

Black Women's and Girls' Return to Joy: Addressing Trauma, Healing, and Educational Opportunity

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Abstract

The concept of thriving amidst trauma receives minimal attention when addressing negative life experiences of Black women and girls. This work examines strategies employed and recommended by Black women and girls that prompt thriving amidst traumatic circumstances. Radio broadcasts from the National Girls and Women of Color Council serve as data for the topic. Findings reveal the strength of Black women and girls in dealing with trauma, holding the potential to move beyond coping with circumstances, towards potential thriving in education and beyond.

Keywords: trauma, healing, Black women, Black girls, PEPS Syndrome, radio broadcasts, thriving

Social Contributors to Black Female Trauma

Scant attention has been paid to the concept of thriving amongst Black women and girls. Nevertheless, reframing discussion of coping with trauma for the population, to that in terms of thriving prompts movement beyond victimization, towards triumph and healing. The following reviews related literature to set the work's context, then examines radio commentary on Black women and girls dealing with forms of trauma using thriving as a conceptual framework.

Research has thoroughly documented how negative stereotypes, negative perceptions, and standards of beauty that do not value Black girls and women. Devaluing Black girls and women with respect to their voices, emotional needs, quality in the workforce, in society, abilities, and physical attributes (hair, skin color, body image, and other phenotypes) collaboratively affect the psychological, emotional, physical, and social (PEPS) happiness and well-being of this population (Culbreth, 2014; Lane, 2014; Williams, 2013; Downtin, 2012; Hodge, 2011; Smith, 2010; Rhodes, 2009; Wilder, 2008; Thomas, 2006; Waller-Lomax, 2005; Gordon, 2004; Keith, Jackson & Gary, 2003). High levels of self-worth, self-love, self-esteem, self-identity, self-pride, and self-respect are crucial for the happiness and overall well-being of Black girls and women. When self-worth is affected by negative societal issues, PEPS Syndrome, a condition that manifests itself in the form of negative thought processes, negative attitudes and negative behaviors which in turn significantly affect self-worth, traps Black girls and women in psychic prisons of negativity. PEPS Syndrome defers dreams, diminishes hopes, and stagnate happiness and well-being. Women of color disproportionately suffer from stress related and environmentally induced illnesses, such as breast cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity (Comas-Diaz & Greene, 2013). For instance, cardiovascular disease leads the list in terms of the most common cause of death for Black women (Gonzales & Zea, 2013). In addition, they are more likely than White female peers to be single mothers with less social and economic support. Understanding causes, effects, and strategies for countering trauma would promote greater well-being for this population and promises to expand life spans, while improving the quality of life for Black women and their families.

This work features analysis of the National Girls and Women of Color Council Radio Broadcasts, which examine various forms of trauma amongst Black women and girls. Summaries of select broadcasts follow analysis using the concept of thriving as a conceptual framework. The purpose of this work centers upon examining strategies used by Black women and girls in terms of thriving amidst trauma. The work features exploration of two radio broadcasts centered on these topics as cases to analyze using the concept of thriving as a conceptual frame.

Methods

Collection of data centers upon discourse analysis of two specific radio broadcasts via the National Girls and Women of Color Council:

Factors Impacting the Development of Black Girls
Being Black (and Blue): African American Women and Intimate Partner Abuse

This work's approach to discourse analysis focuses upon "ideas, issues, and themes as they are expressed in talk and writing" (Gee, 2014, p. 1). The work seeks to address the following questions in analyzing talk within these broadcasts: How do Black women thrive amidst life

trauma? What strategies are employed to prompt mental and emotional healing? The researchers employed discourse analysis in summarizing and reflecting upon the featured radio shows. The conceptual framework of thriving provides a lens to further analyze the data.

