

THE LENS OF COLORBLINDNESS AND CULTURAL COMPETENCY:  
AN EXAMINATION OF HOW BLACK FEMALE SOCIAL  
WORKERS VIEW THEIR CLIENTS

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study explores how Black female social workers in the American South perceive their clients' racial identities and how these perceptions affect their professional practice. Using Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Practice* (1990) as the theoretical framework, the study explores how the theories of cultural competence and colorblindness filter through the lenses of Black female social workers in a practical setting. This study can be fundamental for future research that seeks to understand the Black women's perspectives on cultural competence and colorblindness. In this study, thirteen Black female licensed social workers who work in the American South and have been employed for 2 years or more at a social work agency were interviewed. From this study, it was evident that the interviewees had a unique perspective toward the concept of colorblindness. Essentially, all of the participants highlighted that they did employ cultural competency while working with their clients. Generally, the Black social workers in this study felt that colorblindness was not a useful tool for fighting racial discrimination or for dealing with diverse individuals with a variety of needs. The study participants felt that discrimination from clients and other professions was toxic, even when they were only attempting to help. However, all of the interviewees made a commitment to the social work profession, and they have endured the pain of racism and discrimination. Finally, the study recommended and reiterated the significance of cultural competency in dealing with clients.

*Keywords:* colorblindness, cultural competency, racial prejudice, discrimination, oppression, social worker, Black Feminist Thought.

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Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.  
James 1:2-4

Nothing but the Grace and Mercy of God made this happen. Wow, I cannot believe 7 years ago I walked into Dr. Natalie Adams office and said, I want to take a class because I am tired of workshops. I need something to challenge me, little did I know what I was asking for would turn into this degree. In life sometimes we have conditional status we just have to figure out how to overcome the condition and make the status be whatever we achieve for it to become. I was admitted into the BSW program conditional, MSW program conditional and Ph.D. program conditional. This is why I could not tell anyone I was in the program because each day, I wanted to see if I could continue. I was so afraid of people asking how I was doing and then fail and have to face people, so I just hid my journey until 2 years ago. However, with hard work, professors who believed when I could not see the words on paper speaking to me and a loving and supportive soon to be husband, Paul, five children, Toni, Brittany, Paul Jr., Chelsie and the baby Jazmine always giving me laughs I could not have made it. My mother, Carole and my sister, Rae and brother John when I got the end and said I can't write anymore I want make it, they said no you can and you will. They sent so much love and it gave me the burst of energy that I needed. Then I asked my prayer angels to help me because I couldn't see the vision any more. Alisha, Alicia, Seimone, Sontonia, my other sisters, thank you for years of love and really

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### **Introduction**

The genesis of this research project is firmly situated within my work as a social worker, now turned administrator, of a non-profit organization that assists individuals and families with meeting their basic needs. The majority of our clients are African American females who are heads of their households. As a social worker, I aim to provide the best service possible while always treating my clients with the utmost respect. This has forced me to question my own racial biases, assumptions, and presumptions, and reflect on the professional training I have received. Throughout the years, I have found myself sometimes following a colorblind approach while, at other times, using the approaches taught in my undergraduate and graduate training concerning cultural competence.

Recently, I had the opportunity to discuss these two different approaches with a group of colleagues. In 2016, I was selected to present at a social work conference on the topic of race. The panel was entitled “The Imitation of Life: Race.” I wanted to discuss how colorblindness and cultural competence are viewed in the field of social work. Much to my surprise, 25 professionals attended my one-hour workshop. I began with clips from the 1959 movie, “*The Imitation of Life*,” in which John Stahl characterized four strong women, two White and two Black. Annie was a strong Black woman who understood motherhood, culture, and race. Sarah Jane, Annie’s daughter, could have passed for a White woman, even though she was Black and, as a result, she had obvious conflicts with her racial identity.

The movie links the work of Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought*, and the field of social work by discussing the complexity of race, ethnicity, and culture. Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1990) discusses how aspects of race, gender, and class affect Black women and how existing stereotypes trap them. The life of Lora is depicted as one of a privileged White woman whose social and class status continue to rise while the status of her friend and employee, Annie, is oppressive. Collins addressed Black women's attempts to understand themselves by creating self-awareness, evident in Annie's effort to help Sarah Jane accept her self-identity while facing racial discrimination.

This panel allowed me to discuss the definitions of colorblindness and cultural competence using *The Imitation of Life* as the conversation starter. I explained to the participants that I was working on a research paper that would focus on the perspectives of Black female licensed social workers. The participants were Black and White, and comprised of five men and 20 women. A number of questions were posed concerning how race played a role in serving their clients. Many of the responses, such as, "I do not see color, I just see my clients," seemed to indicate that their training in cultural competence had not greatly influenced their work as practitioners.

The next week, I posed a similar question to a group of social work students who were working at the non-profit I direct. Several Black females were quick to reply, "We should always practice cultural competence." They stated that, "Colorblindness is just the wrong way to view clients," and that the course they were currently taking stressed cultural competence. The students had clearly been taught the value of cultural competence, but would they take those lessons into their work in the field? The responses I received from practicing social workers at the conference seemed to indicate that there may be a disjuncture between training and practice.

This research seeks to examine that point further. This study asked, “How do Black female social workers perceive their clients’ racial identities and how do these perceptions impact their professional practice?”

### **Background of the Problem**

Social workers’ good intentions do not immunize them against prejudices; therefore, it is important to examine and understand how they make meaning of, negotiate, and use their racialized identities and beliefs about race to inform their practices. Erroneously, people of color are thought to be insusceptible to prejudices and racial or ethnic biases, yet we all suffer from internalized racism regardless of our racial backgrounds. Studies often focus on how White practitioners interact with clients of color; however, it is equally important to examine how social workers of color perceive their own identities and the identities of their clients in practice settings. This is especially important because these individuals are often presumed to be culturally competent simply because they are not from the dominant group.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is a national organization that offers a code of ethics and standard requirements for its members. The NASW code of conduct acts as a guide to its members; therefore, it is expected that all social workers conduct themselves with the utmost professionalism when carrying out their duties. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) sets educational standards and competencies as a guide for educational institutions. The professional ethics of social work necessitate that social workers address social injustice and discrimination. Specifically, they are obligated to work vigorously

toward ending ethnic and racial discrimination to advance social justice. For social workers to promote social justice and challenge discrimination, they must be aware of the culturally diverse environments in which they practice. Although social workers are trained to promote social justice and challenge discrimination, they can hold implicit biases; more specifically, they can harbor prejudices and misperceptions that could greatly affect their practice. It is imperative that social workers remain vigilant about the deep-seated and often unintentional stereotypes and prejudices that they might subconsciously harbor.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study explored how Black female social workers in the American South perceive their clients' racial identities and how these perceptions impact their professional practice. I investigated whether these social workers applied cultural competence and/or colorblindness in their professional practice. Using Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Practice* (1990) as the theoretical framework, I explored how the theories of cultural competence and colorblindness filter through the lenses of Black female social workers in a practical setting.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study can be foundational for future research that seeks to understand Black women's perspectives as related to cultural competence and colorblindness. Specifically, it can contribute knowledge to the field of social work regarding how its practitioners merge theory and practice when serving their clients of diverse racial backgrounds.

## **Methodology**

Qualitative data helps researchers understand existing patterns, motives, and trends within a comprehensive study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2016). I employed qualitative methods to answer my research question. Additionally, qualitative research is well-suited for studying phenomena because it derives data from multiple sources rather than from one single source (Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Merriam, 2009).

### **Research design**

In this study, I utilized phenomenology as the research design. Phenomenology aims to acquire a deeper understanding of nature or people's personal lives (Vagle, 2014).

### **Data and analysis**

In this study, I purposefully selected thirteen Black female licensed social workers who work in the American South and have been employed for two years or more at a social work agency. I collected two types of data, primary and secondary (Yin, 2014, 2016). Primary data was derived from interviews, and secondary data originated from scholarly journal articles and books. For the primary data, I conducted oral interviews with the participants, using thematic analysis to review and organize the data.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

This brief concluding explanation delineates the contents of the remaining chapters in the dissertation. Chapter 1 provides an outline of how this research is set up in the following chapters. The purpose of the study was to explore how Black female social workers in the

American South perceive their clients' racial identities and how such perceptions affect their social work practice. Chapter 2 is a literature review, which includes an examination of *Black Feminist Thought* and other works by Patricia Hill Collins. An expanded literature review also discusses cultural competencies and colorblindness and how each is vital to social work practitioners. The literature review investigates whether these social workers apply the theory of cultural competence and colorblindness in their daily practices with clientele. The study is framed within the tenets of Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought*. In Chapter 3, the research methodology and data analysis are provided. Chapter 4 presents portraits of the Black women in the study. Chapter 5 describes the analysis generated from the research study. Chapter 6 includes the conclusion and recommendations.

