communities. Unfortunately, regarding the value of culture and identity when designing and implementing interventions that are culturally informed and relevant, practices and protocols are substantially absent. When considering the history of social work, at its origin there were disparities in social welfare access and the acknowledgement of culturally specific needs of African Americans. Hull House helped poor white women and even European immigrants, but it failed poor Black women. In 1889, it was a "a community of university women" whose main objective was to provide social and educational opportunities for working class people (many of them recent European immigrants) in the neighboring communities (Hounmenou, 2012).

Mainstream American settlement houses failed in their movement when it came to assisting Blacks moving to cities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Subsequently, a parallel movement was developed by Black female activists and reformers. Historically oppressed, African-American communities used non-confrontational strategies to uplift their children and families and establish equal rights. These historical factors continue to shape present-day social work dynamics, and disparities in access and culturally specific considerations in social work persist (Hounmenou, 2012). A contemporary example is how the social welfare movement in pursuit of equality for women fails to take into

consideration the compounding impact of race (Mehrotra, 2010). Social Work and social workers pride themselves on social work history, especially the work during the feminist movement which was/is racist and caused Black women to have to create their own system of social welfare. It is this perpetual racism that continues to prevent Black women from joining white women's feminist agenda because it consistently leaves out others and, specifically, Black women in their pursuance of gender equality. Their goal is to move past a glass ceiling while Black women seem to face an impenetrable cement ceiling.

The premise of this study and others like it is that continuing to ignore the cultural implications for interventions and the asset-based benefit of culturally specific approaches creates barriers to improving care for African-American girls in foster care. Little research exists that deeply explores the experiences of African-American girls in foster care. Further, research regarding the impact of cultural isolation and absent representation in social workers and therapists is virtually non-existent. The results of this study will create greater understanding of the importance of cultural representation and consideration for African Americans girls in foster care. The insights gained from the women in this study will enhance work practices and shape research approaches when addressing African-American female adolescents in foster care in predominantly white environments. This dissertation study contributes to the field of social work by elevating the conversation about culturally relevant practices in child welfare and in the foster care system.

Research Aim

The Mirror Project sought to examine the experiences of African-American girls in foster care, considering their experiences in a predominantly white city. The format allowed for these women to tell their own stories and make meaning of their experiences with others who share a similar background. Identity development, positive and negative self-concept, esteem, efficacy and long-term surviving/thriving were discussed in focus groups with four adult women who were formerly in the foster care system. The Mirror Project had the following six aims: 1: To explore the phenomenon of being Black, female and living in foster care as reflected upon by adult women formerly in care. 2: To promote healing by telling stories and giving voice to women who have experienced foster care. 3: To add to the national discourse on the need for culturally relevant and effective intervention in foster care. 4: To support research in positive racial socialization and culturally affirming identity development in African-American girls. 5: To engage in participatory approaches to conducting research within the foster care system. 6: To establish community connections by creating opportunities for relationship/friendship building and to foster a support network of young women.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The Mirror Project explores the experiences of African-American women who were involved in the foster care system as youth. Further, it reveals how the system of foster care perpetuates white supremacy and causes harm to their physical, social, emotional, psychological and cultural development. The foundation of this research is rooted in the history of white supremacy in the United States and the historical treatment of African Americans in all its institutions (M Beliso-De Jesús & Pierre, 2020). This chapter focuses on the myriad ways that white supremacy has contributed to the continued negative experience of African-American female adolescents in care and under a national umbrella of dehumanization of women and people of color. The historical views and depictions of African-American women by all American institutions have greatly impacted Black women and girls. Throughout our history in the US, language and cultural expression have served as both a method for justifying the dehumanization of Black women and a vehicle for celebrating Black women. This apparent dichotomy aligns with the many contradictory policies and laws within a white supremist society that have at the outset appeared to be supportive of African Americans in this country and at the same time been used to undermine their ability to thrive. Scholars have highlighted the detrimental influence of racially charged stereotypes and images on the self-perception and wellbeing of African-American adolescents. Some have suggested that identity components (e.g., ethnic identity and self-concept) serve a protective function. Since being brought to this country in 1619 (though there are historians that suggest that enslaved Africans were brought to America during the Spanish expedition of 1526),

African Americans were immediately dehumanized to justify the barbaric and sadistic treatment that was inflicted upon them for hundreds of years. During this period of enslavement, African Americans were robbed of their native languages, religious practices, music, dance and any other form of expression that was deemed a threat by their enslavers. This is important to consider when we see the residual impact of dehumanization in present-day police brutality, the disproportionate discipline doled out to Black youth and the over policing and overrepresentation of Black people in American prisons (Embrick, 2020). The vestiges of slavery and white supremacy impact all aspects of Black life. Black children in foster care are especially vulnerable to race-based abuse and neglect (Degruy, 2008).

White Supremacy and the Black Female in Foster Care

White supremacy impacts Black life on a macro, messo and micro level (Ray, 2019). It is reasonable to assume that this affects all the social determinants of health when it comes to the African-American community. With Black girls, addressing social-emotional development, racial socialization and cultural representation are imperative to the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions with those in foster care and their families. Cultural identity has been defined as a fundamental aspect of self that includes a sense of membership in an ethnic group and sharing attitudes and feelings with that group (Bernal & Knight, 1993; Phinney, 1996). Scholars and researchers have considered a strong and positive ethnic identity to be a significant cultural asset for African Americans given the racist context of U.S. society (Worrell, & Gardner-Kitt, 2006). Cultural identity can be a

protective factor that shields African Americans from the adverse effects of racism by promoting ethnic pride and making individuals view themselves positively despite racist situations. More research in how therapeutic interventions can be more culturally affirming and create sustainable positive outcomes is needed (Cross & Strauss, 1998).

Macro

The system of foster care is a microcosm of the larger societal systems but serves as the greatest influence in the life of a Black girl in care. Foster care is meant to provide an appropriate developmental context where children have an opportunity to grow socially, emotionally, physically and psychologically. Unfortunately, white supremist ideology is rampant in all American institutions, and human services and child welfare are no exception (Mack, 2021). There is substantial evidence that child welfare systems do not affirm, protect or cultivate children of color or African-American girls in culturally appropriate or culturally sustaining ways. It does not provide environments where positive racial socialization and healthy cultural identity development can be lovingly and intentionally cultivated.

A quantitative survey of 167 active social workers and social work faculty along with qualitative interviews with active social work workers and faculty that were African-American was completed to assess the impact of white supremacy in the system of social work and within the experiences, policies and practices of social work among social work professionals (Mack, 2021). The study identified deceptive narratives, omissions of cultural epistemologies in contrast with white epistemological frameworks, and a fully

divided profession and recommended greater and more equitable contributions from racially diverse and grossly underrepresented communities (Bryant, 2007).

The suggestion that human services and child welfare are steeped in white supremist beliefs is not a new one (Roberts, 2009). A comprehensive analysis of the impact of white supremacy on social welfare ideologies, policies and practices, found that structural racism and systemic discrimination have been imprinted into the American system of social welfare and made a strong case to support the immediate deconstructing and dismantling of discriminatory and white supremacist practices within all public serving systems (Sledge, 2023).

Media Influence on Black female identity development

Another macro-level influence of white supremacy is how it utilizes media to propagate racist perspectives and misrepresentations of non-white communities. The history of negative Black women's images in the media and the lack of positive cultural voice have created an inaccurate narrative and literally robbed society of hearing authentic Black female voices in every facet of media. In the Op-Ed authored by Darian Lane (2021), he questions why media "gatekeepers" are consistently blocking Black writers from telling their own stories. Many stories in fiction, film and television disproportionately tell stories where Black people offer love and forgiveness in response to injustice. The primary storylines of The Help, Mandela and Green Book, center the white character's voice in advocating for or "saving" the Black characters. In contrast, when white characters face injustice in films and stories, the narrative is that they should

stand up for themselves rather than having someone intervene on their behalf. Examples

of this can be seen in films like Brave heart, Gladiator and Legally Blonde (Lane, 2021).

Christelle Ram authored a critical comparative analysis of the historical Black erasure in

the telling of stories Ocoee and Rosewood. In both cases, these were vibrant Black

communities obliterated by racist, white vigilantes leading to the mass exodus of

thousands of Black residents and yet both historical events were erased from historical

recounting (Rams, 2020).

This erasure has a compounding impact on Black Americans and their ability to

foster positive racial identity development. Erasure and false recounting of historical

events, reinforces the continued need for accurate and accessible historical truths to be

shared with African-American children and youth. For example, Adams-Bass, Stevenson

and Kotzin (2014) held focus groups with Black youth ages 14-17 to create a measure of

Black media stereotypes, and they developed the Black Media Messages Questionnaire

(BMMQ) where more than one hundred Black youth completed measures of racial

socialization, racial identity, their knowledge of Black history, self-esteem, and body

image perception. The researchers found that age, gender, and TV viewing were

significantly correlated with endorsement of negative Black stereotype media messages.

Racial socialization, racial identity and knowledge of Black history were positively

correlated with endorsement of positive Black images, (Adams-Bass, Stevenson, &

Kotzin, 2014). Positive racial socialization has been shown to act as a therapeutic buffer

to racism and discrimination. Further, racial socialization supports healthy identity

development and resiliency in African-American youth (Winchester, et. al. 2022). Studies in racial socialization suggest that if African-American children are not racially socialized, they will be socialized by racism, and this racist socialization will lead Black children to develop self-destructive defense mechanisms to protect themselves from shame and rejection from the dominant society. Parents who engage in practices of racial socialization promote healthy development in their children and positive adaptation to mainstream society (Caughy, Randolph, & O'Campo, 2002).

Historically, the white supremist media has perpetuated ideas about race and ethnicity that place African-American women at a clear disadvantage. Beginning with the welfare queen image during the Reagan administration and moving to the porno chick represented in current videos, society views a daily discourse on race, gender, and class that continues to reproduce dominant and distorted views of African-American womanhood and sexuality. The overabundance of this portrayal in popular culture raises serious implications associated with linking sexual promiscuity to the nature and identity of African-American women. These popular representations of African-American women and men are mostly unchallenged by larger society and the African-American community. Now, with social media pages, only fans pages and other platforms for social networking, product promotion and advertising easily accessible to people of all ages, there are even more opportunities to see racism, racist tropes and memes about Black women and girls perpetuated.

D.P. Stephens, in his 2007 study on colonizing images of African-American women, describes how colonizing images and diagnostic labels function together to serve

as an oppressive mechanism for African-American women's health. The mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, the jezebel and the Black lady overachiever are representational images of African-American women that contribute to how they are viewed and treated within the healthcare arena, leading to health disparities. These disparities among African-American women and all women across the African diaspora continue to grow at disproportionate rates. Historical depictions of African-American women and the negative images portrayed in contemporary media and society are a contributing cause for maltreatment in health settings and subpar health care (Stephens, 2007). In a study conducted by Andrews, Greenfield, Driver, & Redwood, (2017), researchers explored how the tendency of medical professionals to stereotype minority ethnic groups (and Black women in the Caribbean in particular) directly impacted both the common discourse regarding their health and reinforced inequalities in access to services and health outcomes.

In a qualitative study designed to identify African-American early adolescents' subjective meanings of African-American women's sexuality in hip hop, Stephens & Phillips (2003) reviewed common portrayals of Black women and the rampant sexual images in the media. These included the Diva, Gold Digger, Freak, Dyke, Gangster Bitch, Sister Savior, Earth Mother, and Baby Mama. These eight sexual images both inform and reflect beliefs about African-American women's physical attractiveness. Interpersonal relationship decision making processes also were influenced by these conceptual frameworks of African-American women's sexuality. Findings from this study

are important given the tendency of previous researchers to ignore race and intra-ethnic variations in studies of beliefs about attitudes toward sexuality (Stephens, 2007).

To subjugate African-American women in particular, some feminist theorists posit that "controlling images" Europeans utilized forced enslaved African women into subordination (Watson, Lewis, & Moody, 2019). Images like that of the "mammy", "Mule" and "Jezebel" were pervasive in shaping the narrative that contributed to the ways that Black women began to see and gender themselves. The language, rhetoric and marketing of these images transmuted these images into the fabric of American society and has continued to shape how Black women are portrayed in music, media, and child welfare justice systems (Simms, 2001).

An often overlooked or ignored aspect of the subjugation and control has been the role that white women have played in the domestic terrorism and outright brutality against Black women historically. The contemporary 'Karen' phenomenon is neither new nor rare, yet such oppressive and consistent negative interactions seldom reach our social work texts or literary commentary. In 2018 there was a national news story covering a situation where a white woman called the police on an 11-yr old girl selling water in front of her home to raise money for a trip to Disneyland. In 2022, again there was a national news story about a white neighbor calling the police on a "small Black woman" spraying a substance on the trees. The "woman" was really a 9-yr old girl who created an all-natural spray to get rid of bugs that were plaguing the neighborhood. The violence perpetrated by white women and white men against Black women and children persists even though it is often regarded as a thing of the past. This practice has such strong

historical roots that it is depicted in a series of photos at the National Museum of African-American History and Culture in Washington D.C.

Controlling images continued through the Jim Crow era, the Civil Rights Movement, and are present today in contemporary media, law, education, health, housing, employment and in every other facet of American society where decisions are made for, or in many cases, against, Black women. These historical traumas together with contemporary stressors have taken a toll on African Americans in general and Black women and girls specifically. Consider the multigenerational transmission of dehumanizing images and over-sexualization of the cultural behavior and bodies of Black women. Further, how this was reflected in the behaviors, beliefs and attitudes of the dominant white culture and recast and internalized by some members of the African-American community that have been socialized in white supremacy. The history of marginalization and demonizing has led to significant personal as well as collective trauma. The foster care system further stigmatizes young Black girls as lacking the support necessary to thrive physically, mentally, and culturally (Bell, 2017).

American adolescents in care are perhaps the most vulnerable and impressionable, regarding these controlling images. African-American teens and non-Black teens develop conscious and unconscious biases and learn subjective meanings regarding African-American women and their value.

As mentioned earlier, there is a gross lack of research that adequately examines the depth and complexity of how white supremacy influences societal beliefs and how negative Black female images have affected and shaped contemporary African-American

female identity. The substantiated methods (including positive racial socialization and knowledge of African-American history) for restoring and repairing the damage of these images are seldom acknowledged or practiced by foster parents, nor are they encouraged by social welfare agencies (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). A contemporary examination of negative portrayals of African-American females shows that the historical depictions of African-American women in the Sapphire, Jezebel and Mammy images have morphed into new labels that some might argue are far more negative and destructive because of the widespread acceptance of these images in media.

Validation of these Stereotypic Roles for Black Women Scale (SRBWS) was examined in a 2004 study conducted by Thomas, Witherspoon and Speight. A sample of 186 African-American women took the SRBWS along with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Racial Identity Attitude Scale–B. A confirmatory factor analysis supported a four-factor structure of the scale, and moderate reliability estimates were found for each of the interrelated but distinct subscales. Stepwise regression analyses revealed that Mammy and Sapphire images were significant predictors of self-esteem scores and that the internalized stereotypic roles contributed unique variance over racial identity attitudes in understanding self-esteem in Black women (Thomas, Witherspoon & Speight, 2004).

This study was comprehensive in that it had a large sample of African-American women and utilized a detailed questionnaire and interview process. Not surprising was the outcome that the Mammy and Sapphire stereotypes, once internalized, reflected a lower reported self-esteem. These images have historically been the most caricatured with unattractiveness and idiocy as common descriptors. There are strong implications

for use in evaluating adult and adolescent self-perception, and in assessing the degree to which the African-American individual has been racially socialized (Thomas, Witherspoon & Speight, 2004).

In the article, The Words Have Changed but the Ideology Remains the Same: Misogynistic Lyrics in Rap Music, Adams and Fuller (2006) explore the historical and contemporary use of the "controlling images" found in rap music and other media forms. Rap music emerged as an aesthetic cultural expression of the urban youth in the late 1970s and has gone through its own transformation over the past several decades. Historically it has been denoted as the poetry of the youth who are often disregarded because of their race and class status. Since its inception, rap has gone through several phases, and it has been used as a medium to express a variety of ideas, feelings, and emotions. Hope, love, fear, anger, frustration, pride, violence, and misogyny have all been expressed through the medium of rap. Unfortunately, the use of misogynistic ideology in gangster/pimp culture rap is prevalent and aligns with the larger cultural picture of how African-American women have been characterized historically (Adams & Fuller, 2006).

The images forced upon African-American Women during slavery, reconstruction, post reconstruction are the same images that the Vice President of the United States faces today. Negative images were and are unapologetically disseminated and remain as fixed images regarding African-American women. Negative depictions of African-American women propagated in the 1600's used scare tactics and intentional misinformation to promote a racist narrative to justify their mistreatment. Throughout the Jim Crow era

these depictions coupled with derogatory expletives supported and justified government-sanctioned terrorism. The Blacksploitation films and Black music in the 70's were rampant with these images and assigned values. They continue to change and re-emerge in contemporary rap lyrics, movies, news, and music. The images of African-American women as irreligious and immoral continue to serve as justification for ongoing objectification, violence and murder (Adams and Fuller 2006).

The purpose of the Adams and Fuller study was (a) to explore the relationship among stereotypic images, beauty standards that are consistent with "colorism," and identity components of African-American girls and (b) to determine the impact of these variables on girls' sexual attitudes. African-American girls (N = 270) ages 10–15 years old completed a questionnaire that included identity components, stereotypic images, and colorism. Expected findings panned out, revealing significant positive alignment with stereotypic images, colorism, and sexual activity. Additionally, significant linkages between identity components and stereotypes were found. In this case, identity did not serve as a buffer against the negative effects of societal messages. Instead, positive endorsement of stereotypes and colorism increased the risk of premature sexual engagement. These outcomes suggest that a strong identity alone may not be enough to reduce sexual risk if girls cannot critically review and reflect on the societal messages that they receive (Adams & Fuller, 2006). The indicator, "colorism" clearly describes what process by which African Americans have begun to self-select Eurocentric beauty ideals and marginalized individuals within the group by placing a hierarchy on hue or

tone and continue to tie negative or positive attributes to complexion (Ryan, Hunt, Weible, Peterson & Casas, 2007).