Conceptual Framework

In his work *Resilience and Thriving: Issues, Models, and Linkages*, Carver describes thriving as being:

...(physical or psychological and) reflect decreased reactivity to subsequent stressors, faster recovery from subsequent stressors, or a consistently higher level of functioning. Psychological thriving may reflect gains in skill, knowledge, confidence, or a sense of security in personal relationships. (2010, p. 1)

The concept of thriving, rather than merely coping during trauma, serves as the conceptual framework for this work.

Radio Broadcast #1: The Development of Black Girls

Factors Impacting the Development of Black Girls aired live one week following the recent incident of the “use of excessive force” in a South Carolina High School. Included in the discussion with Dr. Culbreth were social work scholar and clinician, Dr. Denise Davis-Maye and author and media specialist, Ms. Kymberly Keeton. The purpose of the show was to address the multiple factors which are thought to impact the status of Black girls in the United States, including racism, colorism, sexism, and social class. The focal point around which this discussion centered was the physical assault on an African American high school student by a school resource officer in South Carolina, and as such, the structural and direct violence which Black girls face.

Transitioning to a discussion of Black girls, allows us to highlight the factors which influence their identities, and the intersections of socioeconomic factors, race and racism, and the opportunities to address the gender and racial inequities that exist for Black girls in schools and communities. Lindsay-Dennis (2015) and others promote the contextualizing of Black girls’ experiences in ways that reframe how they are characterized and socially understood (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Crenshaw, Ocen, & Mamda, 2015). While we agree with Crenshaw and colleagues (2015) that Black girls face a multitude of historical, institutional, and social factors which impede their chances of achieving academically, economically, and socially, we also believe that Black girls in the U.S. have consistently been laden with stereotypical characteristics that diminish their value and worth, emphasizing being ‘loud,’ ‘brash,’ ghetto, defiant, and sexually promiscuous among (Morris, 2007). Simultaneously, they are ascribed with traits that create an almost herculean repute, including “strong,” “proud,” “outspoken,” and “resilient.” (Brown, 2008; Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009; Carlson, et al, 2000; Jackson & Lassiter, 2003). That these traits could exist concurrently seems irrational and ignorant at best. How can they, Black girls, be all? How do they, Black girls, manage the divergent expectations that society has for and ascribes to them?

As the discussion ensued there were several themes which emerged: 1) Responses to and recognition of the impact of trauma; 2) Resignation to victimization and marginalization; 3) Creating spaces for support and uplift; 4) Blaming girls for logical responses to the violence; 5) Addressing community internalization of external views of Blackness and girlhood; and 6)

Methods to enact community responsibility for Black girls. These themes align with and further illuminate the significance of the findings of Crenshaw (2015) and her colleagues that the structures governing the schools, communities, and broader society in which many Black girls operate in the U.S. are racialized and gendered and as a result leaving an often undiscernible toll on their psyches, self-concepts, and souls. In fact, Davis-Maye, Davis, and Bertrand-Jones (2013) argue that the excessive focus on Black youth broadly, and Black girls specifically, as social problems serves as a barrier to strategically considering, engaging, and nurturing the competence, cognitive productivity, and aspirations of Black youth.

Responses to Contemporary Exemplars of Excessive School Discipline

Dr. Culbreth began by engaging the panel around an incident occurring in the Fall of 2015, wherein a School Resource Officer (SRO), a deputy of a local sheriff's department, was videotaped by students as he violently attempts to remove a 16-year-old girl from her seat and subsequently hurls her across the classroom. Davis-Maye responded by emphasizing the micro and structural issues present in this incident. First, she discussed the impact of the assault on the victim's self-concept and socioemotional health. The student was looking down at her desk as she responded to the officer. At no point did she appear to be a physical threat which would result in the level of vitriol with which the SRO responds. She further situated her discussion around what appeared to be resignation on the part of the student's peers. The level of acquiescence on their parts suggest a regular exposure to the kind of violence which was depicted in the videos. In other words, the students likely regularly saw this level of hyper-violent responses to Black students and girls.