## **Conclusion**

In social work, Black women should ensure that they carry out their duties without any form of discrimination. Gender, cultural, and racial discrimination always deter people from offering the utmost in their profession. The issues of race and gender should not come into question when social workers perform their duties. Through this study, I attempted to understand how Black female social workers view the theories of colorblindness and cultural competencies. Social work is meant to help people first, then the community, and ultimately the country. Examining these experiences furthers the understanding of how Black female social workers factor colorblindness and cultural competencies into their perspectives.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore how Black female social workers in the American South perceive their clients' racial identities and how such perceptions impact their social work practice. I have investigated if and how the participants apply the theory of cultural competence and colorblindness in their daily practices with clientele. The study was framed within the tenets of Patricia Hill Collins's Black Feminist Theory (1990). The research was guided by one primary question: How do the theories of cultural competence and colorblindness filter through the lenses of Black female social workers in a practical setting?

In this chapter, I begin with a brief contextual history of social work, then address the theories of colorblindness and cultural competency. Further, I explain Black Feminist Thought, and conclude with discussing colorblindness in social work theory and practice.

### **A Brief Contextual History of Social Work**

Social work as an academic discipline was born in the mid-1800s. The appearance of a whole range of social problems was threatening the stability of the country. In 1877, the American Charity Organization Societies (COS) was founded to support the poorest populations on a more individual basis (Cox, Tice & Long, 2016; Reisch & Gambrill, 2007; Tannenbaum & Reisch, 2001). Despite all the efforts of the COS, social work was not perceived as a profession for a long time, due to the lack of a theoretical basis and methodological approaches. In 1915, during a special national conference entitled "Is Social Work a Profession," Abraham Flexner

authoritatively stated that the social work profession did not exist (Tannenbaum & Reisch, 2001). Nevertheless, just a few decades later, both academic and public attitudes toward social work changed. The popularity of the profession grew with the Second World War. During that period, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) was created, and in 1955, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) was created (Cox et al., 2016; Reisch & Gambrill, 2007; Tannenbaum & Reisch, 2001). The CSWE was responsible for accrediting social work education in the country while the NASW provided guidance, updated information, current research and advocacy among many other resources to its registered members and individuals practicing social work (Cox, Tice, & Long, 2016; Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney & Gottfried, 2013; Reisch & Gambrill, 2007).

Today, both organizations work collaboratively. As for the theoretical perspectives that were prevalent in the 1950s, social work practitioners focused mainly on clients' needs in light of the melting pot theory. According to Kohli, Huber, and Faul (2010), the melting pot theory attempts to describe how immigrants assimilated into American culture. It is a metaphor that illustrates how different metallic materials melt to form one and how diverse people of various cultures, religions, ethnicities, and backgrounds in America melt to become part of one large culture.

In the 1960s, a significant social movement called the "War on Poverty" enhanced the role of social work practitioners who were involved in a massive implementation of various social programs, including Job Corps, the Neighborhood Youth Corps, Head Start, and the Office of Economic Opportunity (Reisch & Gambrill, 2007; Tannenbaum & Reisch, 2001). At that time, social work practitioners started to take into account the sociocultural backgrounds of clients based on the "awareness of cultural contexts" (Kohli et al., 2010). In the 1970s, social



work was subject to considerable changes, including multicultural and gender awareness and the emergence of private practice. In the 1980s, President Reagan froze the majority of public social programs; therefore, social workers were required to rely on private sources. Not only did the existing programs reduce their scale and capacities due to the lack of funding, but also the emergence of new social initiatives was dramatically hindered (Cox, Tice & Long, 2016; Reisch & Gambrill, 2007). As a result of social programs' scarcity, more than 36 million people from vulnerable social categories, such as adolescents, young families, and persons of color, were considered poor by the early 1990s (Tannenbaum & Reisch, 2001). Thus, despite the overall national prosperity, the interests of the socially insecure population were largely ignored. Increasing poverty rates were accompanied by new and more complex social problems such as the drug abuse epidemic, increase of HIV/AIDS cases, domestic violence, and homelessness (Cox, et al., 2016; Reisch & Gambrill, 2007; Tannenbaum & Reisch, 2001), which posed greater challenges for social workers.

Instead of spotlighting the most vulnerable populations and discriminated groups, the social workers of the 1980s and 1990s placed the focus on respecting human differences (Cox, Tice & Long, 2016; Kohli et al., 2010; Reisch & Gambrill, 2007). Practically, it meant finding individual approaches for every citizen in need. Additional social identities such as sexual orientation and physical abilities/disabilities or cognitive development were taken into account. Although the emphasis on mutual respect led to increased tolerance, this movement was soon criticized for being too vague to provide real help. Nevertheless, it gave social workers some basic understanding about various diversity issues (Cox, et al., 2016; Kohli et al., 2010; Reisch & Gambrill, 2007). Developing cultural competence broadened the professional horizons and provided deeper insights into the above-mentioned complex social problems arising at the time.

Finally, during the 1990s, a budgetary deficit forced the government to rely on the private sector in the implementation of social programs. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), a social welfare reform initiative often referred to as “Welfare-to Work”, obliged public welfare departments to undertake restructuring measures and placed some “time limits and conditions on the receipt of cash assistance” (Tannenbaum & Reisch, 2001). These administrative changes created significant social service gaps. Since over 43 million of the U.S. population desperately lacked coverage, the nonprofit social organizations faced the enormous pressure of taking responsibility for their well-being (Tannenbaum & Reisch, 2001). Despite all the difficulties with funding their initiatives and responding to the rapidly changing economic situation, social organizations managed to thrive. The social care framework continued to serve the public needs at the turn of the new millennium. The profession continues to develop in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, raising public awareness about social issues. Social work organizations constantly expand their approaches to promote greater involvement and increase research activities. The sphere also upgrades its theoretical basis by incorporating newly emerging social realities and concepts.

The core value of modern social care is social justice, which presupposes equal support and respect for any individual. The ethnocultural framework developed in early 2000 promotes a humanistic approach to service provision (Cox, et al., 2016; Kohli et al., 2010). It encourages social workers to rid themselves of cultural stereotypes and embrace diversity. Instead of treating sensitive issues as “Black or White,” the students learn to be morally active and consider all cultural aspects of the human identity. Social practitioners now concentrate on people’s diversities, which should be respected in any form (Kohli et al., 2010). Simultaneously, the

profession has demonstrated colorblindness, which purports to treat people as individuals with no regard to their skin color.

## **Colorblindness**

In 1963, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous “I Have a Dream Speech” in which he told his audience:

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judge by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream . . . I have a dream that one day in Alabama with its vicious racist, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, one day right there in Alabama little Black boys and Black girls will be able to join hand with little White boys and White girls as sisters and brothers. (King, 1999).

Martin Luther King, Jr. gave this speech during a time when violence and brutality in the Black community were rampant. In his famous speech, he outlined a vision for the country in which the issues of discrimination, racism, and ongoing prejudices in society would no longer be based on skin color, as they had been for so many long and toilsome years. The speech seemed to propagate a colorblind ideology. The speech also contained elements of cultural competence in that Dr. King dreamed of a time when all races and people of all religions would be able to work together to attain a common goal. While his speech was undergirded by the importance of being culturally competent, the speech is best remembered as advocating for a colorblind approach to eliminating racism.

For King and many other civil rights activists of that time, colorblindness meant that Black men and women in society would no longer be judged by the color of their skin in any way; this notion presupposes that we are blind to color. "Colorblindness discourse may offer symbolic or expressive testimony of this society's desire to achieve neutrality in matters of race relations" (Siegel, 2000, p. 8). Colorblindness presumes that race and racial identification based

on the outward color of one's skin are inconsequential if society is truly governed by laws of equality.

Neville, Gallardo & Sue (2016) and Plaut, Thomas, & Goren (2009) stated that colorblindness is a sociological term defined as overlooking racial characteristics when interacting with a person or when selecting someone to participate in a certain activity or receive a service. In theory, colorblind practices do not use racial profiling or data and do not make distinctions, categorizations, or classifications based on race. A good example of utilizing colorblindness in administrative decisions is perhaps when a school processes admissions decisions without consideration of applicants' racial identification.

Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2009) identified four core frames that guide colorblind ideology: cultural racism, minimization of racism, naturalization, and abstract liberalism. Cultural racism refers to the reliance upon culturally-based arguments to explain the position of minorities in society (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). Thus, people often attribute discrimination or poverty faced by a certain social category to their laziness, inappropriate values, or lack of effort. This strategy is also known as "blaming the victim" for their impediments. Naturalization, on the other hand, refers to the occurrence when Whites are allowed to explain racial phenomena by indicating that it is a "natural" occurrence. Abstract liberalism is the usage of economic and political liberalism to explain matters related to racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). Advocates of colorblind practices argue that treating people "equally" naturally leads to an equal society and consequently, race, privilege, and racism do not exert the power they once did (Apfelbaum, Norton, & Sommers, 2008; Neville, Gallardo & Sue, 2016).