The researchers concluded that greater attention to this social issue may improve the health of all adolescent females. This study provided some insight into the issue of media impact on the self-perceptions of African-American teenage girls. By examining the rampant negative portrayals of African-American in rap videos where there are barely clothed women with fair (light) complexions, positioned sexually and overly flirtatious or physically draped over rappers, the authors sought to evaluate the potentially adverse impact on the health for African-American adolescent girls. The survey that the girls completed captured information on viewing habits, perspectives and personal practices. The study revealed how these images directly contribute to the self-reported negative body image and marijuana use. The greatest finding was that continued viewing of negative sexual images of African-American women is correlated with engaging in high-risk sexual behaviors and drug use (Adams & Fuller, 2006).

The historical over-sexualization and sex scripting for African-American women in the US continues to impact their contemporary experiences. Black girls confront sexual coercion based on these racist and stereotypical ways that they have been represented in history, law, media and medicine. Their ability to combat these tropes and resist sexual engagement may be more difficult for them in their adolescence (French, 2013).

The sexuality of Black girls is a frequent discussion when it comes to high-risk teen behaviors. Black girls are often the victims of negative connotations. They are seen

and described as oversexed, more likely to become teen moms and the primary carriers of sexually transmitted infection (STI). Ironically, most studies in this area reflect white American standards of beauty and consistently disregard the experiences of Black girls. The level of attraction that Black girls experience and their level of desire is also unexamined as is the impact of the social pressures placed upon them based on these negative sexual attributions. This is a devastating gap in this area of research as scholars will often discuss Black sexuality and the outcomes for Black girls without ever speaking with any Black girls (French, 2012).

Messo

White supremacy reaches beyond the macro level of societal impact of its institutions like the child welfare system and mainstream media. It extends into the community and impacts the daily lives of families by creating barriers to positive racial socialization in Black homes. This makes it extremely difficult for Black parents to create and sustain positive identity development and the importance of racial socialization with their children.

Parents Building Positive Racial Socialization

Universal goals for all parents include being supportive, loving and helping to prepare their children to participate fully and positively as productive citizens of greater society. Socializing children is largely based on the values that the parents hold and the generally accepted values of the greater society. Black parents experience this process as

problematic in that the greater society often doesn't reflect the cultural values or hold any true respect, love, or value for Black people or their perspectives, culture or their lives. Black children at an early age develop an understanding of their recognized status in society and the roles, and prescribed behaviors attributed to people who look like them, live where they live, eat what they eat and value what they value. It is important that Black children don't solely locate themselves in this social structure. Parents play an essential role in creating a culturally affirming context in both the broader social and environmental context and, also in the familial context. Ideally this will reinforce positive social patterns found within the environments the parents place their children. The neighborhood, schools, social network and extra-curricular activities where Black children are placed by their parents can substantially impact the child's ability to develop a positive self-concept and identity. Parents that intentionally create racially positive and culturally affirming social and environmental contexts for their children are much more likely to produce confident, balanced and open youth and adults. Unfortunately for foster parents with Black children in their homes, this process may be more difficult to cultivate. There are limited resources (specifically financial resources) for foster parents to access to ensure that their Black children have opportunities to thrive in positive Black environments (Thornton, Chatters, Tayler & Allen, 1990).

In a meta-analysis conducted by Rivas-Drake, et al. (2014), 46 studies of racial-ethnic identity and psychosocial, academic, and health risk outcomes among ethnic and racial minority youth found that positive ethnic-racial affect represented an important identity dimension. These findings matched their research expectations and the psycho-

social, academic and health outcomes among four ethnic-racial groups in the United

States were empirically supported (Rivas-Drake, et. al. 2014).

Contemporary literature in racial identity not only highlights the importance of

family modeling and the establishment of positive racial social and environmental

contexts, but it also supports the notion that positive racial socialization helps to deflect

the negative impact of racism in the development of Black self-concept (Stevenson,

Herrero-Taylor, Cameron & Davis, 2002). Black parents are responsible for preparing

their children to experience racism as demonstrated in prejudice and situations where

they are discriminated against. Creating a healthy Black identity largely depends on how

effective parents and family members can balance teaching strategies to cope and manage

their experiences with racism as well as reinforcing a strong sense that they have intrinsic

worth. They must emphasize positive racial images, historical contributions and cultural

influence, and contributions to global knowledge and education (Lesane-Brown, 2006).

Additionally, Black parents can insulate their children from internalizing racist tropes and

offset the negative impact this internalization often has on identity development (Butler-

Sweet, 2011). Overwhelmingly, positive racial socialization has been widely supported as

a mediating component for development of a positive Black identity (Hughes & Johnson,

2001).

Some parents seek to create a positive social and environmental context by

homeschooling their children. This practice is less common among foster parents who

often do not have the experience, resources, time or space to create positive and culturally

affirming learning spaces. Cultural homeschooling for Black children is seen as a form of

'racial protectionism' as Black parents expect that anti-Black racism will be present in education as it is in every other major institution in the U.S. The racism Black students experience can be seen in the one-on-one interactions between them and their teachers and other non-Black students. The historically flawed, Eurocentric curriculum with rampant negative stereotyping, cultural omission, and the abundantly sterilized acknowledgement of the impact of racism and colonization are additional factors. Black children are placed in special education classes at disproportionate rates and there are immense disparities in the punishment of Black students in comparison to their white counterparts, often receiving the most stigmatizing labels (Jordan, 2005). Fully understanding the impact of Black child racism on the social, mental, physical and emotional health of Black child self-esteem, confidence, efficacy and self-concept is essential to understanding why homeschooling is an alternative that more and more Black parents are choosing as a method for reinforcing positive Black identity development in their children (Mazama & Lundy, 2012). In a study conducted by Burt, Lei & Simons (2017), researchers found that positive racial socialization fostered positive racial identity and enhanced spirituality among Black adolescents. These factors were strong deterrents of criminality and supported healthy and productive adult outcomes. They used an asset-based approach in their study, viewing the culture and values of African Americans as positive, they posited that positive familial racial socialization created stronger interpersonal resilience and supported greater resistance to negative behaviors (Burt, Lei & Simons, 2017).

Hughes et al. (2008) launched a mixed-methods ethnic socialization study where he interviewed parents and measured how they viewed socialization and how they inserted it into their parenting methods. Hughes found that Black parents were more likely to report that cultural socialization was an important aspect of child-rearing than Chinese, Latino, and White parents in the sample (Hughes et al., 2008). In a study conducted by Constantine and Blackmon (2002), the researchers surveyed 115 middle-school students attending a predominantly Black school using an anonymous study examining personal attitudes and experiences. The goal was to examine how the relationship between parental racial socialization messages impacted self-esteem in Black American youth. They found that cultural pride reinforced by messages of positive socialization were strongly correlated with self-esteem. Further, it was apparent to the researchers that positive racial messages were integral to the social success of many Black youths and how skilled they were in developing healthy self-concept and self-perception and how well they coped with prejudice and racial discrimination (Constantine & Blackmon, 2002).

Michael Cunningham and Samantha Francois (2014) sought to examine the impact of parental racially and culturally socializing messages and to determine whether these messages serve as a protective factor among African-American students that experience peer and teacher related racial discrimination. The findings showed significant correlations between racial cultural socialization and discrimination originating from teachers in that students experiencing low amounts of racial cultural socialization messages from parents and peers had a decrease in their academic expectations as

discrimination increased, while those experiencing high amounts of racial cultural socialization saw an increase in future academic even if they reported a greater amount of discrimination from teachers (Cunningham & Francois, 2014).

Stevenson (1992) suggests that racial socialization is a critical approach in which transmission of cultural values provides children with positive perceptions of themselves. Stevenson determined that an intrinsic part of the fabric of American society is racism and that it cannot be overlooked. He also states that racial socialization can be a protective factor for children when their parents are intentional in their engagement (Adams-Bass, Stevenson, & Kotzin, 2014).

> "When one's group has been stigmatized by the majority culture's negative appraisals it is encouraging for African-American youth to be told by members of their own group that the assessment of the dominant culture is fueled by inaccuracies and bias and cautioned not to internalize this perception. Within the group youth are given reassurance through acknowledgement of the strengths and accomplishments of their culture," (Adams-Bass, Stevenson, & Kotzin, 2014).

The African-American axiology posits that in African and Black/African-American culture, the highest value lies in the relationships between people (Nichols, 1976). Racial socialization builds on that premise and suggests that relationship development is essential to creating and sustaining mental health and well-being in African-American children and youth (Adams-Bass, Stevenson, & Kotzin, 2014).

Romero and Roberts (2003) found that youth who reported racial discrimination but had higher ethnic pride exhibited higher self-esteem than did those youth who reported high racial discrimination but low positive ethnic pride. Ethnic identity has also been found to be preventative regarding youth engaging in negative behaviors. Developing a strong cultural identity can support healthy mental health and promote healthy social and emotional behaviors. Conversely, developing a negative cultural identity often creates within the African-American individual, feelings of helplessness, shame and leads to negative self-concept and engagement in unsafe or destructive behaviors. In a study conducted by Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone and Zimmerman (2003), African-American youth who reported race as a core component of their identity reported decreased psychological distress. The study also found that a strong sense of identity was also linked to a lower sense of perceived stress (Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone and Zimmerman, 2003). These insights about the need for positive racial socialization provide a foundation for the argument that without it, African-American children and youth are less likely to develop positive self-concept, confidence and will find it difficult to navigate negative narratives and expectations thrive.

African-American women have even greater challenges to positive identity development. White supremacy's influence on historical depictions of African-American women in media and the lack of diversity in skin complexions in marketing and movies and positive limited representation continues to undermine efforts on the part of parents, teachers, social workers and therapists that seek to instill positive identity messages for young African-American girls (Littefield, 2008; Stephens, 2007).

Micro

On the individual level, white supremacy also directly impacts the individual Black person. The Black child being the most vulnerable on this scale. The Black female adolescent is especially vulnerable, as a female in a male dominated society. White supremist notions of beauty and femininity, strength and morality are skewed negatively when applied to Black women and girls.

Skin Color

White supremacy creates a skin color hierarchy with the lightest skin at the top and the darkest at the bottom. This skin color hierarchy is detrimental but even worse when compounded with negative personality and moral attributions. Skin color has played a historically influential role in the lives of African Americans. Black female adolescents are at risk in how they perceive themselves and the way they feel that they are perceived by the larger society. African-American girls in foster care are often placed in homes where their skin is not properly cared for and typically, girls with lighter complexions receive greater affirmation of their beauty by white foster parents. Racism and racist socialization and anti-Blackness is a factor in many foster and adoptive placements regardless of the race of the foster/adoptive parents. All foster parents should be trained and coached to create culturally affirming environments for their Black children (Mcroy, 1999).

Skin bleaching or lightening is a practice that is currently a worldwide phenomenon that can be traced to the Elizabethan age when Europeans used powders and paint (Blay, 2011). This fixation on whiteness was introduced via colonization to communities of color, and skin hierarchies aligned with levels of privilege, freedoms and access negatively impacted how those communities perceived their value, morality and beauty. These beliefs permeated Black families enslaved in the US and continues to manifest itself daily in disparities in treatment by police based on skin color, in television and media castings and has also been proven a factor in salary and benefits offered to individuals seeking employment opportunities. Intra-culturally, colorism continues to negatively impact people of color with Black girls with dark complexions receiving the greatest amount of discrimination (lay, 2011).

In a study completed by Littefield (2008), the role of skin color was examined (i.e., its lightness-darkness) as it pertained to various body-image measures among 66 Black college females described as light-, medium-, and women with dark skin complexion. A Skin Color Assessment Procedure was developed to assess various perceptual dimensions of skin color. Skin color satisfaction was positively related to satisfaction with overall appearance and with the face. Future research should address the possible mediating role of racial identity vis-a-vis the effects of skin color and racial physiognomy on body image. African-American women and their reported perceptions of beauty and acceptance based on skin tone was greatly impacted by historical implications for the development of these beauty ideals. Racism and the reported

perceptions that African-American men prefer women with "lighter" complexions, impacts the overall self-reported level of satisfaction with appearance.

The current literature in social work regarding identity about the impact of skin color on African-American children in foster care is grossly limited and therefore, there are few recommendations for addressing or challenging these perceptions in meaningful ways that will support healthy self-perception and positive self-concept in African-American children in care (Littlefield, 2008). Generally, in the US and abroad, skin complexion and anti-Blackness has a history of influencing race relations in America that has set a very real precedent for how it is viewed globally. Consistently, positive characteristics are attributed to those with lighter skin while those with darker complexions are often relegated to stereotypical categories and judged negatively by their physical appearance (Mathews & Johnson, 2015).

Historically, there have been numerous studies like this one, with similar outcomes for Black women in general. The question now becomes, how does being a Black girl in foster care impact perceptions of personal beauty and worth?

Body Image

White supremacy also applies a hierarchy to body size and shape. Typical Eurocentric standards of beauty placing a thin, straight body shape as supreme with all other body types as less attractive, less desirable even less clean, grossly devalues the Black female body and again uses its poison to create illness when it comes to healthy and positive self-concept in Black girls. In an article authored by Tracey Owens Patton

entitled, "Hey Girl, Am I More Than My Hair? African-American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair, the impact of white supremist Eurocentric beauty ideals on the mental, emotional and physical well-being of young, Black women is discussed. Key to her exploration was her review of a study conducted by Lester and Petrie (1998). Lester and Petrie found that young, African-American women who grow up in predominantly white environments describe feeling strong pressure to conform to a white standard of beauty. The results of this study further indicate that positive racial socialization and exposure to positive Black images are a mediating factor for young Black girls struggling to gain positive self-esteem and self-concept in the face of Eurocentric standards of beauty. Black girls in care living in predominantly white cities have an increased likelihood that they will be inundated with these standards and have more difficulty developing a healthy identity.

Substance Use

According to studies completed by the annual National High School Senior Survey, the Parents Resource Institute for Drug Education Survey, and the Nation Household Study of Drug Abuse, the use of controlled substances by African-American adolescents is lower than use amongst white and Latinx and groups. Contrary to the evidence, negative, racist and stereotypical propaganda places African-American youth at the very top of every risk category, including substance use. These perceptions, though they are not accurate, have a very real impact on the ability for young, Black youth to develop a positive and healthy self-concept and identity. Black girls in foster care are

more likely to have these stereotypes placed on them. It is not enough to know what is true if the greater society believes it to be true and treats you as a second-class citizen based on that narrative. Focus group data reviewed by Bass and Kane-Williams (1993), refuted common, racist stereotypes. The results indicate that substances including alcohol and other drugs are a serious threat to all families including members of the Black community and has the potential to negatively impact ability for Black children to be resilient and to successfully resist the lure of drug use. This is not because they are more likely to seek out drugs but because they have limited access to positive and affirming and safe outlets and extra-curricular activities. Additionally, the continued role of the media in its perpetuation of racist, negative behavioral tropes and images of Black children and their communities compounds the issues Black children face. The foster care system with greater awareness of these inequities may help mitigate the negative impact on children in care. Rampant negative portrayals serve to feed despair and seed hopelessness among Black children in foster care hindering their ability to combat the alcohol and other drug problems prevalent in their community. These ongoing, negative attributions encourage society to solely blame Black people for all alcohol and other substance related problems including violence and crime while ignoring and dismissing how suburban and rural communities are impacted (Bass, Kane-Williams, 1993).

Summary

White Supremacy:

"A political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and

entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white

subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings."

- Frances Lee Ansley

White supremacy is the root cause of all the disparities experienced by the Black

community in America. White supremacy has been the foundation for all US institutions

and centers whiteness in a way that has shaped the institutions of health, education,

housing, economics, religion, politics and media to mistreat, miseducate, neglect,

inhumanely research and dislocate Black people. White supremacy is pervasive and

structural. Its influence informs all the laws, habits, representations, pleasures, policies

and institutions. It is relentless in its aim to privilege itself as the most central, powerful

and valuable in the world (Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre, 2020). The foster care system as a

subset of the healthcare and child welfare system is infected by its sickness and further

exacerbates the difficulty to establish healthy identity for all communities of color that it

serves. This is due in part to its negligence and failure to address disparities in social

welfare policy and practice. African-American girls in foster care may be especially

vulnerable to its impact with negative images, stereotypes and colorism. They may be

disproportionately affected by these social-cultural messages as they often have far fewer

resources to counteract them. African-American girls experiencing foster care in

predominantly white cities have limited opportunity to have representation that supports

positive identity development. The research conducted in the Mirror Project aims to

provide Black women formerly involved in the foster care system with an opportunity to

reflect on their experiences deconstructing the messages and images of Blackness that

they received during that time. Additionally, the process of revisiting these experiences within a group of women who share a similar story, gives the participants and opportunity to use their authentic voices to make meaning of how that experience impacted and shaped their identities (Crosby, 1996).

Navigating white supremacy and its false narratives, misrepresented realities and racist, sexist and unfair attributions is difficult for me as an accomplished and educated Black woman with a healthy self-concept and strong community of support. As a mother of a teenage African-American girl, I know firsthand how difficult it is for her, even with a stable homelife and two loving parents and a substantial network of support from friends and family. It is incomprehensible that young Black girls in foster care are not struggling to maintain self-confidence and esteem without that support and stability. Pediatricians serving youth populations have commented that the issues facing mainstream youth are exacerbated by social media, amplifying clique-forming, bullying, sexual experimentation, privacy issues including sexting and other issues like sleep deprivation and general internet addiction (Okeefe, 2011).   How much more vulnerable to these issues are Black girls in care? We will never know if we don't ask.

The Mirror Project contributes to the ongoing discussion about the ways in which white supremacy negatively impacts African-American adolescent women through its pervasive ideology with the system of foster care. The MP adds to the body of literature that provides evidence of the white supremist, harmful beliefs, policies and practices that need to be changed within the child welfare system. White supremist ideologies within the foster care system must be eliminated to address social problems and create

intervention approaches that are humane and effective and that do not require Black girls to erase themselves to survive that system.