Structural Challenges Impacting Black Girls

Next, structural concerns were demonstrated through what appeared to be ineffective and overreaching classroom and behavior management. The White House Council on Women and Girls (WHCWG) (2015) report the necessity of implementing supportive discipline strategies as opposed to methods based on corporal ideologies. It appears that excessive response to Black girls who are perceived as non-compliant extends beyond New York and Boston as reported in 2015 Black Girls Matter Report (Crenshaw et al, 2015). The South Carolina occurrence serves as a perfect exemplar of the punitive discipline leveled against Black girls. Further, the teacher and principal's apparent lack of sensitivity to what reportedly were multiple losses on the part of the student is even more startling. Were they unaware of the change in the student's family status? The same report additionally delineates how girls view environments where discipline appears to supersede learning as "...neither safe nor nurturing settings within which to learn. To the contrary, the emphasis on discipline turns some girls off from school, leading them to become disengaged from the learning process and subject to separation from school altogether" (Crenshaw et al, p. 28).

Interestingly, the SRO's response nor the principal's inaction were in accordance with the National Association of School Resource Officer's (NASRO) best practices or mission. In fact, according to the organization's 2012 report, *To Protect & Educate: The School Resource Officers and the Prevention of Violence in Schools*, SROs should refrain from engaging in discipline which falls in the realm of the responsibility of school administrators – namely the principal and educators responsible for student compliance. The NASRO's "Triad of SRO Responsibility" implores the SROs to "contribute to the safe-schools team by ensuring a safe and secure campus, educating students about law-related topics, and mentoring students as

counselors and role models.” On the surface, the SRO mission seems laudable, and would be if it were equitably applied and Black girls were considered as worthy of protection.

Ms. Keeton even suggests persecution of Black girls and women, noting that girls in general and the 16-year-old at the center of this discussion are “come for.” This anecdotal observation is supported by Crenshaw and colleagues (2015) as they suggest that Black girls are at greater risk than their White counterparts of being suspended and expelled for behavioral infractions. Scholars (Crenshaw et al, 2015; Lindsay-Dennis & Cummings, 2014) report that educators actually fail to discipline White girls for the very same infractions that Black girls are not only disciplined for but for which Black girls receive suspensions and expulsions.

Interestingly, as the discussion proceeds it relegates the solutions to the past and places responsibility on the broader “Black community.” Dr. Culbreth brought up “the village” by introducing the adage often attributed to a West African proverb: “It takes a village to raise a child.” This aphorism is an idea which is central to many African proverbs and many other communalistic societies. As panelists began to reframe the discussion, the closing thoughts centered on whose responsibility it is to keep Black girls’ soul, psyches, and physical selves safe? Is it the imagined community or village? More importantly, who belongs to the village? Even in the context of a discussion of panelists, all of whom identify as woman-centered, there was a sentiment that somehow the 16-year-old’s plight was the result of some lack on the part of her community. This internalization of messages of want, both subliminally and direct, negatively impact how communities can stand for Black girls (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Parents and communities have put their trust in institutions and expect them to care for, protect, and educate Black girls. However, one will not actively protect what one does not value. Devaluation of Black girls is weaved into the very fabric of the institutions which Black communities have entrusted to care for them. According to Crenshaw (2015), the girls know how much they are devalued and stereotyped. The WHCWG identifies one of their goals as supporting school discipline practices that promote safe, inclusive, and positive learning environments. Focus on uncovering causes of existing disciplinary disparities is urgent as suggested by the WHCWG report. However, these inquiries, policy, and practice developments require programmatic responses which take into account the community contexts in which these girls reside. Programs like KEMET Academy (Davis et al, 2011) encourages a set of twelve (12) competencies which includes an adult investment that requires a deeper level of concern and intentionality not present in many settings where Black girls frequent. The investment of parents, teachers, school resource officers, police, and others recognizes the interconnection between success in their lives and the lives of the young women for whom they are responsible. Such a connection may require a large scale reset and reframing how the Black community perceives, values, and understands girls.