As much as colorblindness seems like the commonsensical answer to racial discrimination, most scholars have refuted this simple solution. Scholars claim that colorblindness is the new form of racism, replacing the racism of Jim Crow with a new racism-lite (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). Bonilla-Silva defines racism-lite as the ideological armor for maintenance of the racial order which otherizes softly these people are human, too, (2009, p. 3). Many of the afflictions that people of color still face in America can be attributed to colorblindness. The major idea behind this new racial ideology is that contemporary racial inequality is a result of non-racial dynamics. Colorblind racism supporters rationalize minorities contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and Blacks' imputed cultural limitations" (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, p. 2). This ideology allows Whites to ignore the problems of the Black community under the pretense that Whites no longer enjoy racial privileges (Cose, 1997; Holoien & Shelton, 2011; Wise, 2010). For instance, colorblind Whites may state that Blacks receive lower wages because they do not work hard enough. Housing problems and neighborhoods segregation are explained as natural grouping tendencies. Even the racial prejudice existing in police profiles and criminal prosecution is considered fair. However, in reality, those inequality tendencies are achieved by covert practices and behaviors. For example, residential segregation is supported by not showing all the available units, offering higher rents or prices to minority applicants among others (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, p. 3). In economic spheres, people of color are offered jobs with limited career growth or lower remuneration levels. Despite civil rights progress, racial gerrymandering prevents minorities from actually influencing the electoral outcome with their votes. Therefore, though colorblind policy arguments may seem logical, the consequences prove otherwise.

Researchers Thompson (1998), Manning, Hartmann, and Gerteis (2015), and Choi (2008) have conducted studies using Black feminist theory to critique the issue of colorblindness. Thompson (1998) contended that theories of caring in both psychology and education “failed to deal with the Whiteness of their cultural and political perceptions, but they affect colorblindness as well” (p. 522). Thompson noted that many theories on social care had been formulated by White theorists. Those theorists drew their conclusions from their “own distinctive cultural and class assumptions” and “information from largely White, middle- and upper-middle class respondents” (Thompson, 1998, p. 531). Due to colorblindness, they have often failed to include the cultural and political perceptions inherent in the Black community that differ dramatically from White middle-class traditions that describe ideal caring principles as retreating from society to the space of innocence found at home. Black caregivers cannot escape the harsh realities of the racist world and must teach their children to survive within this challenging environment. Thompson (1998) added that the universal ethics of care used in education had been criticized for failing to address cultural and political experiences of people of color and Black Feminist Thought. To avoid such limitations, she wrote that philosophers and educators should reconsider their ideas of “innocence” based on the colorblind assumption that race plays no part in the theoretic framework for caring and education.

Manning, Hatmann, and Gerteis (2015) theorized that people have recently developed concepts related to colorblindness to describe White Americans’ attitudes toward African American individuals in the post-civil rights era. In their study, Manning et al. (2015) found that both White Americans and African Americans manifest elements of colorblindness in some contexts. For instance, both White and Black respondents adapted the ideas of abstract liberalism, which is the core concept of colorblindness. It means both races believe in equal

opportunities for individuals regardless of ethnicity. The researchers also discovered that White Americans are less aware of the systemic extent of racial inequality than African Americans. Further, the researchers found that Blacks have a higher probability of rejecting some elements of colorblindness than Whites.

Apelbaum, Sommers, and Norton (2008) reported that utilizing colorblindness as an ideology to eradicate racism in the United States can have the opposite effect than originally intended. They suggest that colorblindness can harm minority groups by branding everyone, regardless of color, as equal when it is evident that there are inequities and differences among people. The researchers reviewed colorblindness in a standard social interaction setting and found that colorblindness is strategically used in most social interactions. For instance, they noted that there is a difference between seeing race and being racist. Although the first seems like a lesser evil in comparison to the latter, the researchers indicated that they could both manifest as racial discrimination. For instance, when one claims to see race, they may engage in practices that reproduce racism, such as with school and neighborhood segregation. A racist, on the other hand, will practice outright racism by practicing discrimination or exhibiting racially abusive behavior.

According to Van Cleve and Mayes (2015), colorblindness denies people justice in the criminal justice system. When people claim that they do not see race, they ignore the racism issue and, therefore are unable to solve it in society. People can easily be denied justice when others may claim that issues at hand are not meant to target particular races, and yet the issues seem to fall squarely on a particular race. Therefore, it is important to review colorblind ideology so that it can have the intended meaning and purpose in criminal justice. At present, as Chao (2013) discovered, multicultural awareness is initially lower in Whites, whereby their level of

colorblindness potentially distorts their attitude and judgments regarding people of color.

Whereas the theoretical implications of colorblindness should promote social equality, the actual interactions are signifying a different outcome altogether. Colorblindness is seen as a solution to racism, but it prevents people from understanding that multicultural and ethnic differences influence their opinions of other ethnic groups.

Chao (2013) noted that there is a need to replace colorblindness with a more racially inclusive ideology that does not put people's needs under one colorblind umbrella but instead serves to address all individual needs, irrespective of their racial backgrounds. Viewing people through a lens of colorblindness does not negate racism as commonly thought. On the contrary, it provides more room for institutionalized racism under which people of color suffer the most. Colorblindness ignores the fact that racism is still rampant in society and that racial minorities bear the brunt. By choosing to ignore color, institutions can more easily employ oppressive practices by using colorblindness as a decoy. Holoien and Shelton (2011) incorrectly contended that in a society that practices colorblindness, racial discrimination could end if all individuals are treated fairly and equally without considerations of their ethnicities or races. It can be said that King supported this argument when he stated that he hoped that his four children would be judged based on their capabilities rather than the color of their skin (King, 1999).

As an ideological concept, colorblindness primarily focuses on what all people share and not their differences; this is perhaps its ultimate appeal. Those who staunchly critique colorblindness as an ideological approach argue that colorblindness neglects the racialized experiences of people of color by depicting them as inconsequential (Atwater, 2007). Cultural competence, on the other hand, falls at the polar end of the colorblind spectrum by centering cultural differences as a strategy to foster equity and justice in society.



## **Cultural Competence**

According to Lum (2005, p. 6), cultural competency is the process by which people and organizations respond in an effective and respectful manner to humans regardless of their ethnicity, language, race, culture, class, and gender, among other factors, in ways that recognize, value, preserve, and affirm their rights. It is also defined as the efforts and actions that individuals take to develop an understanding of others and also facilitate their ability to embrace different cultural viewpoints with respect. Lum (2011) and Sue et al. (2016) view cultural competence as a vital component that allows an organization and its members to work and live harmoniously in a multicultural environment. They also recognize the need for unison of behaviors, attitudes, practices, and policies in that environment.

Cultural competence aims at creating equal opportunities for everyone and advancing social justice. Building connections with people and understanding their expectations, attitudes, and cultural norms are fundamental to cultural competence. Cultural competence positively influences fairness of judgments, mutual trust, social justice within a group and respect for diversity, which fosters healthy relationships between community members (Lum, 2011; Sue et al., 2016). Unlike colorblindness, cultural competence recognizes the existence of cultural differences as a vehicle to encourage ways of communicating and interacting with members of other cultures instead of turning a blind eye to such differences.

The term “cultural competence” lacks clarity due to the complexity and interpretation of the two words that comprise it: cultural and competence. The term “cultural” relates to customs, ideas, beliefs, and behavior in a community, while “competence” relates to the ability to do something efficiently and successfully. It is difficult to gauge cultural competence given the

number, diversity, and dynamism of individual cultures. The implication is that this popular term is too general to have concrete meaning (Hollinsworth, 2013).

Cultural competence means different things to different people in different fields. It is often equated to other concepts such as cultural sensitivity or awareness, social safety, or cross-cultural communication, and cultural proficiency (Hollinsworth, 2013). The term cultural competence was incorporated within sociological terminology in the 1970s and developed further throughout the 1980s (Hollinsworth, 2013). In the early 1980s, due to the new social directions created by the Civil Rights Movement, local governments included cultural competence objectives within their requirements for service initiatives. The organizations were supposed to integrate awareness of ethnic, gender and social class diversities into their frameworks. Federal mandates around education, health, and social justice mandated states to include cultural competence measures or miss out on federal funding (Lum, 2005, 2016).

Currently, programs in social work, sociology, medicine, nursing, and the like commonly express and support cultural competence in their mission statements (Lum, 2011; Sue et al., 2016). However, the major critique of the use of cultural competence in social work refers to "cultural homogenization," which means that the presentation of identities, such as ethnicities, cultures, religions, are often viewed narrowly. Such a perception transmits generic representations of many different social groups that lead to cultural racism or denying differences within one social group (Hollinsworth, 2013). Hollinsworth (2013) suggested replacing cultural competence with autobiographical investigations. Those presuppose critical listening to the clients' life descriptions. They are used to identify social and cultural aspects of their lives that are rendered most important. This knowledge facilitates the exploration of complex interactions and correlations between intersectional identities. Meanwhile, although

scholars disagree on the definition of the term “cultural competence” and its use, it persists in social work practice and theory today. Because of its traditional and historical use in the profession of social work and its reflection in the CSWE’s and NASW’s documents, some scholars (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Colvin-Burque, Zugazaga & Davis-Maye, 2007; Hollinsworth, 2013; Kohi et al., 2010; Sue et al. 2016) note that the phrase continues to be used because of the absence of any other term that can be viewed as an appropriate substitute.

The concept of cultural competence is interpreted through, or in conjunction with, other terms, particularly diversity, discrimination, oppression, and human rights. Diversity is undoubtedly the major concept used by authors when defining cultural competence (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Colvin-Burque et al., 2007; Kohi et al., 2010). Individuals have a variety of social identities that are intricately connected with each other, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation; the various factors involved in multiple identities working together in dynamic ways is also referred to as intersectionality (Collins, 1990; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Hollinsworth, 2013; Kohi et al., 2010).