CHAPTER III: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Racial Identity Development theory describes the process of developing a positively affirmed sense of racial identity and is essential to framing the perspectives of the Black women who participated in the study. Early theorists studied racial identity from a psychological perspective and worked to compile relevant behavioral literature that examines Black and white behavior and identity. These initial racial identity models helped to guide research in identity development and established useful approaches to explaining socio-cultural norms, beliefs and behaviors (Helms, 1990). The Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI), developed in 1998, examined four dimensions of racial identity. These included: salience, regard, centrality, and ideology. The purpose of the MMRI was to examine both the qualitative meaning of being African-American and the various aspects held within the experience of being African American. By utilizing this model, deeper explorations into how these dimensions interact contribute to demonstrated beliefs and behaviors within the African-American community (Sellers, et. al. 1998).

These early works created a foundation for how I might also use a racial identity framework in the Mirror Project. Williams and Lewis (2021) developed a framework that not only explored the many facets of Black identity, but also explored the gendered racial identity development in Black women. Their framework examined four phases of the developmental process when it came to black female identity. These included hyper-awareness, reflection, rejection, and navigation. These phases were connected to intersections in the Black, female experience as a student on a predominantly white,

college campus. Additionally, they identified 6 gendered racial ideologies that included assimilation, humanist, defiance strength, pride and empowerment. These ideologies represented the values beliefs and attitudes of these women and how they arrived at their collective identities. They utilize these ideologies to protect themselves from racism, gender bias and the intersectional oppression created by both (Williams & Lewis, 2021)

This research supported my investigation into identity. It assisted me in deepening my critical awareness of Black female identity development and by reviewing the literature in early research into cultural identity development helped set a foundation for Mirror project.

Using these frameworks, I gained more understanding of the Mirror Project participants; a unique, specific group of women who were young and Black and experiencing the foster care system. Further, I was able to deeply examine their racial identity development during their time in care. Black women are always simultaneously Black and female. We are not able to separate our Blackness from our femaleness and thus, to truly examine how identity in Black women is developed, we must look at the compounding impact the foster care system has on developing a cohesive racially and gendered identity (Spelman,1990).

Racial Identity Development theory suggests that a person's racial identity is shaped by their ongoing and sometimes conflicting assessment about the groups in which they belong. Here in the US there is not racial or biological purity of any kind, but there are clear designations regarding culture and geography, language, music, food and religious beliefs that contribute to how one perceives their racial and cultural identities. It

is also impacted by one's social and political power or lack of power. Racial identity can be seen both as static and unchanging but also dynamic and fluid (Thompson & Carter, 2013).

In her book, Black and White racial identity: Theory, research, and practice, Helms (1990) reviews contemporary theories of Black and white racial identity. Theoretical frameworks originating work and research in this area attempted to describe social formation of identity in a narrow way without a comprehensive analysis of the many aspects that contribute to how one arrives at their total identity. Contemporary research has updated and expanded these to explain the role of racial identity in counseling dyads, social relationships, and groups. Measures for assessing racial identity are described. Original research addresses the relationship of racial identity to other personality characteristics such as value orientations, decision-making styles.

For youth of color, the construction of racial identity is a critical developmental milestone. Ethnic and racial identity (ERI) impacts the psychological academic mental and physical health and risk factors identified in adolescents of color. Most aspects of ERI are associated with positive adaptive behaviors and are generally beneficial for youth of color and African-American youth (Rivas-Drake, Seaton, Markstrom, Quintana, Syed, Lee, & Yip 2014). A meta-analysis completed by Smith and Silva (2011) suggested that positive ethnic identity is positively associated with healthy self-esteem and negatively associated with depressive symptoms among ethnic minority individuals. Additional empirical research posits that there are components of racial identity and ethnic identity development that buffer the impact of adverse life experiences and can mitigate

internalizing symptoms when faced with racial and ethnic discrimination (Smith & Silva, 2011).

Youth in foster care experience a disruption in their mental, emotional and physical worlds. Doubly challenging, they are often faced with the burden of feeling stigmatized and abandoned together with the broader society's sexist and anti-Black negative appraisals. Winchester, et al (2022) conducted a study to evaluate the impact of racism and sexism on the mental health of Black teenage girls. The researchers hypothesized that messages of gendered racial pride and empowerment or GRPE, might mitigate the harm to their mental health due to messages of internalized gendered racial oppression, or IGRO (Winchester, et. al 2022).

In addition, African-American girls in foster care are frequently exposed to toxic levels of stress. Compounding the usual stress-inducing factors such as poverty, health challenges, anti-Black racism, and a lack of access, Black girls in foster care must learn to manage the isolation and cultural erasure of their authentic way of being while trying to develop a positive racial and cultural identity (Yancey, 1992). The importance of having a strong and supportive advocate has been shown to be an effective buffer from the discrimination experienced by these youth. Having encouraging emotional support specifically by Black parents is key to developing a positive racial identity (Yancey, 1992). Black girls in foster care that receive counter-evidence to the oversexualized and demeaning assessments of the dominant culture are less likely to internalize these perceptions (Brody et. al 2014).

The Dove and Powers interviews (2018) revealed that the role of racial socialization and culturally appropriate hair care support and maintenance were significant factors in their personal identity development and were a key component to their overall view of themselves. These findings are important, not only because they shed light on the values and perspectives of young Black women in care, but also because contemporary social welfare practice, placement considerations, foster care training for parents often leave out information, resources and referrals necessary for this critical aspect of healthy identity development for Black children to be achieved (Dove & Powers, 2018).

Laura Daughtery (2011), sought to gain a greater understanding of how African-American females that experienced foster care during their adolescent years developed their identities. In her qualitative research, she explored the social epistemologies and posited that being both Black and in foster care shaped their lives and impacted their level of faith and spirituality. The outcome of her research showed that though their experiences varied, there was a common thread amongst the participants. Many of them utilized the phrase, "identity crisis" when describing how it felt to be a Black girl and foster kid. This crisis remained unresolved in that they held these simultaneous and, in many ways, dichotomous identities perpetually, with no comfort coming from either one (Daughtery, 2011). Identity development for African-American girls experiencing foster care can be supported when placement with family members and fictive relatives can be made. Kinship care placements may mitigate the negative impact of the common stereotypical narrative often promoted in the foster care system regarding Black girls.

In his article, Resilience in Children and Youth in Kinship Care and Family Foster Care, Metzger (2008) explored self-social support, self-concept, and resilience in children and youth placed in foster care in New York City. Of the 107 children and youth, 55 were placed in family foster care, and 52 were placed in a kinship care placement. He found that children in kinship placements had greater interaction with birth parents and stronger, more sustained identities than those in foster care placements (Metzger, 2008). These outcomes further support the notion that cultural representation and positive racial socialization are critical to supporting positive self-concept in African-American girls experiencing foster care.

When there is no positive representation, racist socialization is informed by negative societal narratives, and negative stereotypes and systemic racism occur. When an adolescent is socialized by racist notions of his or her cultural group, negative self-concepts, and behaviors may follow (Yi & Wildemen, 2018). Negative behaviors, influenced by racist socialization often result in youth experiencing foster care entering the justice system. There is a strong link between foster care and the criminal justice system. Rampant inequalities in the treatment of children of color haven't received the attention they deserve. All children engaged in the foster care system are considerably more likely than other children to be involved with the criminal justice system. This often occurs during childhood and in adulthood. Children of color disproportionately experience foster care and are therefore more likely to intersect with the justice system. Because children of color disproportionately experience foster care, efforts to improve

the child welfare system may reduce racial/ethnic justice system inequality (Yi &

Wildemen, 2018).

African-American youth who have experienced foster care are not only more

likely to be charged with felonies than any other race and are more likely to be charged

with felonies of higher severity ratings than others. Youth entering foster care and then

experiencing multiple placements while in care have been found to have poorer social-

emotional, psychological, economic, educational and health outcomes in their adulthood

(Barth, Duncan, Hodorowitz & Kum, 2010).

Methodological Paradigm

The research paradigm I employed for this study was a qualitative approach,

using racial identity development theory, Afrocentric feminist epistemology and

phenomenology as the primary interpretive approaches with an emphasis on language

and meaning. Qualitative research provides a foundation for exploring how individuals

create meaning in their interactions within their environments (Merriam, 2002).

Qualitative research is appropriate for assessing a reality that is constantly changing and

fluid rather than precise and exact. This framing allows for a more open and

understanding approach to collecting and evaluating the data (Merriam, 2002).

Phenomenological research methodology seeks to describe the lived experiences

of people who are part of a particular phenomenon or event (Creswell & Miller 2000).

Phenomenological research explores the essence or primary meaning of experiences. The

researcher's own perspectives and perceptions are not the focus of the research, rather the

voices of the participants or informants are central to the process. According to Tillman (2002), a good phenomenological researcher must be culturally sensitive, close to the data and critical of the investigation process to allow the true meaning of the experience to be revealed (Tillman, 2002). Phenomenological research is intentioned consciousness, where our experiences reflect inward consciousness and outward demonstration. Meaning, memory and image are created through this intersection (Creswell & Miller, 2000). From the perspective of the researcher, if one shares social, cultural, religious or community experiences, this may shape how he or she makes meaning of words, phrases and experiences in a way that is shaped by their cultural familiarity and lived experience. The participant may also lean on their familiarity with the researcher or the research when making meaning of an experience or phenomenon (Heap,1991).

Phenomenology asks about lived experiences and uses abstract interpretations to contrast with them (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). This approach focuses on finding meaning while localizing context. When used in research, phenomenology influences the way questions are framed, how the participants are selected, and how the data are collected and analyzed. By emphasizing language and context in our phenomenological examination, we can explore deeply how identities and knowledge are created (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

Phenomenological qualitative research comprehensively explores lived experiences to gain greater understanding of those experiences and help the reader/viewer of the research understand how meaning is made of those experiences by the people and communities living them. Phenomenological research is often conducted by directly

engaging through interviews, conversations, focus groups with individuals and communities with the understanding that there are varied ways of knowing and creating knowledge. It happens in real life, in real time and lived experience that cannot be summed up by simply counting and measuring. Truth and understanding yields insight and compassion and often change that equals improvement and healing (Byrne, 2001). Phenomenological researchers always consider the context in which people move and live. In addition to interviewing people and facilitating focus groups, researchers seek to extend their analysis beyond basic summaries of what has been stated or suggested to explore deeply the meanings being made by the individuals and groups from their perspective (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

In this study, I am centering Blackness (Afrocentrism) in my phenomenological approach. I am using an Afrocentric feminist epistemology to help understand what I am experiencing as I conduct the research. To do this I must view the phenomena from the perspective of the Black person and center Black culture, history, philosophy and faith in our exploration. Using Afrocentricity as a frame for this approach I can create a more authentic relationship between the researcher and the participants and between the participants. Afrocentricity is the study of ideas and events from the standpoint of Africans as central figures rather than sidekicks, victims or witnesses to their own experiences (Asante, 1991).

Afrocentric feminist epistemology, as explained by Patricia Hill Collins, was created in response to Black women wanting to combine feminist standpoints with Afrocentric perspectives (Collins, 2003). Collins lists four elements that are critical in

applying an Afrocentric and feminist epistemology to phenomenological research: 1. Concrete experience as an influence in meaning; 2. the use of dialogue, 3. the ethic of caring and 4. the ethic of personal accountability (Collins, 2003).

In the Mirror Project, the qualitative paradigm allows for an exploration of both the perceptions that the women report they had as youth and simultaneously explore their current perceptions about how those experiences impacted their self-confidence and racial self-concept. Using Afrocentric (Endarkened) feminist epistemology and phenomenology with an emphasis on language and context, I created a culturally responsive environment in which African-American women were centered and where knowledge and wisdom were shared. The primary research objective was to fully explore the experiences of African-American girls in foster care. Phenomenology helped me get to the essential meaning from the discourse on the participants' lived experiences in foster care. According to Creswell and Miller (2003), in phenomenology participant's experiences are described as "universal essences." In this study, the essence represents the nature of the participant's experiences. The goal was to capture intra-group determined meanings of their lived experiences which move far beyond the factual details (Van Manen,1990).

Afrocentric (Endarkened) Feminist Epistemology highlights the relationship between our cultural positioning, gender, lived experience and ways of knowing. Epistemology itself speaks to our relationship with knowledge and helps us to ask the question: what do we know? How can we know that we know? And how do we reproduce, explain and validate our knowledge? Endarkened Feminist Epistemology was

coined by Cynthia Dillard (2000) to better describe a unique cultural perspective that intersects with gender, race and other socially constructed identities within the context of oppression and resistance for Black/African-American women (Dillard, 2000). This approach to making meaning out of the information that was shared seems the most appropriate as I explore the phenomenon of being young, Black and living in foster care.

Each of these methodological frameworks were interconnected in that they are all critically important when exploring the MP experience and the collective impact of the process and how meaning was made throughout. The most important of these methodologies was the Afrocentric (Endarkened) Feminist Epistemology. This framework centers Black women in a way that focuses on their way of knowing and being and places all the power in the space squarely with them. According to Dillard (2000), research that fully engages in cultural healing methodologies with an Endarkened Feminist Epistemological framework must have three essential components:

1. A person must be drawn into and present in a spiritual homeland.

2. A person must be engaged with/in the rituals, people, and places in intimate, authentic (and humble) ways.

3. A person must be open to being transformed by all that is encountered and recognize those encounters as purposeful and expansive, as healing methodologies.

With these central components in mind, the Mirror Project was situated at the intersection of all three. By creating an environment (community setting within a home) that served as a centering cultural homeland, where the spirit can find rest, all who were present were also drawn to a collective spiritual center. By sharing foods, well prepared

culturally familiar meals and speaking in common Black vernacular and sharing comical statements about social and cultural isolation in a white city like Portland, served as those familiar rituals and intimate and sincere engagements. Finally, there was collective agreement among MP participants to be open to the transformative, cathartic and healing aspects of telling ones' story (Dillard & Bell, 2011). Approaching the MP from a perspective of Afrocentric (Endarkened) feminist epistemology established a more critical and complex framework for examining the MP from an ethnographical research perspective. Using Black feminist thought allowed us to explore differences and agreements about our realities as Black women without the researcher (me) and researcher perspectives being centered. The focus of the MP was the participants, with me being a welcomed observer at times, a visitor into their worlds, and occasionally at times a participant. This moved us beyond somewhat limiting epistemologies to a deeply connected experience that was interweaving time and place, locating us all in the Northwest where it is mostly white, often wet and usually isolating. What changed was the decade, the home environment and circumstance, and the social, religious and political climate. The conversations were emotional, spiritual, sacred and sincere. The Mirror Project centered a Black female way of knowing and being that "acknowledged the joy and pain of location, dislocation and transformation of both in our stories." – Cynthia Dillard

Afrocentric (Endarkened) feminist epistemology is an approach to research and critical intervention that honored the MP participants in a way that honored their

individual and collective wisdom, spirituality, and the sacredness of being Black and woman (Dillard, 2011).

Applying Collins' four elements of Afrocentric feminist epistemology

Concrete experience as criterion of meaning indicates that Black women value wisdom gained through experience more than they value knowledge of a concept. In this way we approach the phenomenon viewing the participants as experts who have gained wisdom through their lived experiences in foster care (Ladson Billings, 1994).

> "For Black women, new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of the community." (Collins, 2003).

Patricia Hill Collins posits that African-American community life, lived experience and Black feminist thought, can all help disrupt multiple systems of oppression. This can be done via dialogue and caring and using empathy to create pathways for communities to improve their situations. She used the following quote to close out her essay, "The existence of Afrocentric feminist thought suggests that there is always choice, and power to act, no matter how bleak the situation may appear to be." (Collins, p. 11).

Additionally, Collins encourages those who wish to engage in Black feminist thought in research, especially when trying to counter systems of oppression that are faced by Black women, to begin with four critical elements and understanding:

knowledge and knowing, domination/interlocking systems of oppression, Afrocentrism, and resistance and change (Collins, 2008).

Knowledge and knowing

This means that you must separate yourself from Eurocentric male-dominant thinking. The wisdom of Black women expressed using their ways of knowing counters this dominant approach to knowledge and creates new insights, new revelations and new content. This creates an opportunity to decentralize power from the Eurocentric white male framework and move it toward a more balanced, equitable and legitimate approach to seeking and finding truth (Adams and Sydie, 2003). Every institution in the world had demonstrated its aim to make the experiences of the less powerful invisible. Further, research and literature support this devaluing, often leading to the disempowered individuals internalizing this oppression. With the mere project we were determined to find knowledge where it's not often sought and make visible the realities of the wisdom shared amongst the Black women in the group.

Domination/Interlocking systems of oppression

This element recognizes that race, class and gender all work together to form an integrated system of oppression. When it comes to women of color, they are not being subjugated by men, they are also being subjugated by white women as well and others who estimate Blackness as inferior. Combined, each identifier creates "one overarching structure of domination" (Collins, 2008). In the Mirror Project we are adhering to

Collins' recommendations that we center African-American women in our approach and in our analysis, to create opportunities for new and culturally relevant thinking and culturally appropriate analyses. By doing this the experiences and knowledge of Black women can be applied to counter these forms of subordination and oppression in research and in research methods and evaluation. Black, female knowledge can be power, and this power can be used by the oppressed for the good of the community.

Afrocentrism

Collins states that Afrocentrism (Endarkened experience) in research must focus on Black cultural self-definition and determination and must be community-centered in its design so that individuals from the Black community involved in the research may come together to define their common experiences to improve their collective lives. She stresses that by using Afrocentric (Endarkened) approaches that are caring, focused on building connections and having dialogue, and that expect personal accountability through the promise of improved daily actions, Black women like those who participated in the Mirror Project are empowered to create an alternative and improved reality for themselves and others (Collins, 2008).

Resistance and change

According to Collins, there are different dimensions of oppression at each level—which includes the personal, the group, the community and cultural, and the systemic level of social institutions and structures. At the center of each of these is an opportunity

for resistance. At the individual and personal level, each person with their individual biography and experience is empowered, confined or oppressed, or may have some aspects of each. This elevates the notion of the power dynamic not always being top down but rather operating on two separate levels: from the top down, but also from the bottom up. In the latter case, people come together to use their collective power to address the dominant person, organization, or system. When it comes to black feminist thought in research or in social action, using the collective bottom up approach to resistance can assist in shifting narratives and changing policies and practices that are oppressive to that group (Collins, 2008).