Radio Broadcast #2: Being Black (and Blue): African American Women and Intimate Partner Abuse

“Intimate partner abuse is any type of behavior that another intimate partner uses to gain power, ... control, and put fear in that other person”. – Dr. Hillary Potter

According to the National Intimate Partner and Violence Survey, intimate partner violence includes physical violence, sexual violence, threats of physical or sexual violence, stalking, and psychological aggression (including coercive tactics) by a current or former intimate partner. Intimate partner violence may occur among cohabitating or non-cohabitating romantic or sexual partners as well as among opposite or same sex couples (National Intimate Partner

and Sexual Violence Survey, 2010). The featured radio broadcast focused on physical, emotional, and psychological abuse.

This topic holds importance for four reasons. First, the number of female victims of violence is staggering. More than one-third of women in the United States (35.6% or approximately 42.4 million) have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner at some point in their lifetime. One in three women (32.9%) have experienced physical violence by an intimate partner and nearly 1 in 10 (9.4%) has been raped by an intimate partner in her lifetime (American Psychological Association, 2015). Approximately 5.9%, or almost 7.0 million women in the United States, reported experiencing these forms of violence by an intimate partner in the 12 months prior to taking the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey in 2010. In addition, nearly 3 in 10 women in the United States (28.8% or approximately 34.3 million) have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner and reported at least one measured impact related to experiencing these or other forms of violent behavior in that relationship (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2015).

Second, victims of intimate partner abuse experience diminished life outcomes. Several studies have found survivors of intimate partner abuse frequently report psychological distress, increased rates of aggression, diminished physical health, and additional challenges in their parental roles (Follette, Briere, Rozelle, Hopper, & Rome, 2015; Jenkins, 2002; Sabri et al, 2013).

Third, the unique socio-historical experiences of Black women may make them less likely than women of other racial and/or ethnic groups to report intimate partner violence. In particular, the Strong Black Woman (SBW) Syndrome is a culturally salient ideal prescription that Black women must always render a guise of self-reliance, selflessness, and psychological, emotional, and physical strength (Baker, Buchanan, Mingo, Roker, & Brown, 2014). Therefore, the SBW Syndrome may make these women less likely to recognize abuse and/or report it (Dow, 2015; Potter, 2014; Richie, 2012). Finally, since the reasons why women enter into and/or remain in abusive relationships are multi-faceted, and many cases of violence go unreported, one must recognize the barriers that make it difficult for many Black women to leave abusive relationships.

Contemporary Examples of Intimate Partner Abuse

Dr. Culbreth specifically mentioned two high-profile incidents in the media that involved Black women and intimate partner abuse. The first incident involved Marissa Alexander, the 31-year old African American woman and mother of three in Florida that served three years for merely firing a warning shot at her abuser (Prupis, 2015). Although Alexander initially faced 20 years in prison under Florida's "10-20-life" rule, many regarded her sentence as a gross miscarriage of justice as well as an attempt to minimize the power of Black female victims of intimate partner abuse. According to Ayanna Harris, co-organizer of the Chicago Alliance to Free Marissa Alexander, "One of the biggest issues and injustices Marissa's prosecution and incarceration illuminates is the criminalization of women who defend themselves" (Prupis, 2015). The second incident involved a 28-year-old African American professional sports player and his 27-year-old African American fiancée. When surveillance video of the assault of Janay Palmer by her then-boyfriend, now husband, former Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice

on February 15, 2014 went viral on February 19, 2014,¹ it immediately created a media storm regarding the prevalence of intimate partner abuse in society as well as critique regarding why Palmer would remain in a relationship with a man that many perceived as unpredictable, calloused, and violent. The public condemnation of Palmer intensified after she married Rice in an elaborate ceremony on March 28, 2014 (Nathan & McCormick, 2014), which coincidentally was one day after he was indicted for third-degree aggravated assault for knocking her unconscious.