Another term associated with cultural competence is multiculturalism, which is mainly described or explained in literature as cultural pluralism, colorblindness, and other terms that typically fall under the multicultural umbrella (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Colvin-Burque et al., 2007; Hollinsworth, 2013; Kohi et al., 2010). Some scholars have criticized the approach to multiculturalism (Sue et al., 2016). They object to multiculturalism because it is most often associated with colorblindness, which, as discussed, is ineffective in challenging racism. According to Lum (2011), cultural competence refers to the efforts and actions of an individual that are aimed at establishing an understanding with others. The ultimate goal of cultural competence is to develop the skills and to embrace different cultural perspectives with respect.

Understanding the expectations, attitudes, and cultural norms of others is fundamental in building connections with one another. When people understand the cultural practices, attitudes, and expectations of others, they are most likely to relate well, hence fostering better relationships. In the following section, the researcher will provide an overview of the study's theoretical framework, Black Feminist Thought.

### **Black Feminist Thought**

Black Feminist Thought is a viewpoint ideology that draws from varied life experiences that not only evaluates relationships of people based on the principles of equality, but also considers the interconnections that exist between social identities such as gender, sexuality, race, class, age, and disability as they impact the community, family, and individual (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Christian, 2010; Collins, 2001a, 2000b, 1990; Harris, 2007; Nash, 2013; Norris, 2012). Collins (1990) noted that the goal of Black Feminist Thought is to generate knowledge that contributes to change, empowerment, and emancipation. Black Feminist Thought focuses on developing and showcasing the rich and often ignored knowledge of Black women by drawing attention to the works generated by Black women in the academy (Banks-Wallace, 2000).

Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith (1982) and Anderson (2001) noted that the voices of Black women were missing from the discussion of gender and race. Scholars (Anderson, 2001; Harris, 2007; Taylor, 1998) observed that Black feminism spoke to Black women's theoretical invisibility in contrast to primarily White female-centered feminist analysis. As other scholars noted (Collins, 2001b; Swigonski, 1993; Taylor, 1998), a Black feminist perspective centers on and values the experiences of Black American women and empowers them with the right to define their objectives and interpret their realities. The perspective not only centers on Black

American women but also Black women all over the world. Also, Black Feminist Thought accounts for how ideas like gender, class, and race blend and interconnect to materially impact Black American lives (Collins, 2000a, 1998b; Nash, 2013, Norris, 2012).

Few (2007) has examined the challenges and advantages of utilizing Black feminist theory to study the lives of Black women both as separate individuals and through the prism of family studies. The latter refers to interdisciplinary research programs dedicated to various marriage and family issues aimed at strengthening the marriage concept and improving the children's well-being. In her work, the author noted that many researchers in interdisciplinary family studies find that the process of understanding race, culture and ethnicity is risky and dangerous; this applies in particular for the Black family scholars (Few, 2007). Nevertheless, the scholars who investigated marriage and family issues within Black communities have followed the path of their colleagues, applying feminist theoretical frameworks in family studies who have trail-blazed the path of understanding the experiences of women and the family (Few, 2007).

Few (2007) has recognized that the use of Black feminist theory in family studies can help to eliminate marginalization by centering the experience of Black women. Black feminist theory also serves to supplement the other family theories such as ecological and symbolic interactionism theory used with experiential data. This use of Black feminist theory distinguishes itself from those provided by the colorblind majority researchers (Few, 2007). For instance, for symbolic interactionists, "Society is a linguistic or symbolic construct arising out of meaningful social processes." (Few, 2007, p. 459). This means that social identities, roles, and privileges arise from people's contextual interpretations, rather than events. The unique experiences of Black women illustrate how gendered family roles in marginalized groups differ from those in White families due to their discrimination from the wider community. Ecological

theory explains individual development via interaction among the individuals, their immediate family or inclusive community and the general societal landscape (Few, 2007, p. 460).

Combining it with Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and its account of segregation practices allows family scholars to better estimate the level of external/internal community influence. Moreover, the theory provides perspective on how to conduct interventions that are culturally sensitive.

Conversely, Black Feminist Theory alone cannot predict generalized family relationship outcomes and faces difficulty in operationalizing the feministic concepts empirically (Few, 2007).

Coined by Patricia Hill-Collins in 1990, the aim of Black Feminist Thought was to locate the distinct gendered and racial experiences of Black women as the focus for social theorizing. Black women bump up against many walls of discrimination in their lives, including racism, sexism, and classism. These multiple forms of discrimination have hindered the development of African American women economically, academically, and politically. Black Feminist Thought advocates for their liberation from these oppressions. As such, it shares many similarities with other critical theories (e.g., feminism, critical legal studies, and critical race studies) in that it seeks to challenge racial and gendered discrimination in society.

The ideas of equality for African American women espoused by Womanism, Africana Womanism, Black Feminist Thought, and Critical Race Theory have contributed greatly to the fight for the acknowledgment of Black women as human beings. This is a clear indicator that the journey to equality has not been a walk in the park. Hill-Collins (1990) in her Black Feminist Thought states:

Black Feminist Thought, U.S. Black women's critical social theory, reflects similar power relationships. For African American women, critical social theory encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing U.S. Black women as a collectivity. The need for such thought

arises because African American women as a group remain oppressed within a U.S. context characterized by injustice. This neither means that all African American women within that group are oppressed in the same way, nor that some U.S. Black women do not oppress others. Black Feminist Thought's identity as a "critical" social theory lies in its commitment to justice, both for U.S. Black women as a collectivity and for that of other similarly oppressed groups. (p. 9)

Patricia Hill-Collins (1990), Alice Walker (1974), Audrey Lorde (1984) and Clenora Hudson-Weems (2006), all early writers in the Black Feminist Thought movement, expanded on the notion of Black womanhood in our society.

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) represents the standpoint that Black women live unique lives. Their "experiences with multiple oppressions result in needs, expectations, ideologies, and problems that are different from those of Black men and White women" (Few, 2010, p. 304). Their unique position is predetermined by two socially discriminated identity factors: race and identity. Therefore, the historical experiences of "enslavement, anti-lynching movements, segregation, Civil Rights and Black Power movements, sexual politics, capitalism, and patriarchy" (Few, 2010, p. 304) have had an impact on Black women's social standing. Collins (2000b) posits that Black women endure economic, social and political disparities due to their race and gender. BFT allows Black women to theorize their own lives from this unique stance or standpoint based on both commonalities and differences.

In her book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), Patricia Collins responded to the fact that many African American women did not consider themselves feminists because their experiences have been summarily excluded in most feminist theorizing. Collins states that BFT is a Black female standpoint that necessitates a Black woman-centered analysis. As such, BFT is first and foremost a Black woman's movement defined by, shaped by, and enacted by women of color fighting for their equality and liberation (Bryson & Lawrence-Webb, 2000; Collins, 2015). In addition to defending their

positions as women in their activist movements, they should also defend their positions as Black people. Even with these disadvantages, Black women have proven powerful and successful in leading intellectual, political, social, sexual, spiritual, and economic movements.

Black Feminist Thought is based on the premise that all Black feminists share the view of eradicating oppression and has changed from mainstream feminism in the seventies as it has evolved historically through individual and group activism in the social and political sectors (Few, 2010; Wilder, Jones, & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013). The movement first started to address the equity of Black women but has since changed to a provocative critique of concepts that represented mainstream feminism.

African American women have faced oppression in American society since its inception, prompting the development of various movements to advocate for their rights. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) traces the birth of BFT to the early 1970s when in 1973, the Black feminist crusade rose to prominence, inspired in part by the Black Liberation and Women's Rights movements. Black women who were associated with both the women's rights movement and the Black liberation movement found themselves subjected to racial and sexual bias within these movements (Collins 1990). Therefore, because Black women's intersectional identities were ignored, they were invisible, and their existence and needs were never taken into consideration. According to Collins (2000b, 2001), Black men failed to support Black women by denouncing the oppression they faced; this was because they had a personal interest in controlling Black women sexually. It was out of these frustrations that the Black Feminist Organization in New York was born in 1973. This group aimed to devise a mechanism for coping with the rampant oppression and sexual abuses faced by the later movements.



Black Feminist Thought empowers Black women to fight the prevalent social injustices sustained through intersecting oppressions (Collins, 2000a; Collins & Bilge, 2016). Black Feminist Thought is based on the notion that Black women can become theorists as producers of their knowledge. An increasing number of African American women intellectuals have taken on the task of investigating the multiple dimensions of African American women's standpoints as well as different expressions of common themes. Black women scholars are central to Black Feminist Thought because they provide critical insights into the condition of Black women's oppression (Carbado, 1999; Collins 1998a; Collins & Bilge, 2016). Black Feminist Thought provides a unique and universal standpoint or vision around the experiences of Black womanhood.

