

# “I Find Myself at Therapy’s Doorstep”: Summary and Suggested Readings on Violence in the Lives of Black Women

Carolyn M. West

**SUMMARY.** This volume used a Black feminist framework to investigate childhood sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and community violence in the lives of African American women. This article will summarize the authors’ findings, review their suggestions for intervention, and provide a list of readings and resources. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail*

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Who, then, can I turn to when I hurt real bad? . . . I find myself at therapy's doorstep. Will the counselor usher me to insanity? Because if she does not openly deal with the fact that there is a very low premium on every aspect of my existence, if she does not acknowledge the politics of Black womanhood, now that would surely drive me nuts. (Johnson, E., 1983, p. 320)

This volume used a Black feminist perspective to investigate violence in the lives of Black women. More specifically, the authors in this volume discussed a broad range of violence, including childhood sexual abuse, dating violence, partner abuse in intimate relationships, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and community violence. A special effort was made to focus on marginalized populations, such as Black lesbians and battered Black women who had sustained head injuries. The final section of this volume was devoted to activism and healing. The purpose of this article is to summarize the authors' findings within a Black feminist framework, to review their suggestions for intervention, and to provide a list of suggested readings and resources.

### ***BLACK FEMINIST THEORY***

Scholars have used Black feminist theory to investigate domestic violence (West, 1999), rape (Neville & Hamer, 2001), and childhood sexual abuse (Wilson, 1994). The purpose of this volume has been to add to this growing body of literature. Consistent with previous researchers, the authors used a Black feminist framework that considers how living at the intersection of multiple oppressions shapes Black women's experience with violence, uses a broad definition of violence, acknowledges diversity among Black women, explores the influence of historical events and oppressive images on victimization, and values Black women's activism and resistance.

*Intersectionality.* In order to understand the complexity of violence in the lives of Black women, Black feminists contend that we must acknowledge the overlap and intersections of multiple forms of oppression (Collins, 1998). This means that “a middle-class, African-American heterosexual Christian woman is not just African-American, not just middle-class, not just Christian, and not just female. Instead, her life is located at the intersection of these dimensions” (Phillips, 1998, p. 682). In this volume, the authors demonstrated how living at the intersection of oppression can create different forms of violence, such as “racialized sexual harassment” (Buchanan & Ormerod), and make it difficult for Black women to disclose their sexual assaults (Donovan & Williams).

*Broad range of violence.* Because Black women live at the intersection of oppressions, they are vulnerable to a broad range of violence in all areas of their lives, including their intimate relationships, their communities, and their workplaces. It is important to investigate victimization across the life span, from childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood. Consequently, this volume included articles on childhood sexual abuse, intimate partner violence (dating and married), sexual assault, sexual harassment, and community violence. Future researchers should investigate violence in the lives of elderly Black women (Griffin, 1999).

*Diversity among Black women.* Therapists and scholars should acknowledge the diversity among African American women. For example, the authors in this volume investigated violence in the lives of low-income Black women (Banyard, Williams, Siegel, & West), Black college women (Few & Bell-Scott), and professional Black women (Buchanan & Ormerod). Some groups of Black women are especially vulnerable to victimization. Consequently, the authors addressed violence in the lives of Black lesbians (Robinson) and Black women who had sustained head injuries (Banks & Ackerman). Future researchers should focus on Black women across the Diaspora (Johnson, P. C., 1998) and across economic groups (Russo, Denious, Keita, & Koss, 1997). There should be a special effort to include Black women who are especially marginalized, such as Black women who are HIV positive (Jackson-Gilfort, Mitrani, & Szapocznik, 2000) and Black women who are trapped in the criminal justice system (Richie, 1996) or welfare system (Raphael, 2000).

*Black women's history.* Consistent with Black feminist theory, the authors explained how Black women's history of sexual violence, in the form of rape and forced breeding, has influenced Black women's experience with sexual harassment (Buchanan & Ormerod) and rape (Donovan & Williams). Tillet focused on the history of lynching, a form of violence that has remained in the collective memories of African-Americans and

has shaped our discourse about intra-racial sexual assault. The authors also traced the history of oppressive images, such as the subordinate Mammy and sexually promiscuous Jezebel. These images continue to influence Black survivors' self-perceptions and the responses they receive from service providers. Legal scholars are beginning to use Black feminist theory to challenge perceptions of Black survivors in the court system (Ammons, 1995; Kupenda, 1998; Moore, 1995). When appropriate, therapists should make similar efforts to explore traumatic racial memories and the origins or consequences of oppressive images (Daniel, 2000).