The Reasons Why Women Tolerate Intimate Partner Abuse

Dr. Potter revealed several reasons why many Black women enter into and/or remain in abusive relationships. One reason why some women tolerate abuse is generational. During the broadcast, she mentioned an 18-year-old African American female that “did not want to date Black men because that is who abused her mother.” Sadly, this young woman eventually became romantically involved with two males that were abusive toward her. A second reason why many women tolerate abuse is due to being financially dependent on their abusers as well as religious institutions that tell women, “You just need to be a better wife,” which further encourages women to remain in abusive relationships and/or marriages. A third reason why many women tolerate abuse is because the abuser and the abused are members of a low socioeconomic status, and thus, have a higher level of interaction with law enforcement than more economically advantaged couples. Due to the fact that many African American men have negative interactions with the legal system, Black woman may be reluctant to report abuse because they fear that their abuser will be jailed or lose his employment. A fourth reason why many women tolerate abuse is because they are socialized to believe they provoke their partner to act in violent ways. Case in point: When she publicly said, “I do deeply regret the role that I played in the incident,” Janay Palmer insinuated that she (the abused) and her husband Ray Rice (the abuser) were equally responsible for her being knocked unconscious. According to Potter, oftentimes the victim feels that she must apologize for “putting him in that position where he has to be abusive toward her.” A fifth reason why many women tolerate abuse is because they love their partner. However, these women must recognize that “love, fear, power are also reasons why women stay.” It is imperative that African American women in abused relationships realize “this isn’t love when someone is doing this [being abusive] to me.” While Black women in toxic relationships may have strong love for abusers, these abused women must accept that “fear, power, and control” ultimately drive these relationships. The final reason why many women tolerate abuse is because the blame is not put on the proper person. Unfortunately, for many female victims of abuse (and particularly those that have been in many abusive relationships), the blame is squarely placed on their shoulders, yet *the focus needs to be on the men*. For individuals that may be inclined to blame the woman for the abuse, it is important to recognize that regardless of race, abusive men typically possess certain mindsets and display certain types of behaviors. As Potter poignantly stated: “Batterers go through the same school...they use the same tactics, the same language” (i.e. “If I can’t have you, no one can.”). They are oftentimes very charismatic, and sadly batterers are looking for certain types of individuals they can have power over.

¹ For more in-depth coverage of this incident, see the ESPN (September 19, 2014) story, “Rice Case: Purposeful Misdirection by Team, Scant Investigation by NFL,” by Don Van Natta and Kevin Van Valdenburg.

The Negative Effects of Intimate Partner Abuse

Dr. Culbreth then posed the question, “So, if a little boy sees his mother being abused, will he be more likely to abuse himself when he becomes an adult?” According to Potter, there are several negative effects for the African American abused woman and her children. Research that looks at life course and generational outcomes suggests males of abused mothers are more likely to be abusive (starting in adolescence) and the females are more likely to be attracted to abusive men. A deep internal struggle exists for boys whose role models are abusive males, yet are simultaneously deeply inclined and compelled to protect their mothers. An additional negative effect are the deleterious psychological effects of intimate partner violence on the self-esteem and self-doubt of Black female victims. Many of these women wonder, “Can I choose a man who’s not going to beat me?” In her work, Dr. Potter has spoken extensively with Black women that were on the verge of being in an abusive relationship in their current relationship. However, several of these women were in prior relationships marked by abuse. Because many of these Black women did not trust themselves to be in a relationship with a man that would not abuse them, they purposefully remained celibate or made the conscious decision to focus on rearing their children. Another negative effect of intimate partner abuse for women is the associated stigma of being a single mother. Even though Black women are part of a “working legacy,” many abused Black women’s desire to be in a relationship with a Black man may be so strong that regardless of whether they have biological children or are part of a blended family, they “just want to look like a normal family, so if I have to put up with a little abuse, I will deal with that.” The last negative effect of intimate partner abuse for Black women is the legacy of strength from which they come. Although Black women are part of a history where they worked outside of the home and were forced to be strong, particularly during slavery (i.e., protecting themselves from abusive slave masters and men in the fields with whom they worked and lived), many in society may find it difficult to believe that Black women can be victims of abuse. Outsiders may believe, “There’s no way this woman could have been the victim....she’s just too strong for that!” The Battered Women’s Syndrome [which was mentioned during the trial of Marissa Alexander] “was never really helpful for Black women because they [Black women] never fit the ideal victim.”