The works of Collins explore two concepts that are embedded throughout Black Feminist Thought: intersectionality and interest convergence theory. Introduced by Derrick Bell, interest convergence occurs when “issues cannot be understood without the same consideration of the decision's value to Whites” (Bell, 1980, p. 524). This means that any progress in racism elimination is possible only if it does not infringe on White supremacy. In other words, Whites have no interest in solving the problem of racism unless it serves their socio-economic and cultural needs (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dubey, 1994). Collins (1990), echoing the sentiments of Derick Bell, indicates that Whites will offer their support of racial justice in instances where they tend to benefit. Therefore, the racism discourse is better understood through considering intersectionality of ethnic, socio-economic and cultural factors. Collins (1990) explains why the term intersectionality is vital in Black Feminist Thought:

Black Feminist Thought fosters a fundamental paradigmatic shift in how we think about oppression. By embracing a paradigm of race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression, Black Feminist Thought reconceptualizes the social relations of domination and resistance. Thus, in considering intersectionality, Black Feminist

Thought makes it clear that Black women do not have the luxury of focusing on issues of gender oppression, in comparison to their White counterparts. Instead, they must be equally, or more so, vigilant on issues of race, class, sexuality, etc. that are tied to separate means of oppression and discrimination. (p.15)

Intersectionality refers to intersecting oppressions such as gender and race and stresses that identity cannot be reduced to one fundamental form.

### **The vital tenets of Black Feminist Thought**

Black Feminist Thought is rooted in the historical context of enslavement, civil rights, anti-lynching, the Black power movements, capitalism, sexual politics and patriarchy (Few, 2010; Nash, 2013; Rousseau, 2013). The purpose of these tenets is to foster Black women empowerment and to build their capacities to resist inhumane practices. The primary tenets of BFT are:

#### 1) Black women's standpoint

Collins contends that as a result of the unique position Black women hold within the traversing ladders of gender, class, and race, they possess an "inimitable angle of vision of the world" (Collins, 2000b). The Black women's standpoint consists of the ideas and experiences that Black women share, which provides a unique understanding of oneself, the community and the entire society, and the theories that try to demystify these experiences. Found deep within their everyday experiences and practices, the Black women's standpoint is characterized by an understanding of the intersectional oppression and the struggle against such injustices and oppression. This common experience means that some themes would be prominent in their views and ideas such as their common struggle against male superiority and White supremacy (Bryson & Lawrence-Webb, 2000; Collins, 1990).

#### 2) Uniqueness of Black women's ideologies

Black women have unique ideologies on how to interpret and address their common struggles. Their experiences provide them insight on how to identify, navigate and how to best solve their issues (Collins, 1990, 2000b; Collins & Bilge, 2016).

### 3) Consciousness as a set of individual reflections on activism towards African American lives

Black women experience the world differently from non-Black women. As a result of these experiences, Black women possess a distinct Black feminist consciousness shaped by their peculiar social realities (Collins, 1990, 2000b; Collins & Bilge, 2016). While being female and Black exposes Black American women to common experiences, it does not mean that all Black women will understand or develop this consciousness.

### 4) Stereotypical images of Black women

Since the slavery era, Black women have been viewed as the “bad promiscuous Black woman” and the “mammy” (Collins, 1990). This dominant ideology through this period resulted in the creation of stereotypical images of Black women that served to maintain their subordination. Since Black women were critical in the continuation of slavery, the dominant ideology allowed no alternative views either on their social roles or sexual and moral identities. The portrayal of stereotypical images of women exacerbates the oppression and alienation of women (Collins, 2000b, 1998a, 1990).

Black Feminist Thought cultivates the development of Black feminist consciousness and also stimulates its accompanying activism towards the liberation of the African American women and strives to eliminate the negative stereotypes, labels, and perceptions imposed upon the Black woman (Collins, 1990, 1998a, 2012; Collins & Bilge, 2016). Intellectual activism has been vital to the growth of BFT, leading to the reclamation of Black feminist intellectual

traditions and giving the intellectual works of African American women their proper place. Such intellectual activism has motivated Black women to initiate ideas and to develop peer relationships in the community known as the Black Sisterhood, based in the U.S. (Collins & Bilge, 2016). As a result of Black feminist intellectual traditions, the major components of BFT were specified by scholars.

One of the key concepts in understanding the BFT is the Matrix of Domination (Collins, 1990). It explains the manner in which oppression is structurally organized and embedded. The Matrix of Domination involves various oppressive factors such as race and gender. Another major component of BFT is self-definition, the capability of a woman to be conscious of her reality. Collins argued that Black women's abilities to resist controlling images, such as a mammy is their first step forward to attain self-definition (Collins, 1990; Nash, 2013). Continuously viewing Black women through the eyes of the dominant group renders such depictions as normal and acceptable.

Refusing the dominant group's imaging of Black women is one way to reclaim the representation of African American women's consciousness. By defining themselves, Black women shift the experience from one of oppression to one of liberation. The recognition that Black women are outsiders within their communities provides further insight into BFT. Black women labored only in the realm of household work and served men before the emergence of World War II (Collins, 2012). The position of the Black women during this era and their treatment as outsiders shaped their views on social, political, and economic concepts (Collins, 2009).

## **The Womanist Theory**

People who are passionate about women's rights and acknowledge female traditions and power are regarded as womanists (Collins, 1990). The origin of Womanism can be traced back to the early feminist movement. The women's movement advocated for ending gender-based oppression but ignored racial oppression. Therefore, Black women were forced to come up with new terminology to define their experiences, particularly with racism. Women of color were thought to be voiceless people; they were not protected, privileged, or placed on a pedestal like White women (Eaton, 2008). During the late 1980s, Womanism emerged from the Black female community, developed as a result of experiences of African American women's struggles against racism, enslavement, and segregation during the first half of the 20th century. The foundation of the theory is social welfare for all people. The theory regards women as the pillars of the society because of the support they offer to men and their commitment to the plight of Black women. It focuses on how Black women associate with men and also privileges the power of the Black woman (Hudson-Weems, 2006).

According to Alice Walker, who coined the term, Womanism is a form of feminism that focuses on women's contributions to the community (Hudson-Weems, 2006). As an American writer and activist during the feminist movement, Walker responded to the needs of women from the perspective of a Black woman. The concept of Womanism emerged as a result of racial and gender oppression of Black women by White women. To be free from the conventions of White women, Black women had to act in courageous, willful, and outrageous ways. Womanism is committed to the survival of African-American women and at the same time separates their true identities from the negative stereotypes imposed on them by the dominant White part of the society (Hudson-Weems, 2006).

Womanism presents an opportunity to identify the principles by which women of color respond to their social realities in thought and action. It recognizes women of color as the survivors of an oppressive world (Hudson-Weems; Walker, 2006). Womanism's goals coincide with those of Black Feminist Thought, both fighting against racial and gender oppression of Black women by White women (Eaton, 2008). Womanism helps to foster safe spaces for Black women to express their struggles against discrimination and to feel empowered to overcome them.

The conceptual frameworks of BFT and Womanism are essential for social workers who strive to develop all-around cultural competence. These two approaches recognize intersectionality of social oppression faced by African American women. Therefore, they may also shed some light on other cases of intersectional discrimination. That particular framework was chosen as correlative to my personal cultural and social experience. It provided alternative information for my data analysis, which may differ from the adopted approaches formed by dominant White middle-class researchers. Specifically, it helped to capture the meaning of the gathered data without fitting it under one colorblind multicultural umbrella. Broadening the conceptual horizons of cultural competence is critical for further development of social work.

### **Cultural Competence in Social Work**

The need for social work practitioners to recognize and address the diversity of their clients is vitally important for effective communication and positive social outcomes. Scholars (Abram & Moio, 2009; CSWE, 2015; Lum, 2005, 2011; NASW, 2016; Sue et al., 2016) have pointed out that education that aims to foster cultural competence in social workers is essential to achieve these objectives. Cultural competence includes being competent in people's multiple

intersectional identities, including but not limited to religion, gender, and sexual orientation. Through cultural competence, social workers will increase their sensitivity to and attunement with the specific values, needs, attitudes, and beliefs of diverse families, groups, and individuals, resulting in more appropriate and effective support services and interventions.

Authors Logie, Bridge, and Bridge (2007) conducted a study focusing on the impact of cultural competence on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) populations. Their research revealed that there is bias towards those groups by social workers. Many people from LGBT populations, for many years, have been discriminated against by social workers, given that many of these social workers are not familiar with their backgrounds and sexual orientations. Cultural competence is an essential component in that it reduced the phobia towards the LGBT populations and increased the success of social work (Logie, Bridge & Bridge, 2007).

Vonk (2001) examined the influence of cultural competence among transracial adoptive parents. Whereas in most cases transracial adoptive parents are White European Americans and the adopted children have Asian, African, or Latino ethnicities, this method of family formation has faced controversy. The difficulties in adoption have always been underlined by racial tensions in the community. Taking into account the widespread practice of housing segregation, the adopted children are likely to find themselves in unfamiliar cultural surroundings formed predominantly by a White middle-class community. Their neighbors' and schoolmates' attitudes may range from colorblindness to overt racism. Since adoptive parents belong to the dominant race, they have never had experience with racial oppression or discrimination. Therefore, they cannot adequately inform their adopted children, who may become subjects of racial bias, on the necessary behavioral patterns.

Both supporters and critics of transracial adoptions strongly recommend cultural competency training for transracial adoptive parents. Those could help them "acquire the attitudes, skills, and knowledge that enable them to help their children develop positive racial identities and survival skills for life in a racist society" (Vonk, 2001, p. 246). Moreover, it can help to avoid misunderstandings between parents and children based on cultural differences. Cultural competence results in understanding different cultures and reducing the impact of colorblindness or prejudice, hence paving a way for effective adoptions (Vonk, 2001).