Within a cultural context, when doing research with a community or group, even though every individual has a unique personal experience and their own individual way of knowing, there are some cultural commonalities present and conversations where participants share and discuss their similarities and differences. This creates group validation for how information and concepts are being shared and interpreted. It is because of this, that dominant groups have tried to subjugate diverse groups and impose their standards and understandings upon them. This is particularly true when it comes to research in diverse communities. Within the context of Black women, when we are strong and healthy in our being, our experiences of resistance within the culture have led to revolutions and national movements. Unfortunately, when Black women are not able to resist dominant narratives or cannot withstand the weight of an oppressive person, policy or system, failed resistance can conjure internalized oppressive ideologies and we

may adopt negative and externally derived, and cultural biased narratives about ourselves (Collins, 2011).

Future research in the area of Social Work Research, Sociology, African-American studies and others should consider what the impact might be if they did not simply focus on the research question or solely engage in ethnographic research resulting from a selfish desire to "know more" about a particular Black demographic, or experience, and instead incorporated (by or with a researcher with lived experience), an approach that centered Blackness from start to finish. That is to say that studies like the MP can be used to make the argument that from a research perspective, there is far more to be gained by designing the entire scope, process, content, engagement, methodology, evaluation and findings using Black culture, history, experience, values, spirituality, faith, hope, ways of knowing and axiology throughout the process (Gay & Kirkland, 2003).

The MP project and others like it create opportunities for research and for researchers to be able to explore complex aspects of working with and doing research on communities of color, in particular working with Black women. Cynthia Dillard's work highlights an extreme gap in literature and research. There is a clear lack of culturally relevant and culturally specific approaches to both engaging in research that is culturally sustaining for the participants but also in research that poses the question, why is it that we only view evaluation through a Eurocentric, male-dominated lens? Methodological frameworks like Afrocentric feminist epistemology allow for a deeper investigation into how we collect and interpret data. Creating methodologies for collecting data, completing ethnographic research and evaluating and making meaning of the data allows for the

power in research to shift towards the historically disempowered community. By changing the way that you collect data and the way that you evaluate it, explain it to the world, and use it to influence policies and practice, we are creating a new reality for many Black and Brown communities. Throughout the mirror project, I utilized strategies highlighted by Dillard for engaging Black women in a more sincere and relevant manner that is aligned with our cultural values and our deeply rooted understanding of what it means to be Black and female and live in white spaces.

CHAPTER IV: METHODS

Research methodology

As noted, the methodological frameworks that I utilized in the Mirror Project were in qualitative research theory and included Phenomenology and Afrocentric (Endarkened) Feminist Epistemology (Dillard, 2000). Exploring what it meant to be Black, female and in foster care required that I use qualitative approaches that would best elucidate the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Qualitative approaches focus on gathering data through direct experience on-site or in the field and are often experiential. Qualitative research approaches seek to gain greater understanding of a person's, family's or community's social, cultural, emotional and spiritual reality. This reality can only be fully understood as explained and demonstrated by the population where research is being conducted. Qualitative research usually utilizes observations of what is seen or heard or experienced. This can be done via interview or focus group (Heyink & Tymstra, 1993).

At the outset, the Mirror Project utilized Afrocentric (Endarkened) frameworks for how participants were recruited to the settings in which the focus groups took place, the questions that were asked during the focus groups and the follow up prompts, the food that was offered, and the pace of the conversation. The space that was made for emotion, and reflectiveness, and anger, and sadness, and regret, and gratitude and love was centered with an Afrocentric (Endarkened) feminist epistemological grounding. Additionally, the process for establishing the reviewer's understanding for why all these

cultural dynamics were important in the MP was also an essential component of this project.

The sample included women who share a common experience of having been in the foster care system as children and who are willing to share about these experiences using their own language. The target group for this recruitment was African-American women ages 18-25 who were formerly involved in foster care in a predominantly white city.

Using Collins' elements to engage in Afrocentric (Endarkened) feminist epistemological research does not guarantee that the research process with Black, female focus groups will be perfect. It does however provide a culturally centered, gender-specific approach that creates a more balanced, equitable and dynamic process of engagement, assessment and evaluation. The subcategories of Afrocentrism: dialogue, caring and personal accountability through empathetic engagement, were integral to the methods utilized in the Mirror Project.

Use of dialogue was utilized via focus group discussion and the way it was facilitated. Rather than a process through which the researcher speaks to the participants, I focused on speaking with the participants so that their wisdom could be shared with greater comfort and ease. The focus groups were conducted in two homes. This was identified by the participants as the most comfortable environment in which to share significant and personal reflections.

participant was attended to and engaged. The participants were centered as respected experts and I provided many positive affirmations throughout the focus group process.

Additionally, at times when emotions were triggered, we took time to breathe, take a break and in some cases held silence to promote easier processing, healing and release.

The ethic of personal responsibility was manifested in how I presented my personal knowledge and in evaluating participant character, ethics and personal values. As the researcher, I encouraged personal accountability among the participants in sharing their stories, speaking their truths responsibly, being open minded and patient. Likewise, I held myself accountable for my positionality as a member of this cultural and gendered community and the impact this may have on the participants and myself. Finally, I held myself accountable to the participants and to the larger community for accurately interpreting meaning and depicting accurate perspectives and stories.

The focus group approach was selected because it is an appropriate format for empathetic engagement and I was confident that it would create an environment where connections and relationships could be made in a more natural manner. In a focus group, discussions arise where multiple perspectives are present and layers of perceptions and feelings are uncovered that may under other conditions go unspoken (Hyde, Brady & Drennan, 2005). Focus group settings have been shown to reduce stress and anxiety when dealing with memories and experiences that may be traumatizing.

Connections to Identity

African-American culture is relationship-based and dialogue in a focus group setting can promote interactions reflective of the cultural practices and natural communication style that will encourage honest dialogue. Additionally, using focus

groups as a culturally responsive approach ensured that the emphasis was on getting to know who the participants were as people, recognizing their collective and individual identities and gaining greater insight into their experiences from their own context and perspective (Gay & Kirkland, 2003).

These groups took place at the home of one of the participants and at my home. This was not the original plan. Initially I intended to meet in the community in a neutral location. However, at the request of the participants to be in a more comfortable environment, homes were offered, and it was the expressed desire of the participants, so we obliged. In this way, I had to adjust to the cultural implications for setting the tone for the group. The goal was to create a setting that reflects a comfortable and informal gathering of women brought together for a common goal; to uplift and enhance African-American girls in the foster care system in Portland, Oregon or similar predominantly white cities.

Using chapters for a children's book presenting the foster care experience for an African-American adolescent girl, entitled *Aminah Brown Breaks It Down*, was helpful in setting the tone for how groups would flow. Similarly, having multiple focus group meetings encouraged a more friendly, almost familial group dynamic that I wanted. At the time of the research, two chapters of the book had been written. Both chapters were inspired by experiences reported by a 26-year-old, African-American woman with whom I worked with when she was 13 and I was serving as a Child and Family therapist for a therapeutic foster care program in Portland. The chapters are entitled "Moving" and "How I got my Kicks back." I selected the topic of moving because it was reported to be

one of the most stressful and often traumatizing experience that a child in foster care will experience. I wanted the reader to navigate the experience alongside Aminah, empathizing with her and rooting for her to find stability and rest. The second chapter that details the experience of having your things stolen in a host family's home, by the host family's children, also helps the reader to better understand foster care dynamics and again, the reader gets drawn in and invested in seeing Aminah win and justice prevail.

These two chapters provided some insight into a moving experience that many children in foster care dread and explores how to be inventive, strategic, resilient and determined when living in a house full of kids who are often struggling to get their basic needs met. By using the story chapters as the prompter for discussion, I squarely centered the Black female adolescent experience in Oregon. Aminah, at one point or another reflected each of us, and whether it was in her language or her irritation at the lack of cultural understanding or her frustration with the child welfare system or her challenge in navigating early adolescence in middle school, we could all relate to her in one way or another. The fact that she was a child experiencing foster care further cemented her in the hearts and minds of our participants. This was done intentionally to center Black feminist knowledge of self and our unique courage and brazen ability to tell the truth to power in all circumstances.

The chapters about Aminah Brown acted as an effective prompt for discussing each woman's experience in foster care, and participants discussed their stories and relayed their personal perspectives about the content in a manner that was organic, affirming of their cultural identities, and seemingly cathartic for all of them. As we read

each chapter, the discussions flowed as the women agreed and disagreed with the content. They were inspired to chime in with their thoughts and ideas and criticisms about the way Aminah was making meaning of her experiences. This process connected the participants to Aminah and to each other and helped establish shared meaning for all participants and evoked strong feelings and emotions. It is for this reason that there were only 4 participants in this study. The small group encouraged open and honest dialogue and created a setting where all voices at the table were heard, openly validated and appreciated.

Recognizing that there may have been varied levels of reading ability and comprehension among participants, I stated at the outset that participants could choose to read aloud or listen and then discuss. By approaching the issue this way, participants did not feel ashamed for any unwillingness or inability to read aloud while allowing them full participation in the story review and the discussion.

Within the MP focus groups I listened, took notes and sometimes as a group, posed for group pictures (never to be related to our study) and spoke about our families and our struggles and our dreams and needs for support. I asked questions that were sometimes answered by an individual and sometimes answered collectively as a group. This extends beyond a typical focus group setting because our axiological perspective (the highest value in Black culture is relationship) was a thread embedded throughout the MP from the first moment the research idea was formed to the member checking and ongoing as the Aminah Brown series continues to evolve.

Sample Recruitment

The participants in this study were African-American women who ranged in age from 25 to 40. These participants were specifically recruited to fully explore their actual lived experiences in foster care and to ensure that the composition of the focus group participants had some shared experience growing up African-American in the Pacific Northwest and being involved in the child welfare system. This age range seemed the most appropriate for this study because though they were no longer youth and no longer involved in the child welfare system, their memories were vivid and their ability to recount their experiences was sharp. Additionally, women in this age range are typically more forthcoming than younger and much older women as they often feel less inhibited in small group settings. These women were mainly recruited by using community networking.

There are many organizations and community groups that focus on delivering services that attend to the cultural and social needs of African-American women and girls. These included but were not limited to, beauty and barber salons, community centers, social and sports events. Information about this study was posted in many of these venues with a phone number and email address listed for more information related to the study. Additionally, there were a couple of women who were formerly involved in foster care who volunteered to recruit in their natural environments (neighborhoods, social networks) and informal networks. A total of 15 women inquired, volunteered or signed up to participate in the study. This supports the idea that there is interest in this research topic. There were 6 participants that were not eligible (currently in the foster

care system or were not within the age range or location) and 5 that could not commit to the full process. There were 3 participants selected from the initial recruitment process and one participant that joined after the first group and participated in an individual session with me. The recruitment flier is included as Appendix A

Perhaps the most important factor in the recruitment was me as the researcher/facilitator. Being a long-time resident and former child and family therapist in the community, there is a strong and trusting relationship between me and the cultural community from which these women were sampled. Trust is imperative in the African-American community when it comes to any form of inquiry, and it is especially important in research. African-American communities have been the focus of research and discourse since their arrival to this country in chains. Since then, numerous experiments, often painful and detrimental to their health and wellbeing have been conducted in African-American communities with hospitals, researchers and physicians complicit in unethical practices. Today, unethical experimentation and research continues to occur in poor communities and communities of color where informed consent is complicated, confusing and sometimes ignored (Washington, 2006). Having a strong and positive reputation in the cultural community was an asset to my recruitment but may also have complicated the group dynamics due to community connections, family history, etc.

The Mirror Project is based on the lived experiences of real people (human subjects) and therefore it is imperative that the participants can provide informed consent to participate. Informed consent is complex and multifaceted. As the primary researcher I asked myself critical questions about how to go about getting informed consent: What

does it really mean to be informed? What are the expectations of the participants? What is

the appropriate level of informing that is acceptable to them? What are the conditions

under which they are willing to give their consent? These questions vary and depend

heavily upon a multitude of factors (Anderson, et. al. 2007). Social and cultural context

in explaining the goals, risks and potential benefits of participation were taken into

consideration to ensure greater understanding about what it means to be informed. There

was also an opportunity for participants to outline their concerns, suggest changes in the

consent process and to have an informed consent session prior to the first focus group so

that everyone felt comfortable with moving forward with the focus groups (Schuck,

Brady & Griffin, 2009). Study procedures followed an approved IRB protocol, and

signed informed consent was obtained for all participants (Appendix A).

Data collection

      This focus group discussion process was audio recorded and the conversations

were professionally transcribed. The transcripts were then analyzed by me and an

additional researcher to identify themes regarding the experience of being in foster care.

      The first focus group opened with a personal introduction to me, the facilitator

and primary researcher, and the study. I used scripted language that explained my

interest, role at Portland State University, and my lived experience in Portland.

Additionally, I shared that I am a fierce advocate and champion for Black girls in foster

care and that the journey we were going to take together could result in helping young,

Black girls that are currently in the system. I invited each participant to introduce

themselves and share a bit about why they chose to participate and what they hoped to gain from the group.

The women went around the table introducing themselves and answering the question. In the first session, I explained the process and the focus group agreements and used the analogy of a mirror stating that just as a mirror reflects what is in front of it and a similar way, we would be using the chapters from the book, Aminah Brown, Breaks it Down. I then explained that by sharing honest thoughts and ideas about the experiences that they had had in foster care, and how those experiences had impacted them in their adulthood we would be able to identify ways that we may be able to make the experience better for the girls currently involved in the system.

After a few questions were answered, we moved onto the agreements. In explaining the agreements, I told the group that it is up to everyone to determine whether they agreed with the statements, and I gave them permission to change them or remove them as they saw fit. Specifically speaking about speaking our truth honestly and responsibly, I wanted the group to understand that the expectation was for participants to speak from their own experience and from a place of compassion. The second agreement was to listen to understand, which meant that even if you're not in agreement with another participant we are agreeing to try to understand where they're coming from. The third agreement was to keep what was said in the group confidential. I explained to the group that I would not be utilizing names or any other identifiers in my data collection and that I would discuss any specific details with them first to see if they wanted them included in the final write up. Finally, I explained that there may be themes that they find

triggering and that everyone was welcome to take a break to take care of themselves if they needed moments of silence. I wanted to make sure that they understood that they had the opportunity to take a break, disengage, re engage and then continue.

After we discussed the agreements, we took a short break and determined how to approach the first chapter. We decided to read aloud, taking turns and then begin our review. After we reviewed the first chapter, we took another short break and then the participants were asked to resume the discussion on the story and share insights and personal experiences.

As an observer, it was interesting to watch the facial expressions of the participants as they listened to the reader. I could tell that they were envisioning Aminah, sometimes they would smile and other times they would shake their heads in disbelief. I noticed that some of the participants appeared to be holding their breath waiting for something to happen--I'm not sure if it was good or bad--and then exhaling when there was some sort of resolution in the story. What seemed to be universal was that each of them felt a sense of familiarity with Aminah. Several of them stated so outright, and others just kind of closed their eyes and said, "hmmm." As the author, I was happy to see the moments of comic relief land in the ways that I had intended. Aminah as a character is precocious, smart innovative and hilarious. That part of her personality softens the blow of the harshness of her situation and it was impacting the group in a similar manner. It was softening the edges of their complicated stories.

At the second meeting, we reintroduced ourselves and revisited the agreements to see if they still felt good to the participants. If any changes needed to be made, we made

them then. Next, we did a brief check in on the week. The goal was to continuously create opportunities for participants to increase their familiarity with each other and with me as the researcher and facilitator. We took a short break and began our review of the next chapter followed by the discussion of the chapter, insights and personal stories. This session closed with a group activity. At the third session, we greeted each other and discussed the agreements. At this session we did not review a chapter. Instead, the group was prompted to share personal stories and their hopes for the character. The hope was that by doing this, we would continue to strengthen the bonds of these women as a community and gain insight into how they were perceiving the process, the group and the chapters. To close the session, we completed a group affirmation. The affirmation was about acceptance and letting go. It was very powerful even though several participants expressed that this was very difficult for them to do even as an adult, and even with some of the painful memories being so far in the past.

This session was equally as intriguing as the first. The women seemed excited to see one another eager and to resume our discussion about Aminah. At the same time, there was some nervous energy about how the story might end. Two of the participants asked if they were going to be upset at the ending when the book was complete. They were concerned that something bad was going to happen to Aminah and that she wasn't going to survive the system. I assured them that the goal of writing this series was to inspire and encourage and bring comfort to black girls experiencing foster care who may think no one can relate to their experiences. Additionally, I explained that I wouldn't engage them in a process where the main character doesn't emerge triumphant just as they

were all living testimonies to their faith, power, resilience and fortitude and brilliance. That answer seemed to satisfy them and we were able to resume our session.

The fourth session was focused primarily on recommendations for caseworkers, mental health providers, teachers, and foster parents for how to best support African-American girls in foster care. The participants were encouraged to make recommendations based on their personal experiences and perspectives. At the close of the session, the women received their gift cards and were provided dinner. I invited them to participate in a listening and feedback session following data analysis. The participants were encouraged to follow up with the researcher should ideas or insights arise.

This session was slightly unusual in comparison to the two prior sessions. We were finished with the chapters and yet many of the questions kept returning to Aminah and her lived experiences and how unfair the circumstances she was in. There was seemingly a collective aching for Aminah by the participants in the mirror project. I believe that they saw themselves in Aminah and they saw so many opportunities for social workers, caseworkers, mental health providers and every other adult person involved in their cases, to be their champions and to right so many wrongs and correct so many injustices that they were experiencing. The conversation was robust in that they had many recommendations for how things could have gone in a different direction had someone truly cared, or if someone had asked the right questions or had seen them as full and complete human beings instead of "just" foster kids.