Recommendations for Women in Abusive Relationships

Given the high number of women in abusive relationships are not reflected in the current statistics, Dr. Culbreth posed the important question, “What should women do to protect themselves and their children?” Since it takes a woman approximately seven times to leave her abuser before she leaves for good (Potter, 2014), it is essential that a woman has a firm plan in place. Furthermore, since a woman has a greater chance of harm immediately after she leaves the relationship, Dr. Potter advised that women be keenly aware of how a man behaved when she first tried to leave and that she has a solid plan in place *before she leaves the relationship*. Dr. Potter has advised women in abusive relationships to not write down their plan as this can be dangerous, especially if the abuser has a habit of frequently checking her telephone or monitoring her daily activities. Given the likelihood of violence is substantially heightened immediately after the abused tries to leave, Black women in abusive relationships are encouraged to memorize or think through (by role-playing in their mind) where they will go, who their support systems will be (sadly, some women lose valuable support systems when they leave their abuser and ultimately return to him), and who can assist them. Toward the end of the broadcast, Dr. Culbreth recounted a situation with a young woman who was being physically abused. This young woman eventually got pregnant by her abuser and was being physically abused during this time. She said, “He really loves me. He only does this because

he gets upset with me.” Even though many people “don’t want to get involved,” Dr. Culbreth stressed the importance of being responsible for ourselves and others, and as such, to not stand by idly when a woman is being abused. Although some individuals object to getting personally involved in situations involving abuse, Dr. Culbreth encouraged her audience, “You don’t have to get involved. Just make a phone call.” Hence, individually and collectively we have a responsibility to help minimize the physical, emotional, and psychological abuse of Black women.

Findings

In light of the conceptual framework of thriving, the broadcast on the use of excessive force upon Black girls, centered upon the role communities play in promoting the well-being and safety of Black girls. While no direct strategies were offered to promote thriving of Black girls, the repeated idea of increased “adult investment” in promoting success for Black girls serves as a component of how communities may move towards thriving for this important group.

Similarly, the broadcast on Black women in abusive relationships centered upon both collective and individual action in improving the safety and well-being of women. The most noteworthy recommendation was the importance of women in abusive unions forming plans to leave such relationships. Should this plan entail not only leaving, but also healing, it may serve as a component towards ultimately thriving. However, the underlying current centered upon coping rather than thriving.

Conclusion

Racism, low expectations, and as discussed here, a lack of safety in schools presents barriers to learning, academic engagement, and ultimately achievement for Black girls. University and college campuses are not immune from the threat of abuse, particularly stemming from dating relationships. Such experiences hinder the personal well-being and academic experiences of abused students.

The results of this study suggest continued need for understanding strategies towards thriving and healing of trauma amongst Black women and girls. Future work in this area may delve deeper into this topic by studying Black women and girl exemplars who healed from and thrived amidst trauma. Examining best practices of individual exemplars and of programs geared towards promoting the success and well-being of this important population would complement the work. Future research in this area might further explore how intersectional identities shape the experiences of Black women and girls in schools, the workplace, and society as a whole. Exploring the complexity of the group’s identities and how they influence outcomes promise to raise understanding of their challenges so that they might be ameliorated.

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