For transracial adoptive parents, it acquires particular importance, since the social experiences of their children and their own differ greatly. Proper upbringing and caregiving in such cases must also be adapted to the cultural and social needs of a child. However, this cross-cultural knowledge and its efficient application is crucial not only for separate families, but also for professionals in the social care sphere.

Social work professionals must acquire attitudes, skills, and knowledge that will increase their cultural competency (Sue et al., 2016). Based on the definition offered by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2001), culture has a broad meaning that entails specific group life experiences, intergenerational passages, and behavior patterns. Lum (2007) views culture as "...an interconnected pattern of a person's behavior that is comprised of communications, culture, thoughts, values, actions, and beliefs, as well as the interplay of an ethnic, religious, racial or social group" (p. 54). It implies the entirety of a way of life being handed from a particular generation to another, including the ways people from varied religious backgrounds, a person with disabilities, or people who are transgender, lesbian or gay experience the society around them. Since social workers deal with numerous people on a daily basis, they should embrace their clients' cultural diversity to facilitate communication and cooperation.



Although they may have some initial awareness of certain social groups' values that differ from their own, other cultural backgrounds and identity aspects may appear unfamiliar or even puzzling. Thus, cultural competence training becomes useful for ethical communication in the social work sphere.

Currently, cultural competence training is compulsory for social work practice and is identified as an essential standard in the NASW's Code of Ethics (Harrison & Turner, 2011; NASW, 2001). The need for cultural competency resulted from the necessity to effectively work with minority ethnic groups, vulnerable individuals, such as those neglected due to their social status or health condition, and those people who are socially neglected. With a multiethnic environment like the United States, social work practitioners will inevitably work with clients from diverse backgrounds. Social work professionals should learn values of other cultures to understand how to address problems caused by racism (Harrison & Turner, 2011; Lum, 2005; Sue et al., 2016). These scholars explain that cultures are constantly changing and, therefore, social practitioners must continue to stay abreast of cultural shifts and clients' cultural backgrounds.

Social work is a career committed to serving the needs of all communities and individuals with an emphasis on the vulnerable and poor. To accomplish this, social workers must abide by certain ethics and standards that guide their work. Cultural competence remains a necessary standard of social work practice and education. Because the U.S. population continues to quickly diversify, the demand for social work services that are culturally competent is imperative more than ever before. The updated standards show expansion in the understanding of cultural competence in the social work field (NASW, 2016). This involves a significant expansion of the meaning of culture to incorporate various characteristics of identity such as immigration status,

spiritual or religious beliefs, sexual orientation, family structure, and gender identity (NASW, 2016).

Furthermore, in the revised standards of competency, NASW (2016) identified ten main competencies needed for social work practice and education: cross-cultural knowledge, self-awareness, cross-cultural skills, values and ethics, advocacy and empowerment, communication and language, a diverse workforce, professional education, service delivery, and leadership to build cultural competency. Another updated standard in social work practice is cultural humility, which emphasizes the function of social work practitioners as learners in the professional-client relationship (NASW, 2016). Moreover, cultural humility aims to empower clients to become experts in their lives instead of being the subject of practitioners' "accumulated awareness and knowledge of cultural information" (Ortega & Faller, 2011, p. 30). The concept of cultural humility included in the cultural competency standards demonstrates a dedication to improving cross-cultural services.

In its Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (2008), the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), emphasized that social workers should consider their clients' diversity and understand that people may be exposed to marginalization, isolation, oppression, and social discrimination (p. 5). Moreover, the CSWE (2008) encouraged its social workers to behave as learners who would receive knowledge about the processes above from their clients. In Educational Policy, section 2.1.5, the CSWE also highlighted "the interconnection of human rights and discrimination" (CSWE, 2008 p. 5). In particular, the CSWE pressed social workers to increase their awareness of the way in which various mechanisms of oppression and discrimination work negatively in society. While many clients are affected adversely by these conditions, social workers are in a strong position to assist them in issues of sociopolitical

importance, including equal treatment and human rights concerns. These interactive processes form a core basis for social work that is a foundational principle to address these important societal needs.

The NASW shares many common views with the CSWE's cultural competence policies. In particular, they both address the relationship among the principles of diversity, social oppression, and discrimination. The NASW acknowledges the possibility of racist practices in the social work occupation and institutions (Bonilla- Silva, 2009). The NASW (2001) and CSWE (2008) insisted that social workers should be culturally competent and understand the nature of strengths of different cultures: "cultural competence requires self-awareness, cultural humility, and the commitment to understanding and embracing culture as central to effective practice" (NASW, 2001, p. 4). Based on this approach, suggested by both NASW and CSWE, Kohli et al. (2010) provided their operational definition of cultural competence. They state (2010) that cultural competence is the ability of social workers to successfully communicate with "people from different cultural backgrounds" (p. 257). According to Kohli et al. (2010), the first and most important step toward understanding human diversity is practitioners' awareness of their own diverse identities and acknowledgment of social oppressions they might be exposed to. According to Abrams & Moio (2009), cultural competence is a principle that is vital to social workers' education. Historically, this concept referred to people of color and included various social identities that could constitute the basis for discrimination and oppression based on sexuality, gender, nationality, ethnicity, ability, and so forth. Cultural competence has now taken on different interpretations and meanings, causing misunderstanding and confusion.

The Council on Social Work Education in its "Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards," did not provide a direct definition of cultural competence, although it did highlight

respect for diversity. The CSWE (2008) states: “the dimensions of diversity are understood as the intersectionality of multiple factors including age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, political ideology, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation” (pp. 4–5). In particular, the CSWE pressed social workers to increase their awareness of “the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination” and to be able to “advocate for human rights and social and economic justice” (CSWE, 2008, p. 5).

### **Historical and Analytical View of Social Work and Colorblindness**

Many people can likely agree that Americans live in a racialized society founded on racism and racial hierarchy. The U.S. is a nation whose national origins cannot be detached from the racial ideology of Black inferiority and White superiority, and that still privileges Whiteness. However, some Americans embrace and believe in the colorblindness theory of race, which espouses racial neutrality, whereby the color of a person's skin does not matter since some Americans currently consider this a post-racial society. The theory suggests that people should look beyond skin color since treating others equally and overlooking their race leads to an equal society. However, as good as the colorblind theory sounds, it can be damaging and cruel to people of color. Critics contend that colorblindness perpetuates racism by allowing the majority of the cultural group to maintain its racial status as a privileged, racialized group.

However, antiracism is a crucial agenda for the social work profession. The NASW's social work policy (2007) documents the problem of racism as one of the key concerns for social work professionals. This document highlights Bonilla-Silva's presentation on the colorblind ideology that he considers the new racism. Bonilla-Silva defined colorblind ideology as including practices that are institutional, subtle, and avoid direct racial references but are good at maintaining inequity

(NASW, 2007). Bonilla-Silva (2009) asserted that such ideology has four frames or components that are disguises for maintaining racism.

The first element of colorblindness is abstract liberalism, promoting ideas that support equal opportunity whereas opposing particular initiatives aiming to address real inequity. For instance, a person claims they advocate for equal opportunity and is against affirmative action. The second component is naturalization, which supports the notion that racial inequity is a natural occurrence. For instance, this component allows White people to explain such occurrences as neighborhood segregation and the related disparities in resources, education, and housing as showing people's need to be with "their own kind" (NASW, 2007). The third component is cultural racism, which explains racial inequity as an impact of the cultural behaviors of some racial groups, but ignores the systemic realities which cause the inequality. Lastly, the fourth component is the minimization of racism (i.e., the belief that discrimination does not affect the opportunities for and experiences of persons of color) (NASW, 2007). Minimization permits White people to appear to acknowledge and understand the presence or at least the past presence of discrimination but dismisses efforts to eradicate injustice being experienced in the current time. It is clear that the colorblind ideology supports a sociopolitical order influenced and informed by the existence of oppression and racism.

The NASW (2007) report challenges social work educators to ensure that all social work practitioners are equipped with skills to identify colorblind racism, and therefore, dispel it in the organizations they work for and in others. Furthermore, practitioners should have the capacity for rectifying it diligently with relevant evidence about the current indicators of racism. The main method identified by NASW (2007) to address this new form of racism is that of promoting an antiracist community that creates initiatives for accomplishing racial equity. The key agenda in

this approach is to not valorize race or encourage the development of divided and segregated racialized communities. However, antiracism aims at ensuring equality for all with no regard for one's race. NASW (2007) declared that antiracism has a significant agenda that aims to transform society to eradicate the effects of racism, including other 'isms' such as sexism, ableism, heterosexism, classism, and ageism, which oppress people and deny them their dignity and rights. This crucial perspective informs a wide set of social work approaches, which can be regarded as oriented towards practice based on anti-oppression, antidiscrimination, and antiracism.

Social work is the main profession in America that expects its practitioners to exhibit an understanding of institutional and structural racism, and it is the key profession that has established official standards of proficiency to solve the problem of racism and race (NASW, 2007). In each institution, evidence shows that Whites have more privilege than Blacks. The lack of legal actions for the recent killings of Black Americans like Trayvon Martin shows the urgency of widening commitments to address established racism. Whereas the United States has realized some significant gains regarding race relations and representation, it needs an efficient approach to achieve racial equity. Given that the key aim of NASW is to promote the well-being of people and to enable them to meet the most basic needs, with emphasis being laid upon empowerment and attending to the needs of oppressed, vulnerable, and poor persons, practitioners in social work are expected by the profession to lead commitments to apply specific strategies to transform social work practices and the organizations that they work for (NASW, 2015). Therefore, the need for developing a cultural competence system is evident in order to build an actionable and pragmatic racial justice system.

