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Article

ACSSW Research & Scholarship Committee Presents: Research in Action Celebrating and Destigmatizing the Sexuality of Black Women

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Celebrating and Destigmatizing the Sexuality of Black Women

To fully understand the nuances of Black sexuality, one must also take into consideration the intersections of race and gender (Hill Collins, 2004). At the apex of sexual politics lies the intersection of gender, race, and sexuality that determines how individuals are treated and perceived by those around them. Racism has long been an intrusive element of Black sexuality and is a result of colonization. As explained by Meiu (2015), Western European colonizers imposed their standards and practices concerning sexuality and morality onto the inhabitants of the lands they colonized. This imposition laid the foundation for them to legitimize colonization as being "moral" and perpetuated the ideology that individuals expressing or experiencing sexuality in a manner different from theirs as being immoral and needing reform. For example, in the pre-colonization period in the East African kingdom of Buganda, it was common for the king and his male pages to engage in intimate relationships, as this was considered a form of "political obedience" (Meiu, 2015, p. 1). European missionaries, however, equated this with sin, thereby condemning this native practice and the natives of Buganda as "devious" and needing salvation. The condemnation of Black sexuality through religion continues, with research stating that some Black women report religion as evoking feelings of fear, shame, and/or silence as it relates to sex and sexuality (Crooks et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the bodies of Black women were hypersexualized and displayed in European "freak shows." When one African woman who was forced into participating in these exhibits died, her body was dissected and put on display in a museum (Crooks et al., 2020). This is one instance of the Black woman's body being forcibly subjugated to the white male gaze—a phenomenon Black women continue to face.

Fetishization has long been a product of this phenomenon. The Jezebel stereotype emerged during enslavement in the Americas and characterized Black women's sexuality as inappropriate and deviant. This race and gender stereotype was used to justify White male enslavers' sexual assaults on the Black women they enslaved (Nanda, 2019). Current literature describes ways in which the Jezebel stereotype of Black women as hypersexual continues to shape Black women's decision-making as evinced by how they express and participate in their own sexuality, including fashion choices and what sorts of sexual acts they engage in (Leath et al., 2021; Nanda, 2019). Others' exposure to the Jezebel stereotype also influences their treatment of Black women. For instance, Black women are at higher risk for being objectified, harassed, and victims of sexual assault (Nanda, 2019). Research asserts that the Jezebel stereotype is responsible for the justification of sexual violence against Black women.



In sum, Black women's eroticism has been devalued, vilified, and subdued, as explained by Audre Lorde (1978). Audre Lorde encourages Black women to reclaim their sexuality and eroticism, as it is their source of creative energy and empowerment. Our primary duty as counselors is to foster the wellness of our clients. This includes fostering the celebration of Black women's sexuality.

Celebrating Black Sexuality

Destigmatizing Black women's sexuality is a necessary step to deconstruct the harmful narratives that exist; however, a sex-positive framework calls counselors to not only accept and affirm, but to celebrate, liberate, and "amplify pleasure" (Thorpe et al., 2021, p. 5) regarding Black sexuality. Womanist, feminist, liberation, and emancipation theories provide counselors with guiding frameworks to celebrate Black sexuality, collaborate with clients to explore pleasure, reclaim Black sexual expressivity and autonomy, and self-define their sexual desires and experiences (Lindsey, 2013). A key element of this celebration and liberation of Black women's sexuality includes embracing the "womanish" aspect of Black women. As explained by Alice Walker (1972), womanish refers to Black women engaging in "outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one..." (p. 9). Black women and girls have long been encouraged to temper this element of their sexuality. We, like Alice Walker, call for the reclamation and celebration of being womanish. Below we propose strategies grounded in feminist, womanist, liberation, and emancipation theories for counselors to guide the celebration of Black women's sexualities within the therapeutic relationship.