Table 1. Mirror Project Focus Group Sessions

Group 1 *Welcome, Introductions and Reading of Chapter 1*	Group 2 *Welcome, Review of Chapter 1 Reading of Chapter 2*	Group 3 *Welcome, Review of Chapters 1 & 2 and Personal Reflections*	Group 4 *Welcome, Review of Chapters 1 & 2 and Personal Reflections*
Prompt: After reading the first chapter: Aminah describes having to move and having been placed in multiple foster homes. In your experience, was your cultural identity considered when agencies and individuals made foster care placements for you?	**Prompt:** After reviewing chapter 1 and reading the second chapter: Aminah describes feelings of disconnection in school. What were significant experiences that you had while in foster care that increased or decreased your feelings of disconnection (or acceptance)?	**Prompt**: After reviewing chapters 1 and 2: Overall, Aminah loves being African American. In that way she has a solid identity. When you were in foster care do you feel you had a healthy African-American identity? What makes you feel this way? Do you feel you have a healthy identity now? Why or why not? **Prompt:** Aminah references a pro-Black foster mom and attributes some of her feelings about herself to that experience. What do you feel are the unique and culturally specific considerations that individuals and agencies should make when addressing African-American girls in foster care and in determining appropriate foster parents?	*Reflections:* The MP participants shared many anecdotal stories during the last member-checking session. Some were related to the study; some were related to Aminah and some were just reflective our time together and what might come from the sessions. Overall, participants were happy to have made the connections with others who had similar lived experiences.

Table 1 indicates the conversation prompts used for each session. There was so much conversation that happened outside of these questions. The commentary that came after the specific question was asked was much more engaging and thought-provoking. It's like they wanted to answer the specific question but they also wanted to ask the question within the question that I didn't see at first. That is to say that even if I asked a question related to Aminah's experience and their own personal experience, the process of telling their own stories was much more extensive with details that could never be captured in a survey or a simple question. In the telling of their stories, they expressed emotion and you could feel the sense of loss and betrayal in one moment and the triumph of overcoming an unjust system or person was much more inspiring than simply stating that they were making better choices in their lives in comparison to their parents.

There were profound answers given after all the formal answers had been given. The formal aspects of the questions and answers we're always succinct. Once we engaged in a short report about how the process went, and I asked if there were any additional comments or questions. The questions asked weren't really questions, or perhaps they weren't really questions for me as much as they were rhetorical questions about the purpose of social welfare and the child welfare system or the point of making small changes when the system is so big. I asked the group questions like, "So, how was that for you? What thoughts or feelings came up for you during this process? Did you feel triggered in any way? Please let me know after the session if you find yourself triggered and would like some follow up with a therapist between sessions.".

The responses were always polite but I felt like they were humoring me at times giving me what they thought I wanted to hear or needed to hear from my report but then offering the information that would really help me in shaping Aminah as a character. I thanked them for their time and for their willingness to participate and told them that I would look forward to seeing them at the final review session.

A Fourth Participant

A fourth participant joined the study although she was not a participant in focus groups. She contacted me after the first focus group had met so in an effort not to disrupt the momentum and cultural climate that had been established in the group, I conducted a series of one-on-one sessions where she shared her foster care experience, we reviewed the book chapters and she answered the focus group questions. It is noteworthy to mention that the character Aminah is loosely based on some aspects of this participant's story. She gave me permission to tell her story years ago but reading and discussing the chapters revealed so much more about the challenges and triumphs she experienced in foster care. It was interesting and far more emotional than she anticipated it to be. Even though the story is only slightly reflective of her experiences, she connected with the character in a way that the others didn't. I think this may be due in part to her sadness that she wasn't able to navigate certain situations or home placements. She expressed her excitement to see that parts of her story could potentially bring understanding about what Black girls go through in the foster care system and support healing to children and adults

who share similar life experiences. I took the information from our interviews and added her perspectives to the themes that emerged during the analysis.

Analysis

The inductive approach utilized for analysis was based on LeCompte's guide for analyzing qualitative data and grounded theory (Le Compte, 2000). After reviewing the transcripts from the focus groups, I engaged in a process of "tidying up" the data. This is a process in which the data are organized. First, copies of the transcripts were made. Next, the transcripts and notes were grouped by focus group date. I then labeled each data set with the corresponding focus group date and then the sets were listed in a table of contents (Le Compte, 2000). The data was then reviewed by me and two research liaisons, including a fellow doctoral student and an accomplished professor and researcher. Together, we engaged in a multi-member process of analysis where all researchers compared data with the research questions, compiled the emerging themes, and documented the most common themes by applying codes to them. These codes were then put into a code book. Code books are typically used in research to clearly code responses making it easier to understand how codes are being defined. The code book helped explain how codes reflect the experiences of these African-American women who were formally involved in the foster care system.

The multi-member analysis ensures that the data are being reviewed from multiple perspectives. My colleague and fellow doctoral student shared their perspective on similarities in the outcomes of the sessions and the results of their own study on the

experiences with hair care that African-American girls in foster care experienced. The other liaison was a licensed clinical social worker who had experienced foster care. Her perspectives on the foundational set up of the focus group (setting, tone, content) and her insights into the themes that emerged were invaluable assets to the review process. These perspectives and insights strengthened our interpretation of the emergent themes we found in the Mirror Project. This supports reliability in that the themes that are most surfaced by multiple researchers are ultimately included in the code book. This process helps limit the level of personal inference and potential bias into how the data is perceived by the coder.

Following the coding stage broader themes were constructed using a process that established the basis for making meaning out of the collected data. This process involved reviewing the codes using meaningful criteria in which solutions and explanations were drawn from the data (Le Compte, 2000). Using frequency, omission and declaration, coded items were grouped based on repetition of themes, sporadic occurrence or as the result of a participant proclaiming the item's importance. This helped in developing a taxonomy of coded items where greater comparisons were made (Le Compte, 2000). This process allowed me to create a list of things that seem to naturally fit into categories. Once the final coded items were grouped, and natural patterns tracked, handwritten diagrams were made to visually view the linkages.

Member-checking

To ensure that the codes and patterns identified were valid, the analysis needed to be meaningful to the participants. For this reason, once the initial analyses were concluded, the information was presented to the participants using a PowerPoint presentation with selected audio clips from the focus group discussions. This way the participants were able see their language captured in words on the screen as well as hear their voices as we reviewed the full scope and outcomes of the study. Seeing their words and hearing their voices provided participants with an opportunity to clarify, omit or further explain the intended meanings that emerged during the groups. The participants engaged in a shared review of these analyses and provided insight, perspectives and reflections on the process and presentation so that the final analysis would be viewed as valid (Le Compte, 2000). Additionally, the agreed upon themes collected from the group and the fourth participant were reviewed with the fourth participant who also agreed with the final list. This information was then used to inform both the write up and supported the findings and recommendations from the participants that were designed to help social workers engaged with African-American females in foster care.

Positionality/Reflexivity: Considerations/Risks

By conducting research in my community, I had a unique perspective to offer the process. My connections to the community added to my ability to effectively recruit but may also have impacted how respondents expressed themselves in the groups. Many of the women know me and I was aware that they may worry that I will judge them or look

down on them for what they were saying or sharing with the group. Additionally, they

may have connections to individuals or families that I have engaged with in the past and

have positive or negative associations with interactions with therapists. In this community

it is widely known that I was a therapist in the community for more than 14 years. This

may have impacted the responses of the participants.

I also think about the impact that being close in age with the participants may have had

on the process and the discussion. My ability or inability to be appropriately detached

from the group members, from group dynamics and outcomes is also something I

continue to reflect on. Too much detachment would be a sign of cultural disrespect and

could have seemed aloof. Too much attachment might have impacted how the

participants interacted with me and each other.

I entered this process knowing that I may know the families of the participants

and in many cases, could potentially know the foster parent with whom the participant

lived. This was tricky to navigate as I often heard unfavorable information about how

foster parents treated a participant. I feel deeply connected to my community and I want

to support health and wellbeing in my community. I am aware that this strong resolve

may have influenced how I made meaning of the transcripts. That is why it was so

important to have an additional researcher provide feedback to ensure that I maintained

some objectivity in the analysis.

CHAPTER V: RESULTS

Environment: Setting the Tone

The care and intention that went into the setting, content and process of the groups directly impacted the results. I am both an African-American and a long-time Portland resident so the planning process was largely influenced by my own personal experiences as a woman and as a Black person living in Portland, a predominantly white community. It is for this reason that I set up the sessions in home environments. The first meeting happening at the participant's house was the idea taken from the group. I wanted to use the ideas from the group members to prepare the environment where we would have our conversations. The laughter that occurred during the participant introductions, the compliments on hairstyles, comments on the challenges with "going natural", sharing about being a parent or not being a parent, complaining about the weather, recounting daily microaggressions and the challenges with the problematic white people each of us must deal with were among the statements and commentary that took place during the pre-session period. These conversations were the foundational interactions occurring before I pressed the record button.

It is important to note that by creating this type of environment and the level of comfort and vulnerability that it allowed, expanded the possibility for honest conversation. Afrocentric feminist epistemology speaks to the way that African-American women, "know" and understand their experiences. When there is honest conversation, truth, introspection, reflection and epiphany are all present and working interchangeably to bring us to a common understanding.

In the sections below, I begin with a brief overview of how participants came to participate in the study. Then, to provide context for the stories and themes that emerged from the focus groups, I provide some background regarding the circumstances that brought the participants into foster care. Next, I share the themes that were derived from the analysis. Finally, I offer my reflections on the focus group experience.

The Participants

Each participant connected with me individually to inform me about their interest in participating in the mirror project. They each had a dynamic story, unique in both how they came into care and in how they navigated the foster care system. Some participants have big personalities, full of insight and uncanny comedic timing. Other participants were more reserved and protective of their stories, sharing only small tidbits of their experience in the beginning and then with each group, opening and becoming more vulnerable in expressing themselves.

A soft spoken, woman in her 30's with a bright smile and an infectious laugh, was the first person that I spoke with about the Mirror Project. She was skeptical at first, wanted to know what the study was for and whether she would be directly connected with her participation and whether statements that she made would be shared. I explained to her the process and we discussed the potential value in participating. She has worked in the community for years creating opportunities that prepare Black children for academic opportunities and provides informal mentorship to other young Black women.

She shared a little of her story before we started the groups but I told her that I wanted to have her speak in detail about her story in real time with the other participants.

Another participant in a conversation discussing her participation in the group expressed some consternation about joining. Of all the participants, she was probably the most hesitant to participate. She was reserved and quiet and self-deprecating even in our initial conversation. She expressed that she wasn't sure if she was right for the group since she didn't feel like she had accomplished much or could be considered a success story. I explained to her that the purpose wasn't to show that Black women who experienced foster care in the northwest in a predominantly white city were able to achieve great success. The purpose of the Mirror Project was to explore their experiences and give voice to them so that there could be more cultural considerations when engaging with girls in a similar situation. I explained to her that what I gained from these focus group sessions would help me become a better advocate for how girls in care are treated. She perked up at the thought of that and agreed to participate.

Another participant was a naturally outgoing woman in her 40's who spoke candidly and in a more matter of fact manner. Over the past several years I have interacted with her in multiple social work related capacities and have known her to be pragmatic in her decision making and passionate about her work with young girls. This was a unique experience for us; to be engaged in such an intimate and personal conversation. At our first meeting she mentioned that she hadn't spoken about her experience coming into care for years but that even though she didn't speak about it often,

she recognized that there were contemporary behaviors that she unconsciously engaged in that she believes with the direct result of childhood trauma.

The fourth and final participant was a younger woman in her late 20's who was a former client (during her early teen years) and upon whom the Aminah Brown book chapters are loosely based. She stated that she wanted to join the focus group but then later was not responsive to the reminders and ultimately requested to meet with me one-on-one just to discuss the book chapters and her own experience and care. She has always been creative and innovative when it comes to creating opportunities for herself and for her family members. She was responsible for getting all her 6 siblings together when they were separated following their entry into the foster care system into care and she was still finding ways to support them as an adult. Her participation in the study was unique but invaluable to the process as she was so intimately tied to the experiences of the other group members but also to the stories that we were using as prompts during our discussions.

Participant 1 came into care as the result of her family's drug abuse. Her parents were young and although they stayed together through the conception of five children, they soon separated and the mom was left to raise them alone. The mother struggling to keep everything in the air was experiencing trauma and abuse from a boyfriend and ended up living with the children in a hotel room. Ultimately after participant one was left as a three-year old with an infant in the hotel room alone, the children were removed. Participant one reflected on that time in a kind of whimsical manner. When speaking about the circumstances, it sounds like she's talking about someone other than herself,

positioning herself like an observer to a gruesome scene. She demonstrates a lot of compassion for herself as a child and for her siblings. She even has some compassion for her mother and father and their unfortunate life situations. She spoke about their united desire to stay together under any circumstance. It is because of that childhood past that they endured extreme trauma at the hands of foster parents who had no formal record but were no less criminal in their treatment of her and her siblings.

Participant 2 came into care due to parent neglect. She was placed with biological family members, however the family members with whom she was placed were not loving or kind. As she reflects, she says that there may have been some inklings on the part of her family about her sexual orientation however this was prior to her identifying herself as queer. Participant 2 struggled because in her situation, most people felt like she was very fortunate to be with family rather than with strangers. Unfortunately, the experience that she had was less than supportive and felt less than familial. Her handler was harsh and threatening. Her experience was that of being a burden to her family and any attempt at speaking up for herself or defending herself would be met with admonition and accusations that she was ungrateful. This experience with family negatively impacted her sense of self and her self-confidence. She never could quite understand why they treated her like she didn't deserve to be loved. Participant 2 spoke a lot about how she was continuing to struggle with this dichotomy of being in a home with family and at the same time being in an empty space among strangers. Participant 2 is the most hopeful of all the participants that bridges may be formed between

them so that those who seem more balanced and successful, may support those

who are still struggling with their past and trying their hardest to lay a foundation

that is positive and healthy for the future.

Participant 3 came into care because of a raid upon a religious cult based in

Southern Oregon that ultimately relocated to Milwaukee Oregon. Within this cult

participant 3 experienced and witnessed ritualistic beatings as discipline in strict

adherence to literal interpretations of the Bible and extensive physical training in pursuit

of Olympic status. There were three adults charged with supervising more than fifty

children. There was never enough food and the children were always hungry but there

were strict rules regarding, "asking for more than what is given."

Participant 3 recounted that one evening one of the girls asked for an additional

piece of corn. She was met with the same response that she was not to ask for more than

what was given. Another adult opted to give her an additional piece of corn and the adult

that was initially giving instruction responded by saying, "I'll see you again later." The

"later" would come long after the children had all gone to sleep. The girls in participant

3's room were awakened by one of the caretakers and the girl who had asked for the

additional piece of corn was instructed to get out of the bed. Participant 3 did not want to

go into detail but she did mention the girl was beaten savagely and even bitten at different

points. She lost consciousness at some point and the ambulance was called. Apparently,

the fire department arrived first and failed to resuscitate the girl. At some point later that

night all the children were transported to a house in Milwaukee where they waited in a

home with no heat or food for a couple of days. One day while participant 3 was looking

out of the window she saw so many "pretty lights". She would soon recognize those pretty lights as being police sirens as a long trail of police we're nearing the property. The detectives and social workers swarmed in and removed the adults. The officers began questioning all the children who were starving with the promise that once the questioning was complete, they would be given McDonald's. They were also told that they would be reunited with their parents. With such a large group of predominantly black children, child welfare was uncertain where to place them. They opted to send all the children to McLaren Correctional Facility where they warehoused the children in small cottages until they could find them placements. Participant 3 stated that it was like growing up in a room with no windows or doors and then one day someone opens the door and says, "you can go out now." At first, as you're walking out, you're excited by all that you see. You are fascinated by the flowers and brightness of the sun but then when you turn back towards your house, someone shuts the door and locks it all up and says you can never go back in again. She said that is what it was like leaving the dynamic of family that she'd always known. It was clearly an unhealthy situation and an extremely traumatizing and harrowing experience, but it was made even more so by having a white, male psychologist evaluate her and state that she would likely be antisocial and never make friends. He also said that she would probably not graduate from high school and would likely never marry or have a family. Participant 3 revels in the celebration that all these predictions and prophecies about her bleak future would fail.

The Themes

The focus group discussions surfaced six themes that bring voice to the experiences of Black, female adolescents experiencing foster care in predominantly white communities and specifically in the Pacific Northwest. Their perspectives are unique, their voices are absent in contemporary literature and research, and their stories often go untold or ignored. In discovering commonality in their experiences, they also gained community. After reviewing the transcripts with the participants, the following themes were agreed upon as essential areas in need of change, dismantling or evolution of the foster care system overall and as it pertains to African Americans.

Theme 1: Lack of Engagement in Foster Care Decisions

The Mirror Project participants expressed the lack of intention in foster placement, follow up, monitoring and future planning. Participants repeatedly stated that they felt the social workers, counselors, teachers, coaches and other community members failed to ask them anything about their concerns, desires, perspectives, hopes, dreams and never offered to engage in future planning with them. Further, the women stated that having 1:1 transparent communication and future planning conversations would have made a positive impact on their identity development and how they perceived their worth and inherent potential.

> "We were all sitting at the table, my worker, the psychologist, a school
>
> counselor, my attorney and me. They were all white, discussing what

grade to put me in since I had never been in a formal school. They kept

stating how I would have a difficult time navigating socially and

academically and how I would probably not make any friends! (The group

gasps) Yes, girl! They were just talking about me like that right in front of

my face! Finally, they say maybe put her in 5th grade. Then my attorney

says, "Let's ask her." So, I ask them what grade I should be in and they say

7th. I say well, put me in 7th. I ended up excelling, graduating from high

school on time and with honors! Just placing me in 5th grade would have

been humiliating and devastating to my confidence. It would have

changed the trajectory of my entire life and they were comfortable doing

it!" - Mirror Project Participant 3

When we consider how decisions are made for and about young people in foster

care, *without* the perspectives, feelings, and self-determination of the young person in

foster care, we see patterns on the part of social workers, teachers, and others where good

intentions yield immeasurably harmful outcomes. The quote above poignantly and

painfully illustrates how easily hopes, dreams and the spirit of inspiration can be quelled

instantly with thoughtless decision-making. Further, it simultaneously serves as a

testament to the strength of the human spirit and its desire to persevere. This young

woman, who was in so many ways disempowered by her circumstances found a way in

the midst of culturally incompetent white dominance, to summon from somewhere deep

in her spirit, to influence the trajectory of her life. She steered her way toward a bright future, though never in a position to take the wheel.