## **Black Feminist Thought About Social Work**

Healy (2001) and Lay and Daley (2007) conducted research using Black feminist theory to explain issues related to social action. Healy (2001) articulated that the primary aim of critical social work such as teaching and nursing, is to "promote social justice through social work practice and policy-making" (p. 1). As a result, social workers apply critical practice theories that put teamwork and cooperation as a top priority. Lay and Daley (2007) stated that Black Feminist Thought emphasizes Black women's issues and that this perspective helps them to resist oppression through empowerment. Lay and Daley (2007) articulated that Black Feminist Thought is one of the theories that threatens the dominant social order. Therefore, Black feminist social workers can apply this theory to fight against oppression and injustices.

Today, the profession of social work as a legitimate one would not be questioned. Over the past century, social workers have proven the necessity and importance of the profession for the good of society. Meanwhile, the profession of social work continues to struggle with its alignment of principles and practices. One such important principle is cultural competence.

This study stresses that social workers should properly understand cultural competence to address intersectional discrimination their clients face. The other important principle is colorblindness, which is a dominant ideology with regards to racial matters. In as much as colorblindness and cultural competence hold the potential for inclusivity in social works, they should be integrated in such ways that do not foster the inherent injustices and forms of oppression.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### **Purpose of This Study**

This study explores how Black female social workers in the American South perceive their clients' racial identities and how these perceptions impact their professional practice. I have investigated as to whether or not these social workers apply cultural competence and colorblindness in their professional practice. Using Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist Theory as the theoretical framework, this qualitative study asks, "How do the theories of cultural competence and colorblindness filter through the lenses of Black female social workers in a practical setting?"

#### **Methodology and Research Design**

##### **Research questions**

The purpose of this research was to explain, how, why, and when social workers use either colorblindness and/or cultural competency in their work with clients. I have identified how social workers learn cultural competencies throughout their careers and how colorblindness presents itself. I employed qualitative methods to answer my research question. Such an approach worked well for this study because qualitative data helps researchers understand existing patterns, motives, and trends within a comprehensive study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Yin, 2016). Additionally, qualitative research is well suited to study phenomena because it derives data from multiple sources rather



than from one single source (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Yin (2016, p. 9). Researchers provide five distinguishing features of qualitative research:

1. Studies the meaning of people's lives in their real-world roles;
2. Represents the views and perspectives of the people in the study;
3. Explicitly attends to and accounts for real-world contextual conditions;
4. Contributes insights from existing or new concepts that may help to explain social behavior and thinking; and
5. Acknowledges the potential relevance of multiple sources of evidence rather than relying on a single source alone.

Qualitative data facilitates the gathering of various types of information, including the nuances that accompany the study of people. Qualitative data allowed me to account for the emotions, body language, and tone of voice of my participants. It also permitted the flexibility within the research process to capture rich content for use in the case study (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

For this study, I selected the research methodology of phenomenology because it best aligned with the purposes of my research. Phenomenology aims to obtain a deeper understanding of nature or people's personal lives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Vagle, 2014). Even though this research methodology does not offer the researchers the possibility of having an adequate theory with which they can explain or control the world around them, it is important in providing them with plausible insights that can bring a close contact with the reality (Vagle, 2014). Additionally, phenomenology relies on lived experiences and human understanding of those experiences in order to develop a viewpoint. As such, it provides a valid and reliable description of meanings that are attached to different concepts and phenomena

shared by numerous individuals (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I chose this method because it provided great assistance in the identification of meaning behind human experiences and how they are related to different phenomena or a collective occurrence that is significant (Creswell, 2007).

Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher who is also known as the founding father of phenomenology, explained that objects and events occur independently (Manen, 2014). The two basic approaches to phenomenology are hermeneutic phenomenology and empirical, psychological, or transcendental phenomenology (Creswell, 2007). Max Van Manen (2014) described the phenomenological perspective as one that leans towards lived experience and hermeneutics, which is the interpretation of the basics of life. He posited that in addition to providing descriptions of phenomenon, phenomenology assists the researcher with interpretation, hence, making it an interpretive process. Transcendental or psychological phenomenology, on the other hand, focuses more on describing experiences of participants and puts less concern on the interpretation of the researcher. Manen (2014) described how Moustakas incorporated Husserl's idea of epoche, where the investigator lays aside their experiences with an aim of getting an original perspective, one without bias, toward the phenomenon being studied.

According to Creswell (2007), phenomenology is largely used in research in various disciplines such as psychology, education, sociology and health sciences. I used this method to show how complex meanings are embedded in seemingly simple observations and experiences. After determining that the phenomenological method was the most suitable method for this study, I incorporated suggestions by Creswell (2007) in the design to explore the way Black female social workers view their customer's racial identities.

## **Research design**

Research design is the procedure, approach, or strategy used by researchers to measure the defined research variables. The design defines the hypotheses, research problems, variables, and the experimental design in the manner in which they are required to attain the objectives of the research. By integrating the basic attributes of the research, the research design is used to provide answers to the research questions based on the type of research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, I used a phenomenological approach to provide answers to the qualitative research.

## **Phenomenology**

A phenomenological study aims to acquire a deeper understanding of the issues being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Phenomenology provides insights and a detailed understanding of the subject matter under research such that the researchers obtain a broad spectrum for the assimilation of all the information collected during the research. Understanding people's perceptions enables researchers to obtain information that the respondents are unwilling to give. Such information is implied in the manner in which the respondents explain their answers as well as the expression they give while giving the answers (Vagle, 2014).

Hermeneutical phenomenology is utilized to interpret meanings and contexts of implicit dialogues. The basic themes, such as interpretation and textual meaning, are used by the researchers to obtain critical information from the responses (Laverty, 2003). I interpreted the interviews with an aim to understand the detailed meanings, sociocultural contexts, and their impact on the variables of the study.

According to Merriam & Tisdell (2016), phenomenology is interested in the appearance of things and routines. It entails a review of an entity in its wholeness rather than simply a single perspective. Researchers thus get a unified experience by evaluating a series of occurrences that surround a particular context. Additionally, researchers must be able to draw meanings from appearances and observations in order to make advised inferences regarding such observations.

Phenomenology is the individual's perception of events based on their observations. A study using phenomenological design may, therefore, be understood as one that focuses on understanding the individual perceptions regarding the research subject. Its overall goal is to have a direct assessment and description of the phenomena concerning how people experience it without considering the theoretical frameworks that offer explanations of their occurrences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Smaller sample sizes are considered appropriate for phenomenological research because they are easy to interpret and evaluate.

The researchers mainly use open-ended questions to give the respondents an opportunity to express their insights without contextual limitations. According to Vagle (2014), open-ended questions promote self-expression and give the respondents the liberty to answer questions based on their perceptions. Four steps are involved in structuring and interpretation of such questions, namely: bracketing, intuiting, analyzing, and describing. With bracketing, the researcher should avoid using personal presumptions when confronting the data. Intuition helps the researcher to remain open to the descriptions made by the participants. Analyzing entails coding and categorizing the meanings, while the description is the final step of defining the phenomenon based on explanations provided.

## **Participant Criteria, Recruitment, and Selection**

In this study, I purposefully selected thirteen Black female licensed social workers who work in the American South and have been employed for two years or more at a social work agency. Merriam (2009) and Yin (2016) state that there is no magical number when choosing sample size; the goal should be to obtain an ample amount of data that will provide the researcher with a saturation of information. Sampling is used to get responses from selected members to make a generalization (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2016). When determining the sample size, I chose a sample size that I believe reached a saturation point, allowing for the identification of consistent patterns and that represented the variations within the target population.

In this study, I made use of purposeful sampling to identify participants. Briefly, purposive sampling refers to subjective, selective, or even judgmental sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Purposive sampling is a method of sampling in which the researcher deliberately selects participants following their qualities (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016;). In purposive sampling, researchers consider samples that have a higher possibility of serving the intended study. This sampling technique, also known as judgment sampling, relates to selecting nonrandom samples and does not require fundamental theoretical concepts or a specified number of research participants. It is the responsibility of the researcher to make decisions regarding what is necessary for the study and to select correspondents who are willing and capable of providing information that will help address the issue under study.

Participants were required to meet the following criteria:

1. Identify as a Black woman;

2. Employed for at least two years as a social worker;
3. Be a licensed social worker from their respective state;
4. Be currently employed (two years or more) or retired social worker.

I also applied snowball sampling for this research. Snowball sampling refers to a sampling method that involves finding research subjects. In this sampling technique, an individual subject helps the researcher to identify the name of another subject, then gives the name of the third subject, a trend continues until the researcher has all of the subjects needed for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2016). In other words, the snowball sampling technique involves identifying participants who then help the researcher to identify other research participants. The method will apply through networks at social work conferences and other gatherings of social workers. I recruited participants who work in the agencies identified in the proposal and I asked social workers for names of other licensed colleagues who would possibly participate in the research.