Feminist Theory


Counselors resist the politics of silence around Black women's sexualities through (Lindsey, 2013; Thorpe, 2021):

- Integrating opportunities (e.g., using skills such as broaching or open-ended assessment questions) for Black women to discuss sexualities.
- Broaching race, gender, and other differing identities early in the counseling relationship, to invite open communication about diversity.
- Emphasize power sharing in counseling by assuming a non-expert stance on Black women's lived experiences.
- Trusting, affirming, and validating Black women's unique realities, including experiences of marginalization and oppression, as related to their sexualities through the frequent use of reflection and paraphrasing skills.
- Exploring with Black women how racial and gendered socialization influences their sexuality, including sexual identity, expression, and pleasure.
- Emphasizing clients' autonomy over their bodies and sexualities.
- Promoting opportunities for Black women to articulate and explore what is pleasurable to them.

Womanist Theory

Counselors conceptualize and celebrate the sexuality of Black women holistically through (King, 2004; Walker, 1972; Williams, 2005):

- Integrating the whole of Black women's identities (e.g. race, spirituality, socioeconomic class, sexual/affectional identity, ability status, etc.) in their exploration of how they came to know and understand their sexuality.
- Collaborating with Black women to challenge conceptualizations of Black women's sexuality rooted in sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, cissexism, and other oppressive traditions.
- Exploring ways Black women can experience their sexuality and pleasure as acts of rebellion against historic and current oppression they experience.
- Conceptualizing Black women's sexuality as a spiritual and physical manifestation of their wholeness.

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- Partaking in the liberation of Black sexuality by affirming the labels Black women apply to their eroticism and sexuality.
 - Holding space for the fluidity of Black women's sexuality.
 - Fostering Black women's womanish exploration of their sexuality.
 - Developing women-centered support networks that foster clients' sexual, psychosocial, emotional, and spiritual wellness.
 - Fostering and exploring Black women's love for and relationships (sexually and nonsexually) with other women.
 - Identifying and exploring Black women's personal values pertaining to their sexuality.

Liberation Theory

Counselors provide space for Black women to reclaim their sexualities through (Coleman, 2021; Ezaydi, 2023; Hill Collins, 2004):

- Dismantling feminist approaches that center Whiteness and ignore intersectionality.
- Centering the lived experiences and expressed goals of Black women to guide the therapeutic process.
- Emphasizing intersectionality, including trusting Black women to define their own identities and sexualities and explicitly holding space for the various domains in which Black women interact and reside throughout their lives.
- Interrogating messages that conflict with how Black women view themselves and their sexualities.
- Exploring with Black women how they can claim, reclaim, and express their sexual agency on their own terms.
- Empowering Black women to make decisions that are in their own best interests.

Emancipation Theory

Counselors liberate Black women's sexualities from restraint, oppression, and control through (Hepworth Clarke, 2022; Thorpe et al. 2022):

- Explicitly recognizing that Black women's sexualities have their own histories separate from Western conceptualizations of sexuality.
- Using Black women's definitions of sexuality and pleasure to inform counseling and to select culturally responsive interventions.
- Understanding how Black women currently and historically experienced empowerment and freedom through pleasure, sensuality, love, and eroticism.
- Using holistic, expansive, and sex positive approaches in counseling that emphasize mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical experiences of sexual intimacy and pleasure.
- Exploring with Black women how they experience joy, sensuality, connectedness, and spirituality through their sexualities.
- Including sexual mindfulness in therapeutic modalities to enhance mind-body-soul awareness during sexual encounters.

In sum, counselors have the privilege of accompanying Black women along their journey of reclaiming and celebrating their sexuality. To do so counselors must take special care to provide sex-positive counseling. We propose that this can best be accomplished by adopting an eclectic framework with womanist, feminist, liberation, and emancipation theories at its foundation. Through such an approach, Black women can reclaim their sexuality and engage in their eroticism as "an opening up, a healing, a seeing and being seen" (Cooper, 2018, p. 22).

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