Theme 2: The need for social workers to have a cultural Lens

The Mirror Project participants each discussed at length the myriad problems, abuse, and the irreparable damage to their lives they experienced at the hands of their "workers." Participants attributed the failures of the social workers completely to their lack of compassion for Black people, their racism, and their professional and cultural incompetence. Participants collectively agreed that having Black, female representation would have been helpful in every situation because they feel that to be believed would have supported their identity development as an advocate for themselves. Threats would be identified and substantiated and red flags would have been raised when making placement decisions. In many cases, the participants stated that their foster homes would have been deemed unsuitable with an intercultural lens and Black cultural perspective of a Black worker.

The quote below highlights the importance of cultural epistemology in social work and advocacy with Black children in care. In this session participant 2 was speaking to an intrinsic way of knowing that she believed would have been present had her worker been African-American. There is well known cultural saying within the black community that we are folks who can "read" people. Essentially this means that we can innately assess the sincerity of the person standing in front of us. In children as young as four years old, it is evident in nearly every child of color's experience within the public school

system, that their grades and the disciplinary actions taken against them are a reflection

that, "My teacher doesn't like me." Afrocentric, cultural epistemologies must be

considered when working with children within the Black community.

> "I feel like if I had a Black worker, they would be able to read between the
>
> lines and like see that we are looking at our foster parents to see how to
>
> answer questions and maybe they would make it so we could have a
>
> private conversation about how it's really going." - Mirror Project
>
> Participant 2

These participants' experiences with the child welfare system indicate it is failing

to recognize that just because someone is related doesn't make them family, and in

keeping with Black cultural norms, everyone who is family isn't necessarily related to us.

This illustrates the importance and need for cultural representation in foster care workers,

therapists and placement specialists. Child welfare agencies should work to create greater

pathways and support for African-American social workers and administrative staff to

better serve the Black children in care.

Participants explained that on several occasions, they felt they had to "play down"

their Blackness to be perceived as worthy of advocacy. Social workers were more likely

to support positive placement and advocate for Black girls that seemed to be depressed or

subdued. The girls that were perceived as angry or aggressive were less likely to receive

kind words, honest information about placements, and resources. The women stated that

they felt that they had to change who they were to get their needs met and this impacted

their self-esteem and their confidence in being accepted as their authentic selves.

"Mainly, these workers just want to put you somewhere. They don't care

where you end up or how you fit in or if they even like you there." -

Mirror Project Participant 1.

Theme 3: Foster Home Abuse

Each participant recounted at least one physical and or sexual assault while in

care. They blamed poor review and evaluation of the homes, families, values and social

and familial backgrounds of the people they were placed with. In some cases, even in the

case of relatives, there was not adequate vetting of the fostering guardians and the family

members and friends that had access to the young girls in the home. Mirror project

participants suggest a far more rigorous background check that extends beyond a criminal

record. They also feel there should be more creativity when it comes to finding suitable

placements. This included connecting with local Black community-based organizations,

religious communities outside of Christianity and collaborative efforts to raise the

monetary stipend for fostering. The consensus was that it wasn't enough for people to

"do it for the money." Furthermore, those who were motivated by the small cash support

were not using it in any way to support the children in their homes.

During the Mirror Project discussions, all 4 women reported having experienced

physical abuse   and 3 out of 4 women reported experiencing child sexual abuse (CSA)

during their time in care. This was typically perpetrated by adults in the home, older

foster siblings or extended foster family members. Each woman spoke about the fears

associated with reporting the abuse and being separated from siblings. For several of the

women, once the abuse was reported their fears became reality and they were separated

from their siblings. In these circumstances, they are faced with the impossible choice of

having safety or having one another. It is impossible to choose and yet choosing is

unavoidable. The impact of having to make these "impossible" decisions deepens the

wound caused by the destruction of the family and creates new pathways of pain for

young people in care. The experience of abuse while in foster care is a prevalent one, and

the women discussed at length the ways that the abuse could have been prevented or

abruptly interrupted if they had been provided with opportunities to discuss their

placements with social workers or if there had been clear and safe reporting pathways.

The quotes below illustrates how deeply painful it is to make a choice that you

understand will change the trajectory of your life but may also irrevocably damage the

relationship you have with your sibling. Participant one described the desire to ensure the

well-being of her sister by exiting a situation where she was being abused, and yet as she

spoke I could sense the uncertainty about having made that choice and whether or not it

was the right one.

> "So, my sister and I were in this one home, and I really liked my foster
>
> mom, but you know, I was really developed for my age and not long after
>
> we moved there, my foster dad started hitting on me and trying to touch
>
> me. One day she saw him and told me that I was "fast" and that I was a

bad influence on my younger sister, so I had to move. He never attempted

this with my sister, but she felt abandoned by me, and it changed our

relationship. She seemed happy there so I didn't report it because I knew

we would probably not be placed together." - Mirror Project Participant 1.

"We basically hid the abuse [From her parents] because we didn't want to

get separated but one day my sister went to school, and a teacher saw a

bruise on her arm and that was it. We were all separated. It was sad

because they didn't have anywhere to put my brothers, so they put them in

JDH (juvenile justice residence) and my brother who has always been

brilliant, I mean in 5th grade math as a 2nd grader. Suddenly he was like,

oh, here is where all the Black boys are. He was so used to being the "only

one" in class that he felt more comfortable in jail. It changed his whole

life. He was in and out of jail after that." - Mirror Project Participant 1

Theme 4: The Impact of Placement Decisions

The Mirror Project participants discussed the harm and trauma caused by

separation from biological family members, including parents, siblings and fictive kin.

The state and county stance on what is "best" for participants regarding who has access

isn't always (usually isn't) correct. Participants suggest a greater effort to continue

contact with all "safe" family members and loved ones. They also recommend that the

way "safety" is evaluated should also be reexamined and restructured. An example

provided by a participant is a circumstance where the grandmother who loves them and would be the best placement is ineligible to foster because they have a 1965 possession charge for marijuana. The closet pedophile with no record gets the opportunity to foster ahead of the grandmother.

The quote below provides an example of how the removal determinations made by agencies and social workers may not always be what is "best" for the child in care. Sometimes, having a loving parent struggling with substance abuse may be a healthier environment (with supports) than placing the child with a stranger who doesn't love them and who may be motivated by foster parent compensation rather than the well-being of the children placed with them.

> "They took me from my mom, right. It was crazy because even though she had her problems with drugs, she was always making sure we got to school and stuff. I mean we were not stable or anything, but we had a lot of love. When we were taken out of the house, the next placement was so disgusting and we would have to beg for a washcloth and I kept thinking, wait- these people are more qualified to raise me than my mom? - Mirror Project Participant 3

> "I was thankful when the white family that was fostering me actually adopted me because I can honestly say that I had support, more resources and they were kind. but they absolutely didn't acknowledge that I was

Black or give me any positive reinforcement for my culture at all. I had to

go into NE Portland on the bus alone to get any of that. It was weird. My

culture literally had to die for me to exist in their word. I was just so

amazed that they didn't see it as important or necessary in caring for me."

- Mirror Project Participant 1

Theme 5: Locus of Control

The lack of control and self-determination over their lives was another theme that

emerged from Mirror Project participants during the focus group discussions. The level

of agency and efficacy that was thwarted in these women at critical points in their identity

development changed the trajectory of their lives. Two of the women spoke of finding

their confidence and voice much later in their adulthood, while one said she never found

it and hopes to develop in herself so she can have a real chance for happiness. The

participants wanted to highlight the need for visibilizing Black girls in foster care. They

spoke of the need for workers, care givers, therapists and attorneys to listen to them and

allow them to have some say in the decisions made about their lives. The women

recommended that workers should support the interests of the Black girls they are

working with and exposing them to positive role models. Celebrating their Blackness as

beautiful and as an asset and not a burden on the parents and the system would have

given them just enough self-love to fortify them against the rampant and intrusive anti-

Black narratives they were forced to adopt.

In the quote below, the participant is reflecting on how the character in the book describes a moving experience that was completely different from hers. She finds it comical in a sad and ironic way. She's animated in her eagerness to share with me what is commonly the experience of girls in care.

> "I think that it's funny how the girl (Aminah) knows where she is going when they tell her she will be moving. Like that does not happen! Like she got to know where she was going. She got to take a bag with her. She knew when her stuff would arrive. (The group laughs and agrees) that is definitely not what happens, at least not for me. You have zero say in what happens with your life. Zero." - Mirror Project Participant 1

The next quote contrasts the lack of control with her agency and determination in the face of opposition (the foster care system) that is seeking to negatively impact her family. She has learned to name drop in order to establish some semblance of power. This approach not only works to enable her and her siblings to connect, it also fueled her personal sense of power and self-determination that she would credit for how she later navigated difficulties in life.

> "I was like, I know people high up! I know Dr. DeGruy so ya'll gonna make sure I see my siblings! I acted up! and then they finally set up visits for all 6 of us! They had us all spread out like we don't need to see each other. We all had the same experience with the same two parents, so we

needed that bonding time. I had to fight for it though." -Mirror Project

Participant 4

Theme 6: Healing and Resilience

The path to healing from the many traumas they experienced in the foster care

system is clear for three of the Mirror Project participants and unclear for one of them.

Two stated that going to therapy, active involvement in their religious community, giving

back to community and having a family has helped to fuel and sustain their mental,

emotional, physical and spiritual well-being. For the third participant, she believes that

this group meeting was a great first step. She expressed the desire to connect with a

therapist, travel and fall in love as possible areas she may explore in her future. All

participants were provided with therapeutic resources at the close of the final session.

Whichever practice the women of the Mirror Project adopt, they must begin the

process by recognizing that they have personal power to access peace and love and joy.

For now, these women all agree that they are worthy and deserving of these, even if a few

of them are yet unclear about what it will mean to truly work toward sustained holistic

health and wellness.

"I am still evolving and healing. I am not there yet. I am trying though,

and I believe I will get there someday. I mean at least I like who I am as a

person and that's the first step right. I have a lot of hope I will find

someone who loves me and who makes me feel safe." - Mirror Project

Participant 2

The quote below describes a process of truth and reconciliation even if the truth and reconciliation occur within herself. Here she is speaking to her agency and self determination to laughing in the face of adversity and achieving success despite the odds and the predictions for her life. The joy with which she expresses how she turned the tables on the very people who were supposed to support her growth and development and yet only envisioned a life of misery, sadness and isolation for her was evident in the way she described returning to the individuals who had the power to make crucial decisions in her life. There was so much celebration and how she expressed her personal triumph.

> "Do you know I found that psychiatrist and the reporter who reported on my story. I also found the school counselor who said I would never make friends, would be socially awkward and would probably never get married. I walked in the office and set down the psych eval he did and expressed to him that I have an LCSW, I am married with children and have a happy and functional life! I wanted him to know that they can't label me and just determine what my life was going to be. That was probably the most healing for me." -Mirror Project Participant 3

Researchers Reflections

Exploring Language: How Black Women Know

Afrocentric feminist epistemology speaks to the idea that there is a culturally specific, gender specific way that Black women communicate and understand one another. During the MP sessions, there were many moments where an outside observer who was not African-American or female or raised in the U.S. might not understand or appreciate what was happening in real time. When someone was sharing their story, the women would make audible sounds of agreement or disbelief or shared rage and indignation. It's hard to explain if you're not an active participant in this cultural framework. The way that the term "Girl" could be used interchangeably with "I can't believe that!" or "I know you know what I mean," or "That's awful!" or "I am in total agreement!" would undoubtedly be missed by many but was a special kind of Black girl coded dialect that we all spoke fluently.

It was a beautiful thing to witness, and a beautiful thing to be a part of. Using the book chapters as prompts for discussion supported the notion that language and meaning are important when assessing someone's situation or experience. The language that the main character in the book chapters uses was familiar to the participants but also led them to speak about the language they would use to express themselves which was not aligned with the main character's language. Therefore, using the book chapters was so important to this process. The participants were able to speak for and about Aminah rather than speak about themselves or their direct experiences. In some cases the prompts would lead them to speak about their own personal story and they would sit and reflect, many

times holding their breath at certain moments that were particularly poignant or painful. In these moments we would sit in silence. Occasionally, a participant would reach over and touch the shoulder or the leg of the person speaking or would share a glance that would encourage them to continue a way of saying "I am with you," even though no words were exchanged. As the author of the book chapters I assured them that their feedback would be taken seriously and that I wasn't offended by their criticism of the circumstances and opportunities Amina had in the stories that may seem unrealistic or, in any way, insincere.

In this space there were moments when I was considered the expert. There were others when I was considered the researcher but most often, I was considered another black woman in the sisterhood who understood what it felt like to be culturally isolated in a sea of whiteness, often overlooked, undervalued and underestimated. In that sense we were all experiencing life and a similar way even if our histories were different. Typically, in research this would be seen as a conflict there would be too many opportunities for dual relationships and possible transference. However, those are approaches that are largely steeped in whiteness using a cultural framework that doesn't often fit research done with communities of color. Our interactions are not dichotomous, they are interwoven and it only makes sense for the researcher to be apart from and within, the whole.

CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION

There are many aspects of the Mirror Project that had a profound impact on the

participants and the researcher. I sought to examine identity development while studying

the unique phenomenon of being Black, female and involved in a very white system of

foster care. What was revealed in the sessions far exceeded my expectations. The

vulnerability and transparency of the participants was astounding. The community bonds

that were forged during the process and the poetry they spoke when recounting their life

stories at one moment would break us all down and reduce us to tears. Then, in another

moment, inspire us and ignite in us a flame of resistance and social action. It was a

mental and emotional roller coaster filled with laughter, tears, reflection, song and food.

It felt like much needed medicine.

The implications for harm are rampant in the previously discussed examples. The idea

that it is a common experience for the child welfare system to exclude fostered youth

from placement decisions and to be so dismissive of the impact placement decisions have

on the health and wellbeing of these young Black women in care stands in the face of the

social work code of ethics and the commitment to "do no harm (NASW, 2008). To "do no

harm" suggests that we fully embody integrity, respect for all people, autonomy and

justice. This is nearly impossible to do when all social work approaches were designed

with one specific group in mind and the inherent assumptions that the values and customs

and perspectives of that one group is "normal" and all others are "abnormal" leads to

harm in nearly every case where the "helpers" (researchers, clinicians, social workers and

social work administrators) are from that one specific group are usually the "harmers" of all other communities that they are working with and in. Social work research should not merely seek to minimize harm but rather redesign research that is reciprocally beneficial to everyone involved and that centers the voice and the perspectives of the community being served in that design process. It is harmful to actively disempower a person, family or community. When we do this, we are contributing to a process of dehumanization and robbing the individual of agency and self-determination. The youth's perspective is important when making decisions about his or her education, home environment and health. Involving youth in decision-making has been shown to decrease anxiety and increase efficacy and esteem. It will often improve how youth communicate with parents, and providers (Feenstra, et. al. 2014). When we exclude the youth from this process and prevent them from being full participants in their own lives and render them powerless, with no control over their environment, or life direction, we are deepening the injuries that they have endured by entering care in the first place (Abrines-Jaume et. al. 2016).

The Mirror Project sessions revealed how important culture and representation are in navigating the child-welfare system, identity development, well-being and the ability for African-American girls to thrive as they enter adulthood. The findings from this study reveal the magnitude of harm caused by the lack of understanding and cultural consideration in social work practices within the foster care system. Additionally, the findings and recommendations in this study may be invaluable to the social work profession in that it may encourage shifts in standards of practice.

Black children are overrepresented in the child welfare system and it is often suggested that this disparity is the result of Black families having greater risk factors than their white counterparts. These purported risks include unemployment, single-parent households, poverty, etc. The suggestion is repeatedly made that it is because of these risks that Black parents disproportionately abuse and neglect their children. The reality is that child welfare, just like every institution and system in the United States, was created with a white supremist framework. Historical and institutional racial discrimination has led to the determinations for what is "best" or "safe" for Black children. This has largely been decided by child welfare workers and organizations that do not value Black culture, perspectives or beliefs and therefore exclude Black parents from the child placement decision-making process (Hill, 2004).

Black healing and resilience happen on an individual, familial and community and societal level. The process of healing from childhood trauma is not an easy one. It is often even more challenging to move beyond trauma healing to living in healthy ways that allow you to thrive. The most critical step is to tell the truth and to accurately view oneself through a lens that is kind and full of grace and compassion and which is reinforced by significant people in your life and in society (DeGruy, 2005). Additionally, more options are needed when considering how mental health services are presented given the difficulty of securing a culturally appropriate therapist, counselor, psychologist or psychiatrist. The benefits of having culturally relevant, reflective and affirming mental health support may have helped begin this process earlier for the Mirror Project

participants and they could be further along in their healing journeys (Briggs & McBeath 2010).

There are many new approaches for creating and sustaining healing in Black people that support mental, emotional, physical and spiritual restoration and repair. Some of these practices are rooted in cultural rituals, breathing exercises, service and advocacy. Because trauma may be sustained internally in the spirit, mind, body and even in the DNA, it is essential that intentional efforts to heal are aligned with equity and justice in the external world. We must heal together as a society so that we may all thrive (Ginwright, 2015).

Having a sense of control over one's life has been proven to be a factor in the social determinants of health. Disempowerment of choice when it comes to your physical body, access to healthy spaces, culturally affirming methods for developing your identity and opportunities to see and interact with people who look like you and can provide you with positive cultural representation is the ultimate betrayal of the child welfare system. So much harm is being offered in a spirit of service. Social work as a profession needs to better equip its professionals and the systems in which they work and serve to view Black children first as children and then to see them in their fullness and wholeness. They are worthy and deserving to be at the design table when it comes to determining what is "safe" and "healthy" for their development into young adults (Feierman, 1985).

Research has shown that when it comes to social development, positive behaviors and academic achievement, having a locus of control is a critical factor. Children in foster

care often feel less in control of their lives than children out of care, even though, in most cases a child in the home of their parents has little control over their lives also. It is different when you consider that as a child in care, your will, your desire to be with family, to move placements, or to stay in a home you are placed is not a factor in where you end up. This can be extremely disempowering for youth in care and can make developing a sense of efficacy and self-determination difficult (Kang, et. al, 2015).