*Resilience and activism.* Despite the challenges faced by African American survivors, the authors in this volume documented their resilience (Banyard and colleagues) and their strategies for terminating abusive dating (Few & Bell-Scott) and marital relationships (Taylor). The authors also demonstrated how participation in the research process (Taylor), the arts (Simmons), and spirituality (Nichols) could be used as forms of activism.

### ***SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERVENTION***

Although many Black survivors are resilient, based on literature reviews (Jenkins; West), it is clear that some survivors experience psychological distress in the form of depression, anxiety, stress, and somatic complaints. Despite their symptoms, several authors discovered that some Black survivors were reluctant to participate in therapy (Donovan & Williams; Few & Bell-Scott). This volume was designed to provide culturally sensitive techniques, which we hope will enable practitioners to appropriately respond to the needs of Black women. The following suggestions for intervention were consistently discussed throughout this volume:

1. *Educate professionals.* Many service providers, including therapists, nurses, and police officers, will be called to serve the needs of Black survivors. All professionals should become more knowledgeable about violence in the lives of Black women (see Appendix for references).
2. *Conduct a comprehensive assessment.* Service providers should develop the skills to take abuse histories (Young, Read, Barker-Collo, & Harrison, 2001). Given the "web of trauma" experienced by many Black women, providers should ask about a broad range of violence in their lives, including violence in their homes, communities, and workplaces. Service providers should also note historical violence,

which was committed against African Americans as a group or against the survivor's family members, and violence based on race, social class, or sexual orientation (Scurfield & Mackey, 2001).

3. *Draw on the survivor's strengths.* The service provider should assume a competence orientation that acknowledges successful strategies used by survivors.
4. *Encourage activism.* Researchers, mental health providers, community activists, and survivors should develop collaborative relationships. Activism can take many forms. For example, community members can help develop media campaigns or violence prevention programs, and professionals could assist by volunteering their services. It is particularly helpful if activism takes place in a Black feminist environment in which participants are working to eliminate race, class, and gender oppression (White, 2001; White, Strube, & Fisher, 1998).
5. *Improve social support networks.* With education about the risk factors and symptoms associated with victimization, friends, relatives, and community members can help survivors rebuild their lives. If these individuals are not available or are not an appropriate option, therapists should consider referring the survivor to a culturally sensitive support group.
6. *Acknowledge oppressive images.* Both survivors and therapists may internalize oppressive images of Black women (e.g., Mammy, Jezebel). These images can influence the survivor's self-perception or the therapist's response to the survivor. These images should be acknowledged and addressed.
7. *Understand the importance of literature, art, and music.* Using resources that reflect the experiences and challenges faced by Black women may promote healing for some survivors. If appropriate, the survivor could be encouraged to keep a journal or use literature or music that she perceives to be soothing and empowering.
8. *Understand the importance of spirituality.* Faith, religion, or spirituality can be used as a form of Black feminist activism or a source of comfort for some Black survivors. Service providers should not minimize spirituality in the lives of survivors.

Many Black survivors will find themselves at "therapy's doorstep." Before coming to therapy, Black survivors may ask the same question that was asked by Black feminist Eleanor Johnson (1983): "Will the counselor usher me to insanity?" How will mental health professionals respond to this ques-

tion? With culturally sensitive training and a commitment to social change, therapists can help usher clients toward healing.

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## APPENDIX

### SUGGESTED READINGS

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## WEB RESOURCES



*<http://drcarolynwest.com>* This Website provides an extensive reference list on violence in the lives of African Americans.

*<http://www.dvinstitute.org>* Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community (University of Minnesota, School of Social Work). The Institute's mission is to provide an interdisciplinary vehicle and forum by which scholars, practitioners, and observers of family violence through research findings, the examination of service delivery and intervention mechanisms, and the identification of appropriate and effective responses, can prevent/reduce family violence in the African American community.

*<http://www.incite-national.org>* Incite! Women of Color Against Violence. Incite is a national activist organization of radical feminists of color advancing a movement to end violence against women of color and their communities through direct action, critical dialogue, and grassroots organizing.