Generally, it is expected that most people should accept personal responsibility for what they experience in life and demonstrate personal power in determining their life circumstances. However, when a child or youth is in care, they are more likely to succumb to feelings of powerlessness because they perceive that every aspect of their lives is controlled by outside forces and that chance, fate, lack of worthiness for having a good life, is why they are experiencing the trials and tribulations associated with foster care. For these women this powerlessness shaped how they saw the world and impacted their belief in the level of influence or personal power they would ever achieve as adults (Ester & Rotter 1963).

It is so vitally important that we look at how to improve the status of all children in care and make room for diverse opinions and perspectives to influence the profession. It can only be through the full and robust participation of those with lived experience in care, that we may be able to tear down the old system and redesign a new, inclusive and equitable system atop a foundation of truth, justice and liberty. This is the only way to ensure that children leave care, happier and healthier than when they entered it.

Importance to Child Welfare Practice

The information gathered in this study provides insights into practices and strategies used with African-American children in care that are substantially injurious to their wellbeing and often thwart their ability to heal from trauma, develop and sustain a healthy sense of identity and thrive into adulthood. Findings from this study provide strategies for child welfare professionals to consider their blind spots when serving African-American girls in foster care. Good intentions are meaningless if the impact is harmful. Having workers that look like you, see what you see and understand what you understand undoubtedly supports healthier outcomes for the health and wellbeing of Black children in care (Hunte, Mehrotra & Klawetter 2022).

Trained social workers use the strategies they have been taught to best meet the needs of their clients. Unfortunately, all systems in the US are founded upon white supremacy in that there has historically been little regard for issues impacting non-white clients, patients, families or communities. It is extremely important that careful consideration in placements is made on the part of social welfare agencies. The ignorance about how these decisions impact the identity development, health, and wellbeing of Black children in care can no longer be tolerated if we are going to positively impact criminal justice outcomes for vulnerable populations in foster care. Social service organizations should seek cultural guides to navigate placement options and to review potential strengths and risks with each placement. In a study conducted by Blakeslee, Chuang, Bunger and McBeath (2014), researchers found substantial benefits of racial and

ethnic workforce diversity and stressed the importance of policy changes in direct-service providers.

The information that was surfaced through this research project sheds light on the harm that the child welfare system may unintentionally cause African-American children and youth. There are many current and emerging strategies that are culturally informed and evidence-based that social workers, therapists and child-welfare administrators may utilize to establish new standards of practice that will better serve African-American children and will help non-Black social workers create and maintain healthier and more impactful methods for serving African-American children in care. Finally, these findings support the need to be child/youth centered and collaborative when designing for Black youth in foster care. This strengthens the argument that communities should be co-designers in their intervention.

Implications for Social Work Policy

The findings in this study support the need for shifts and changes in social work policy and therapeutic strategies within the child welfare system. Training and education that extensively explores the impact of the history of US policies regarding health, mental health, education, employment, housing and how these policies contributed to historical trauma, serial forced displacement and gentrification that impact Black communities nationwide should be instituted. Structures and institutions that have, since their establishment, narrowly focused on the needs of white children and families may with this research and similar focus have the evidence to support making changes that will

support the health and wellbeing of African-American children. Lived experience within the social work community should be considered when developing therapeutic models for working with African-American children.

Social work education has attempted to teach competencies in cultural awareness and positionality in its coursework. Unfortunately, all too often this attempt results in a focus on racism being part of dominant culture and the self as a part of culture in general. While self-awareness and cultural competency is generally emphasized, there is rarely an emphasis on active anti-racist ideology, frameworks and actions. Simply recognizing one's own biases as a social worker or social work administrator does not change systemically racist policies, laws or practices and this leads to continued harm for the child of color or family of color that is involved in the foster care system (Feize & Gonzalez, 2018).

Critical social work has worked to utilize a reflexive lens to locate and identify the unconscious conceptualizations of power and the dominant white culture's approach to social work. The issue becomes how a system run by the dominant culture can ever see itself clearly if the lens through which it is viewing issues of racism and discrimination is always its own. Audre Lorde (1984) eloquently describes this quandary when she said, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Only through intimate and sincere engagement with communities that have been historically excluded from the social work design table will authentic, balanced discourse, paradigm shifts and sustained changes to social work culture be made possible (Brown, 2012).

Another lens through which social work views the communities it is "helping" is shaped and influenced by language and meaning. How one speaks with verbal and nonverbal language can be used as a justification for subjugation and oppression. We have seen this with dual language learners and in the research that has been conducted on the discrimination that people with strong accents experience in the US. However, measuring discrimination based on voice inflection, cultural vernacular is a much deeper issue to explore when it comes to children in foster care. Linguistic diversity could be seen as a strength and a mitigating factor when experiencing trauma however, it has been shown to be a significant factor in how children in care are addressed and perceived and how their biological family is treated. More research is needed to see how a more inclusive and accepting system where cultural language and meaning making is welcomed with curiosity and respect may positively impact the experience of children and families engaged with child welfare agencies (Harrison, 2006).

The outcomes of this study suggest that by engaging with individuals of color who have experienced the foster care system in a process of review regarding harmful practices that they experienced and providing them with an opportunity to suggest improvements, may improve the experiences of African-American youth currently involved in the child welfare system.

Limitations

Doing this research is not going to solve all issues pertaining to African-American girls in foster care. This was not a large enough sample to generalize to the entire

community of African-American girls who have experienced this phenomenon. Additionally, my positionality in being a long term resident of Portland and having so many mutual connections in community was another potential issue because my interpretations may be unconsciously influenced. Confirmation bias, being a researcher and an adjacent community member, can threaten the analysis because I may have personal experiences regarding issues related to cultural isolation, prejudice and racism that I may unknowingly project onto the focus group participants. Limitations could be minimized with a larger sample size in more diverse demographic within the African-American experience.

Conclusion

It Is clear that the key to my success was my methodology. The approach that I took to both gain trust, establish an easy rapport and promote the establishment of relationships was unique, but effective. It was not only culturally appropriate, but culturally-sustaining throughout the sessions. Additionally, using the Aminah Brown book chapters as a prompt for discussion was extremely effective in soliciting personal stories that spontaneously surfaced throughout the project.

My intention was to create an opportunity for social work as a profession to grow itself in its inclusivity and impact. My goal was to examine the experiences of this small group to help amplify their voices and create a space where their perspectives were centered. The un-intentional impact was the brightening of spirit, the love and sisterhood that abounds because of the connections made. The women in the group found a unique connection

and comfort in a community none of them knew they needed but expressed their immense gratitude for now having it. I was not prepared for how important it was that they felt seen and heard, affirmed, and encouraged by individuals with whom they share a common experience.

Another positive outcome was that this study revealed some exciting and unexpected insights into what African-American girls are challenged with in foster care. These insights may spark further research into this population of girls, in social work institutions and organizations and make their stories visible in the greater community. Another outcome may be that the children's series on Aminah gets published and used as a prompt for discussion between practitioners and girls in foster care.

These discussions may then create a foundation for a more balanced process of engagement that supports and affirms the beauty and brilliance of Black girls. The power and potential in these divine beauties should be celebrated and their agency and self-determination encouraged. If we can get this part right for them, the sky's the limit on what they can do, where they will go and what they will achieve.

Strength, Resilience, Power and Emancipation

> "An old world is dying, and a new one, kicking in the belly of its mother,
>
> time, announces that it is ready to be born. This birth will not be easy, and
>
> many of us are doomed to discover that we are exceedingly clumsy
>
> midwives. No matter, so long as we accept that our responsibility is to the

newborn: the acceptance of responsibility contains the key to the

necessarily evolving skill." - James Baldwin, No Name in the Street

In addition to securing positive racial socialization on the part of parents, there are

of course, additional and effective methods for countering controlling images and racist

socialization outside of parental modeling and social and environmental context setting.

Black women are among some of the most marginalized people in the US. There is a

popular statement amongst Black activists that says, "When Black women are free, we

will all be free!" This saying stems from the idea that if Black women were successful in

countering the negative social and political societal malignancies which include racism,

sexism and poverty, the greater society would benefit. Black woman freedom represents

the destruction of all systems of oppression. Likewise I have often posited that serving

Black children well and creating policies and practices that affirm, uplift and inspire

them, will ensure that every child will be served well and will have real opportunities to

thrive (Muhamad, 1974).

Black people and especially Black women, to raise society to a higher standard,

must be honest about the power we have when we are engaging others and how we use

this power- this unique and mystical trait that is divine in us and God-given. We have

shown our influence in every major movement toward liberation in this country and

beyond. Black women have always had the capacity to position themselves at the

intersections of race, gender and power and create a "way out of nowhere" and find

safety and security where there previously has been none (Geyton, 2022). We influence

popular trends, voter turnout, election results, music, art, and therapeutic methods that

have led to the healing and sustainment of whole communities, tribes, and countries. This means that Black women should view the ways that capitalism continues to oppress us and strategically create institutions, policies and practices that disempower the systems that feed the machine that is capitalism. This becomes foundational to the possibility that women everywhere can be liberated. Once we taste true freedom, we will have an appetite for nothing less! This is a revolution! This is how revolution is accomplished! All who reside in any politically or racially enslaved nation must experience full liberation to bring about individual, collective and societal transformation (Beale, 2008).

"What is today the message of these Black women to America and to the world? The uplift of women is, next to the problem of the color line and the peace movement, our greatest modern cause. When now, two of these movements- women and color combine in one, the combination has deep meant." - W. E. B. DuBois, 1920

Dubois in 1924 assessed the purpose and impact of contemporary Black women's clubs and community work. He recognized that while Black women suffered economic disadvantages in comparison to their white counterparts, their service work in missionary societies, church activities, and other areas of civic engagement, served to establish greater unity in the Black community and created social uplift. He acknowledged Black women as the catalyst for building stronger infrastructure for Black liberation and for sustaining the integrity of all organized efforts. Black women, through historical and contemporary labor/economic struggles, challenges to have an equitable voice in women's movements and to be visible in feminist epistemology, have shown tremendous

agency and perseverance. This may directly reflect the level of vitriol experienced by Black women as their Blackness, bodies, voice and image has been weaponized by all major institutions to reinforce negative stereotypes and controlling images in society (Gilkes, 2016).

References

Abrines-Jaume, Neus, Nick Midgley, Katy Hopkins, Jasmine Hoffman, Kate Martin,
Duncan Law, and Miranda Wolpert. "A qualitative analysis of implementing
shared decision making in child and adolescent mental health services in the
United Kingdom: stages and facilitators." Clinical child psychology and
psychiatry 21, no. 1 (2016): 19-31.

Adams-Bass, V. N., Stevenson, H. C., & Kotzin, D. S. (2014). Measuring the Meaning of
Black Media Stereotypes and Their Relationship to the Racial Identity, Black
History Knowledge, and Racial Socialization of African-American Youth. Journal
of Black Studies, 45(5), 367–395.

Adams, T. M., & Fuller, D. B. (2006). The Words Have Changed but the Ideology
Remains the Same: Misogynistic Lyrics in Rap Music. Journal of Black Studies,
36(6), 938–957.

Ahmad, M. (1974). Toward pan African liberation. The Black Scholar, 5(7), 24–31

Anderson, E. E., Solomon, S., Heitman, E., DuBois, J. M., Fisher, C. B., Cost, R. G., ... &
Ross, L. F. (2012). Research ethics education for community-engaged research: A
review and research agenda. Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research
Ethics, 7(2), 3-19.

Andrews, N., Greenfield, S., Driver, W., & Redwood, S. (2017). Strong, female and
Black: Stereotypes of African Caribbean women's body shape and their effects on
clinical encounters. Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of
Health, Illness and Medicine, 21(2), 189–204.

Asante, M. K. (1991). The Afrocentric idea in education. The journal of negro education, 60(2), 170-180.

Barth, R. P., Duncan, D. F., Hodorowicz, M. T., & Kum, H. C. (2010). Felonious arrests of former foster care and TANF-involved youth. Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research, 1(2), 104-123.

Bass, L. E., & Kane-Williams, E. (1993). Stereotype or reality: another looks at alcohol and drug use among African-American children. Public health reports, 108(Suppl 1), 78.

Beal, F. M. (2008). Double jeopardy: To be Black and female. Meridians, 8(2), 166-176.

M Beliso-De Jesús, Aisha, and Jemima Pierre. "Anthropology of white supremacy." *American anthropologist* 122, no. 1 (2020): 65-75.

Blakeslee, Jennifer E.; Chuang, Emmeline; Bunger, Alicia; and McBeath, Bowen, "Under What Conditions Does Caseworker-Caregiver Racial/Ethnic Similarity Matter for Housing Service Provision? An Application of Representative Bureaucracy Theory" (2014). School of Social Work Faculty Publications and Presentations. 97.

Blay, Yaba Amgborale. "Skin bleaching and global white supremacy: By way of introduction." The Journal of Pan African Studies 4, no. 4 (2011): 4-46.

Briggs, H. B. (2010). Infusing Culture into Practice: Developing and Implementing Evidence-Based Mental Health Services for African-American Foster Youth. Child Welfare, 89(1), 31-60.

Brody, G. H., Lei, M. K., Chae, D. H., Yu, T., Kogan, S. M., & Beach, S. R. (2014). Perceived Discrimination Among African-American Adolescents and Allostatic Load: A Longitudinal Analysis with Buffering Effects. Child development, 85(3), 989-1002.

Brown, Catrina G. "Anti-oppression through a postmodern lens: Dismantling the master's conceptual tools in discursive social work practice." Critical Social Work 13, no. 1 (2012).

Bryant, Danté, and Karen M. Kolivoski. "The stories we tell: Examining the persistence and impacts of normative-whiteness and white supremacy within social work education." Advances in Social Work 21, no. 2/3 (2021): 481-499.

Bryant-Davis, T. (2013). Sister friends: A reflection and analysis of the therapeutic role of sisterhood in African-American women's lives. *Women & Therapy, 36*(1-2), 110–120

Burt, C. H., Lei, M. K., & Simons, R. L. (2017). Racial discrimination, racial socialization, and crime: Understanding mechanisms of resilience. Social problems, 64(3), 414-438.

Butler-Sweet, C. (2011). "A healthy Black identity" transracial adoption, middle-class families, and racial socialization. Journal of Comparative Family Studies, 42(2), 193-212.

Byrne, Michelle M. "Understanding life experiences through a phenomenological approach to research." AORN journal 73, no. 4 (2001): 830-830.

Bell, Carl C. Lessons Learned from 50 Years of Violence Prevention Activities in the

    African-American Community, Journal of the National Medical Association

Cenat, J. M., McIntee, S. E., Mukunzi, J. N., & Noorishad, P. G. (2020).

    Overrepresentation of Black children in the child welfare system: A systematic

    review to understand and better act. Children and Youth Services Review, 120.

Collins, Patricia Hill. "Feminist Epistemology." *Turning points in qualitative research:*

    Tying knots in a handkerchief 2 (2003): 47.

Crago, M., Shisslak, C. M., & Estes, L. S. (1996). Eating disturbances among American

    minority groups: A review. International Journal of Eating Disorders, 19(3), 239-

    248.

Creswell, J. W., & Miller, D. L. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry.

    Theory into practice, 39(3), 124-130.

Crosby, Ned. Creating an authentic voice of the people. In *annual meeting of the Midwest*

    Political Science Association. 1996.

Cross, W. E., Jr., & Strauss, L. (1998). The everyday functions of African-American

    identity. In J. K. Swim & C. Stangor (Eds.), Prejudice: The target's perspective

    (pp. 267–279). Academic Press.

Cunningham, Michael, and Samantha Francois. "The role of racial socialization in

    promoting the academic expectations of African-American adolescents: Realities

    in a post-Brown era." *Journal of Negro Education* 83, no. 3 (2014): 281-299

Daughtery, L. G. (2011). Understanding identity development and spirituality in African-American female adolescents through their foster care experience. Journal of African-American Studies, 15(4), 455-468.

Daughtery, L.G. Understanding Identity Development and Spirituality in African-American Female Adolescents through Their Foster Care Experience. J Afr Am St 15, 455–468 (2011).

Dettlaff, A. J., & Boyd, R. (2020). Racial Disproportionality and Disparities in the Child Welfare System: Why Do They Exist, and What Can Be Done to Address Them? The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 692(1), 253-274. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716220980329

Dillard, Cynthia B. The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen: Examining an endarkened feminist epistemology in educational research and leadership. International journal of qualitative studies in education 13, no. 6 (2000): 661-681.

Dillard, Cynthia B., and Charlotte Bell. "CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: Endarkened Feminism and Sacred Praxis: Troubling (Auto) Ethnography through Critical Engagements with African Indigenous Knowledges." *Counterpoints* 379 (2011): 337–49.

Dove, L. M., & Powers, L. E. (2018). Exploring the complexity of hair and identity among African-American female adolescents in foster care. Children and Youth Services Review, 95, 368-376.

Dowdell, Elizabeth B. PhD, RN, CRNP; Cavanaugh, Deborah J. MA, MHC; Burgess, Ann W. DNSc, RN, FAAN; Prentky, Robert A. PhD. Girls in Foster Care: A

VULNERABLE AND HIGH-RISK GROUP. MCN, The American Journal of

Maternal/Child Nursing 34(3): p 172-178, May 2009

Battle, Esther S., and Julian B. Rotter. "Children's feelings of personal control as related

to social class and ethnic group." *Journal of personality* (1963).

Embric, D. G., & Moore, W. L. (2020). White space (s) and the reproduction of white
supremacy. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *64*(14), 1935-1945.

Euser, Saskia, Lenneke RA Alink, Anne Tharner, Marinus H. van IJzendoorn, and Marian

J. Bakermans-Kranenburg. "The prevalence of child sexual abuse in out-of-home

care: A comparison between abuse in residential and in foster care." *Child*

maltreatment 18, no. 4 (2013): 221-231.

Feenstra, Bryan, Laura Boland, Margaret L. Lawson, Denise Harrison, Jennifer

Kryworuchko, Michelle Leblanc, and Dawn Stacey. "Interventions to support

children's engagement in health-related decisions: a systematic review." BMC

pediatrics 14, no. 1 (2014): 1-11

Feierman, Steven. "Struggles for Control: The Social Roots of Health and Healing in

Modern Africa." African Studies Review 28, no. 2/3 (1985): 73–147.

Feize, Leyla, and John Gonzalez. "A model of cultural competency in social work as seen

through the lens of self-awareness." *Social Work Education* 37, no. 4 (2018): 472-

489.

Franko, D. L., & George, J. B. E. (2006). Eating Disorders, Culture, and Ethnicity:

Connections and Challenges in Group Therapy. Group, 30(4), 307–320.

French, B.H. More than Jezebels and Freaks: Exploring How Black Girls Navigate

Sexual Coercion and Sexual Scripts. J Afr Am St 17, 35–50 (2013)

Gay, G., & Kirkland, K. (2003). Developing cultural critical consciousness and self-reflection in preservice teacher education. Theory into practice, 42(3), 181-187.

Geyton, T.A., Town, M., Hunte, R. & Johnson, N. (2022) Magnifying inequality: How Black women found safety during dual pandemics. Journal of Social Issues, 00, 1– 19.

Gilkes, C. T. (2016). Three Great Revolutions: Black Women and Social Change. Berkeley Journal of Sociology, 60, 50–56.

Harris, Michael, and Hannah Benton (2021). "Implicit bias in the child welfare, education and mental health systems." *National Center for Youth Law*.

Harris, M. S. (2021). Racial bias as an explanatory factor for racial disproportionality and disparities in child welfare. *Racial disproportionality and disparities in the child welfare system*, 141-158.

Harrison, Gai. "Broadening the conceptual lens on language in social work: Difference, diversity and English as a global language." *British Journal of Social Work* 36, no. 3 (2006): 401-418.

Heap, J. (1991). A situated perspective on what counts as reading. Towards a critical sociology of reading pedagogy, 103-139.

Heyink, J. W., and TJ. Tymstra. "The Function of Qualitative Research." Social Indicators Research 29, no. 3 (1993): 291–305.

Hill, Robert B. "Institutional racism in child welfare." *Race and Society* 7, no. 1 (2004): 17-33.

Hoffman, Mary. "Problems of Identity in Foster Children." Child Welfare 42, no. 1 (1963): 10–17.

Hooks, Bell. (2000). Feminist theory: From margin to center. South End Press.

Hornton, M. C., Chatters, L. M., Taylor, R. J., & Allen, W. R. (1990). Sociodemographic and environmental correlates of racial socialization by Black parents. Child development, 61(2), 401-409.

Hounmenou, C. (2012). Black settlement houses and oppositional consciousness. *Journal of Black Studies*, *43*(6), 646-666.

Hughes, D., & Johnson, D. (2001). Correlates in children's experiences of parents' racial socialization behaviors. Journal of Marriage and family, 63(4), 981-995.

Hunte, R., Mehrotra, G. R., & Klawetter, S. (2022). "We Experience What They Experience": Black Nurses' and Community Health Workers' Reflections on Providing Culturally Specific Perinatal Health Care. Journal of Transcultural Nursing,

Hyde, A., Howlett, E., Brady, D., & Drennan, J. (2005). The focus group method: Insights from focus group interviews on sexual health with adolescents. Social science & medicine, 61(12), 2588-2599.

Jordan, Kathy-Anne. "Discourses of difference and the overrepresentation of Black students in special education." The Journal of African-AmericanHistory 90, no. 1-2 (2005): 128-149.

Kang, Hannah Soo, Kyle Edward Chang, Chuansheng Chen, and Ellen Greenberger. "Locus of control and peer relationships among Caucasian, Hispanic, Asian, and

African-American adolescents." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 44 (2015): 184-194.

Kools, S. M. (1997). Adolescent identity development in foster care. *Family relations*, 263-271.

Koonce, J. B. (2012). Oh, Those Loud Black Girls!: A Phenomenological Study of Black Girls Talking with an Attitude. Journal of Language and Literacy Education [Online], 8(2), 26-46

Lesane-Brown, C. L. (2006). A review of race socialization within Black families. Developmental Review, 26(4), 400-426.

Lester, R., & Petrie, T. A. (1998). Physical, psychological, and societal correlates of bulimic symptomatology among African-American college women. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 45(3), 315–321.

Lewis, P. J. (2011). Storytelling as research/research as storytelling. Qualitative inquiry, 17(6), 505-510.

Littlefield, M. B. (2008). The Media as a System of Racialization: Exploring Images of African-American Women and the New Racism. American Behavioral Scientist, 51(5), 675–685.

M Beliso-De Jesús, A., & Pierre, J. (2020). Anthropology of white supremacy. *American anthropologist*, *122*(1), 65-75.

Embrick, D. G., & Moore, W. L. (2020). White space (s) and the reproduction of white supremacy. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *64*(14), 1935-1945.

Mack, M. (2021). The white supremacy hydra: How the Family First Prevention Services Act reifies pathology, control, and punishment in the Family Regulation System. *Columbia Journal of Race and Law, 11*, 3, 767-810.

Margaret O'Brien Caughy, O'Campo, P. J., Randolph, S. M., & Nickerson, K. (2002). The Influence of Racial Socialization Practices on the Cognitive and Behavioral Competence of African-American Preschoolers. Child Development, 73(5), 1611–1625.

Mathews, Tayler J., and Glenn S. Johnson. "Skin complexion in the twenty-first century: The impact of colorism on African-American women." *Race, Gender & Class* 22, no. 1-2 (2015): 248-274.

Mazama, A., & Lundy, G. (2012). African-American homeschooling as racial protectionism. Journal of Black Studies, 43(7), 723-748.

McKenry, P. C., Kim, H. K., Bedell, T., Alford, K. A., & Gavazzi, S. M. (1997). An Africentric Rites of Passage Program for Adolescent Males. Journal of African-American Men, 3(2), 7–20.

McRoy, Ruth G., and Helen Grape. "Skin color in transracial and interracial adoptive placements: Implications for special needs adoptions." Child Welfare (1999): 673-692.

McRoy, Ruth. Racial Identity Issues for Black Children in Foster Care, Routledge (2001): 2nd Edition.

Mehrotra, G. (2010). Toward a continuum of intersectionality theorizing for feminist social work scholarship. *Affilia*, *25*(4), 417-430.

Merriam, S. B. (2002). Introduction to qualitative research. Qualitative research in

    practice: Examples for discussion and analysis, 1(1), 1-17.

Metzger, J. (2008). Resiliency in children and youth in kinship care and family foster

    care. Child welfare, 87(6), 115-140.

Mhiripiri, N. A., Ureke, O., & Mubayiwa, M. M. (2020). The Discursive Dynamics of

    Action-Research and Zimbabwean San People's Production of Audio-Visual

    Stories. Africa Development / Afrique et Développement, 45(4), 77–106.

National Association of Social Workers. (2008). Preamble to the code of ethics. Retrieved

    May 4, 2008, from http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/ Code/code.asp

Nichols, E. The philosophical aspects of cultural differences. World Psychiatric

    Association, Ibadan, Nigeria, November 1976.

O'Keeffe, Gwenn Schurgin, Kathleen Clarke-Pearson, and Council on Communications

    and Media. "The impact of social media on children, adolescents, and families."

    Pediatrics 127, no. 4 (2011): 800-804.

Patton, Tracey Owens. "Hey girl, am I more than my hair?: African-American women

    and their struggles with beauty, body image, and hair." *NWSA journal* (2006): 24-

    51.

Ray, V. (2019). A theory of racialized organizations. *American Sociological*

    Review, *84*(1), 26-53.

Richardson, E. (2003). African-American literacies. Routledge.

Rivas-Drake, D., Syed, M., Umana-Taylor, A., Markstrom, C., French, S., Schwartz, S. J.,

    ... & Ethnic and Racial Identity in the 21st Century Study Group. (2014). Feeling

good, happy, and proud: A meta-analysis of positive ethnic–racial affect and adjustment. Child development, 85(1), 77-102.

Rivas-Drake, D., Seaton, E. K., Markstrom, C., Quintana, S., Syed, M., Lee, R. M. Yip, T. (2014). Ethnic and racial identity in adolescence: Implications for psychosocial, academic, and health outcomes. Child Development, 85, 40–57.

Dorothy Roberts, e.g.,

Roberts, D. (2009). *Shattered bonds: The color of child welfare*. Hachette UK.

Romero, A. J., & Roberts, R. E. (2003). Stress within a bicultural context for adolescents of Mexican descent. Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 9(2), 171–184.

Ryan, C. S., Hunt, J. S., Weible, J. A., Peterson, C. R., & Casas, J. F. (2007). Multicultural and Colorblind Ideology, Stereotypes, and Ethnocentrism among Black and White Americans. Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 10(4), 617–637.

Salenius, S. (2016). Marginalized Identities and Spaces: James Baldwin's Harlem, New York. Journal of Black Studies, 47(8), 883–902.

Schuck, S., Brady, L., & Griffin, J. (2005). Initiation and rites of passage: learning the school culture. Change: Transformations in Education, 8(1), 44-55.

Schweitzer, L., & Stephenson, M. (2007). Right Answers, Wrong Questions: Environmental Justice as Urban Research. Urban Studies, 44(2), 319–337.

Sellers, R. M., Caldwell, C. H., Schmeelk-Cone, K. H., & Zimmerman, M. A. (2003). Racial Identity, Racial Discrimination, Perceived Stress, and Psychological

Distress among African-American Young Adults. Journal of Health and Social

Behavior, 44(3), 302–317.

Sellers, R. M., Smith, M. A., Shelton, J. N., Rowley, S. A., & Shavous, T. M. (1998).

Multidimensional model of racial identity: A reconceptualization of African-

American racial identity. *Personality and social psychology review*, *2*(1), 18-39.

Shorter-Gooden, Kumea, and N. Chanell Washington. "Young, Black, and female: The

challenge of weaving an identity." Journal of adolescence 19, no. 5 (1996): 465-

475.

Simms, R. (2001). Controlling images and the gender construction of enslaved African

women. Gender & Society, 15(6), 879-897.

Sledge, Shellye L. Deconstructing Racism and the White-Supremacist Practices Holding

Social Welfare and Public Service Systems Hostage. *Public Integrity* 25, no. 4

(2023): 441-452.

Smith, J. A., & Nizza, I. E. (2022). Essentials of interpretative phenomenological

analysis. American Psychological Association.

Spelman, Elizabeth V. Inessential woman. Beacon Press, 1990.

Starks, H., & Brown Trinidad, S. (2007). Choose your method: A comparison of

phenomenology, discourse analysis, and grounded theory. Qualitative health

research,

17(10), 1372-1380.

Stephens B, Gross DP. The influence of a continuum of care model on the rehabilitation of compensation claimants with soft tissue disorders. Spine (Phila Pa 1976). 2007 Dec 1;32(25):2898-904.

Stephens, D.P., Phillips, L.D. Freaks, gold diggers, divas, and dykes: The sociohistorical development of adolescent African-Americanwomen's sexual scripts. Sexuality and Culture 7, 3–49 (2003)

Stevenson, H. C. (1992). Invisibility revisited: Challenging the negative images of Black males. AFTA Newsletter, American Family Therapy Association, 42, 15-19.

Stevenson, H. C., Herrero-Taylor, T., Cameron, R., & Davis, G. Y. (2002). "Mitigating instigation": Cultural phenomenological influences of anger and fighting among "big-boned" and "baby-faced" African-American youth. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 31(6), 473-485.

Sydie, R. A., Bert N. Adams, and Dawn H. Currie. "Sociological theory." *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 28, no. 1 (2003): 101.

Tajima, E. A., Day, A. G., Kanuha, V. K., Rodriquez-JenKins, J., & Pryce, J. A. (2022). What counts as evidence in child welfare research?. *Research on social work Practice*, *32*(5), 514-520.

Thomas, A. J., & King, C. T. (2007). Gendered Racial Socialization of African-American Mothers and Daughters. The Family Journal, 15(2), 137–142.

Thomas, A. J., Witherspoon, K. M., & Speight, S. L. (2004). Toward the Development of the Stereotypic Roles for Black Women Scale. Journal of Black Psychology, 30(3), 426–442

Thompson, Chalmer E., and Robert T. Carter. "An overview and elaboration of Helms' racial identity development theory." Racial identity theory (2013): 15-32.

Thompson, Chalmer E., and Robert T. Carter, eds. Racial identity theory: Applications to individual, group, and organizational interventions. Routledge, 2013.

Tillman, L. C. (2002). Culturally sensitive research approaches: An African-American perspective. Educational researcher, 31(9), 3-12.

Toliver, Stephanie R. Recovering Black storytelling in qualitative research: Endarkened storywork. Routledge, 2021.

Troutman, D. E., & Falk, J. S. (1982). Speaking Black English and Reading--Is There a Problem of Interference? The Journal of Negro Education, 51(2), 123–133.

Van Manen, M. (1990). Beyond assumptions: Shifting the limits of action research. Theory into practice, 29(3), 152-157.

Volume 109, Issue 4,2017, Pages 224-237

Watson LB, Lewis JA, Moody AT. A sociocultural examination of body image among Black women. Body Image. 2019 Dec;31:280-287.

Williams, M. G., & Lewis, J. A. (2021). Developing a conceptual framework of Black women's gendered racial identity development. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *45*(2), 212-228.

Winchester, L. B., Jones, S. C. T., Allen, K., Hope, E., & Cryer-Coupet, Q. R. (2022). Let's talk: The impact of gendered racial socialization on Black adolescent girls' mental health. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 28*(2), 171–181.

Worrell, F.C. and Gardner-Kitt, D.L., 2006. The relationship between racial and ethnic

identity in Black adolescents: The cross racial identity scale and the multigroup

ethnic identity measure. *Identity*, *6*(4), pp.293-315.

Yancey, A. K. (1992). Identity formation and social maladaptation in foster

adolescents. *Adolescence*, *27*(108), 819.

Yi, Y., & Wildeman, C. (2018). Can foster care interventions diminish justice system

inequality? The Future of Children, 28(1), 37-58.

Yip, T. (2008). Everyday experiences of ethnic and racial identity among adolescents and

young adults. In S. M. Quintana & C. McKown (Eds.), Handbook of race, racism,

and the developing child (pp. 182–202). John Wiley & Sons, Inc

Appendix A: Portland State University Consent Form

Title: The Mirror Project: Reflections on the experiences of African-American female adolescents experiencing foster care in a predominantly white city.

Study Principal Investigator: Bahia Anise-Cross Overton, MSW Ph.D. Candidate

Doctoral Advisor: Thomas Keller, Ph.D.

Procedures: If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in 3 focus group sessions in a comfortable setting that is agreed upon by all participants. These sessions will be audio recorded but we will not discuss names or any other identifying information during the sessions and I will omit from the recordings, anything that you feel may be potentially revealing about your identity.

I will ask you questions about your experiences with the foster care system, your life, your family (biological and foster family), your culture and how that impacted your experience. I will ask you questions about how you feel about yourself and others. You will be asked to review two chapters of a story about a young, Black girl in foster care in the Pacific NW and then discuss it in the group.

The focus group discussions will cover how you came into care, how you managed mentally and emotionally during that time and how you feel this impacted you then and now. We will discuss what may have made things better or you and what changes need to be made to the foster care system.

Each focus group session will be about an hour. I may contact all participants in 1-3 months to discuss the summary of your recorded sessions and ask if you agree with my summary of themes and if you have anything to add.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to:

- Build the capacity of communities and social service institutions by engaging the voice of adults who were formerly involved in the foster care system

- Add to the national discourse on the need for cultural responsiveness in foster care.

- Contribute to research in racial socialization and identity development in African-American women.

- Engage in participatory approaches to conducting research within the foster care system.

- Promote healing by telling stories and giving voice to women who have experienced foster care.

- Establish bonds of friendship and foster a support network of young women.

Risks and Safeguards: If the focus group questions or story chapters make you feel upset or and you want to talk with someone, I will find you a counselor or therapist to work with. As I mentioned before, each focus group session will be audio recorded with your permission, and you may choose not to be recorded or have the tape stopped at any time.

Benefits: By being in this study, you may help us learn more about how African-American girls experience foster care in ways that others do not and the ways that foster care can serve Black girls better. This could make life better for the Black girls currently in care.

Confidentiality: I will not use your name or any other identifying information about you in the reports I write about the study. Each recording will be transcribed. That means the words you speak will be written out. The audio recording will be erased once it has been transcribed. I will not tell anyone that you are participating in the study.

Exceptions to Confidentiality: Under Oregon law, suspected child abuse, elder abuse or abuse of people who get developmental disabilities or mental health services must be reported to appropriate authorities. I must also share information mandated by a court order from a judge. If at any time during our time together you suggest that you are harming yourself or are thinking about harming yourself, I will need to alert someone who can help. If I write a report, you will be informed and you may participate in the process if you choose.

Costs: There is no cost to you for being in this study. You will receive a $25 gift card at each session as compensation for your time.

Participation: If you have any questions regarding your rights as a study participant, you may contact the Human Subjects Research Review Committee, PSU Office of Research Integrity 1600 SW 4th Ave. Market Center Building Ste. 620, Portland, OR 97207, 503-725-2227 or 1 (877) 480-4400.

If you have any questions about the study itself, please contact Bahia Overton at bahiao@pdx.edu

Participating in these focus groups is entirely your choice. If you agree to be in the study, then later change your mind, you may quit at any time. You are under no obligation to participate. You will still be compensated for your time.

Appendix B: The Mirror Project: Recruitment Flyer

Figure 1. Mirror Project Recruitment Flyer

Appendix C: Interview Guide

The following questions were posed during each of the three sessions following introductions and check-in and a review of our focus group agreements.

Focus group prompts/questions:

Group 1. After reading the first chapter:

Aminah describes having to move and having been placed in multiple foster homes. In your experience, was your cultural identity considered when agencies and individuals made foster care placements for you

Group 2. After reviewing chapter 1 and reading the second chapter:

Aminah describes feelings of disconnection in school. What were significant experiences that you had while in foster care that increased or decreased your feelings of disconnection (or acceptance)?

Group 3. After reviewing chapters 1 and 2:

Overall, Aminah loves being African American. In that way she has a solid identity. When you were in foster care do you feel you had a healthy African-American identity? What makes you feel this way? Do you feel you have a healthy identity now? Why or why not?