## **Data**

I collected two types of data, primary and secondary (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2016). Primary data came from interviews, and secondary data originated from scholarly journal articles and books. For the primary data, I conducted oral interviews with the participants. Yin (2016) explains that data should be categorized, examined, tabulated, and tested to ensure that it meets the propositions of the study. Mainly, the data for analyses is qualitative. The phenomenological research considers qualitative methods in data collection and fits it into this study. For instance, hermeneutics helps to shed light on the experiences and perceptions of people from their perspectives to challenge both the structural and normative assumptions.

As a school of thought, phenomenology focuses on the subjective experiences of individuals and their interpretations of the world around them. Therefore, it is impractical to separate them from the qualitative data because the responses from the interviews are opinions about their experiences. According to Yin (2016), the interests lie in the meaning, the definition of their experiences and behaviors, as well as the narratives of the correspondents. In this case, the data only focused on characterizing the attributes rather measuring them. They also aided in describing the variables of the study and giving explanations to the research questions.

## **Interviews**

In phenomenology, the researcher aims to collect personal experiences from the respondent, which are qualitative (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, Vagle, 2014), then discussions become essential tools for gathering data to answer the primary research questions. The interview is the primary tool for data collection in a phenomenological study because it offers an opportunity for the descriptions made by the participants to be explored and investigated. Interviewing in this phenomenological study required the application of reflection, clarification, and requests for examples as well as descriptions and developing an interest in listening to the correspondents. The interview questions were open-ended and semi-structured (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009; Saldana, 2013, Vagle, 2014), and encouraged the collection of full and meaningful answers from the participants. Open-ended questions permitted the collection of unlimited responses and details from the participants. The interview questions allowed for creativity and self-expression in replies. The interview protocol is included in the appendix.

Interviews with participants Carla, Keshia, Warrior, Shuv, Mary, Powerful, Helen and Ashley were face-to-face. Interviews with participants Amber, Tamara, Cassie, MTR, and Felica

were done through phone calls. The face-to-face interviews with Keshia, Mary, Powerful, Helen and Ashley were conducted in their homes, while interviews with Carla, Warrior and Shuv were conducted at a local social service agency. The interviewees' ages ranged from 25-77. At the time of the study, eight of the participants were employed, and five were retired. One of the interviewees retired from a state agency and was also employed with the federal government.

I developed thoughtful interview protocol for my case study. I asked a licensed social worker to allow me to pilot the interview questions to ensure that the questions were worded appropriately. On July 24, 2017, I interviewed Mary Smith (pseudonym), a Black female licensed social worker. She responded to each of the questions without any issues. Testing interview questions helps to determine the success of the interview. The aim is to ensure that the questions are logical, in sequence, and that the wording and or terminology of the questions are appropriate for a licensed social worker. The questions should allow for a free-flowing response from the participant. By pre-testing the questions, they could be restructured if needed before the actual interviews begin.

I received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) with The University of Alabama. After participants agreed to interview, I asked them to complete demographic data sheets (see appendix). I conducted interviews beginning in November 2017. I assured the participants of anonymity and confidentiality and obtained informed consent before beginning the interviews. The researcher recorded all the interviews using an audio recorder application on an iPad. As a back-up, I used my cell phone. This process aided my interpretation and clarification of the responses during transcription and coding of data.

At each initial interview, I introduced myself and provided information about the purpose of the research and procedures for the interview. I asked for permission from the participants to



record the interview. I asked, “Do you mind if I record this conversation using my cell phone and Ipad?” I had decided that if any objected, I would thank them for the opportunity to meet with me but I would explain that for this research, I would need participants who allowed me to record the interviews. All of the participants were in agreement to be recorded. I had them sign a permission form stating that I have been approved to proceed. At this point, I placed the recorder in between the interviewer and interviewee. Confidentiality is one of the ethical issues that arises during interviews. In this case, I set out the terms early and assured the participants of confidentiality. I then explained the format for the interview. It is essential that the participants feel comfortable with the process. I explained how questions would progress but that the interview would remain a conversation and at any point, if the participant wanted to stop the interview, it would be stopped. It is essential for such interviewees to be focused and prepared for what they should expect (Yin, 2016). It also helps them to understand the flow of the interview. I explained that there was not any compensation involved with this research study. As a researcher, it was in my interest to explain that I may have to conduct a follow-up interview for clarification purposes and if I needed to do so, it would be done two months after the initial interview. I explained that when completed, the participant could review or request a copy of the completed research. I asked each participant to choose a pseudonym for anonymity.

Informing participants about the approximate duration is crucial. Extended interviews may appear burdensome and tedious to some interviewees, which may lead them to quit. Shorter meetings may also provide less meaningful, more haphazard data. In this study, I ensured that the interviews were conducted promptly in length of less than two hours.

I recorded the exact words used by the interviewee to avoid contradiction when coding the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldana, 2013). I also transcribed the recorded interviews. In

research, transcription of data refers to the process of interpreting recorded information in a manner that is well understood by the people intended to use such data. In my case, I recorded the interviews because otherwise it would have been difficult to capture all of the responses given. I maintained eye contact with the participants to avoid distractions. I avoided using ambiguous statements that might have been confusing to the participants. I made sure that I conducted the interviews with confidence and allowed participants to ask questions so that they felt comfortable and willing to speak freely. I followed my interview protocol and attempted to maintain consistency to keep the data reliable. After completing each interview, I asked each participant if they had any other information to provide. Before turning the recorder off, I thanked each interviewee for their time and participation.

I took field notes to keep track of the information collected during the interviews. According to Yin (2016), “Field notes entail noting down key notes to help the researcher remember accurate information” (p. 169). Those collected included the dates, locations, types of settings, and times of interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2016). I also recorded my thoughts immediately after each interview. In my field notes, I recorded what I was thinking, feeling and how my mind was processing the interview.

## **Data Analysis**

I compiled, dissembled, and reassembled the various documents that I used as data. As noted by Yin (2016), compiling consisted of transcribing a personal journal, field notes, and the interviews. I made notes of themes that emerged in the data. As I dissembled the transcription, I began the process of analysis. According to Creswell & Poth (2018) and Yin (2016), coding helps in categorizing the data and extrapolating distinct concepts in analysis.

Coding itself is the analytical process of categorizing qualitative data to ensure review. It entails the transformation of data forms that are understandable by computer software (Creswell & Poth, and Yi, 2016). Through coding, I broke the data down into master headings and sub-headings. After acquiring data from field notes and interviews, I compared the information gathered and I stored data in my drop box. I used open coding to prevent the occurrence of errors and increase the reliability of the data. The open coding was the initial part of the process and focused on separating concepts and categories in the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2016). This approach ensured that I took all the information collected into consideration without omissions or additions. I applied one code for each category, which was comprehensive, based on the data from the interviews.

After the collection of data, the next process was converting the raw data into meaningful statements. It is important to take notes summarizing the content taken from the fieldwork activities. The next step was to interpret the data collected, and I then finished by writing a report based on the code analysis.

The first step of the process when documenting the data is making it relevant to oneself. Step two is reviewing the purpose of the analysis and focusing on it, and step three is a categorization of the information (Yin, 2016). After that, there is the identification of the patterns and its relation to the categories. The subsequent part is the outline of the process the researcher will use to interpret the data (Yin, 2016). I used the above system to document my findings. Using thematic analysis, I coded and put the data in categories that became themes.

I used thematic analysis to review and organize the data into themes. It is necessary for phenomenological design because it focuses on qualitative data. Thematic analysis helps to examine and record patterns and ideas in any data. This process consists of six coding processes:

familiarization with the data, generation of the initial codes, a search of themes in the codes, review of the themes, definition, naming of the themes and lastly, the production of the final product (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis helps to classify themes and relate them to the data generated. Braun and Clarke (2006) consider it as the most appropriate method of interpretation. Systematic analysis is a way of putting information together to come up with an understanding of things taking place in a given society. I used thematic analysis in my study since it applied to all the methods chosen to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is a method of data analysis in qualitative research used to identify, analyze, and report themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I had different opinions about the concepts arrived at and was able to make a comparison on the data that derived from the analysis. Thematic analysis also helped me understand the current practices of different African American social workers. Moreover, it was suitable for researchers who are not familiar with more sophisticated qualitative methods of data analysis. It is an indication that thematic analysis is flexible, which helped me provide a rich, broad, and complex description of the collected data. This type of qualitative analysis is appropriate to any theory, and I incorporated and applied its concepts in this study. I ascertained the kind of analysis to use to conduct the study to create the themes of current practices of a Black female social worker. The identified themes were coded and analyzed in such a way that it accurately reflected the aspects of the entire sets of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I defined and analyzed all the themes of the study and drafted a comprehensive analysis of each subject. In the end, I created a report that was a story narrative about my data, while also providing a detailed and rich description, and analysis responding to the research question.

## 4. THIRTEEN VOICES

### **Introduction to Participant Narratives**

In this section, I present narratives drawn from thirteen Black female social workers on matters of cultural competency and colorblindness. At the time of the study, the following eligibility criteria were met by all the participants:

1. All were Black females.
2. All were licensed social workers in their respective states.
3. All had been employed two years or more as social workers.
4. All were employed or retired as social workers.

These narratives were carefully constructed from a sizeable amount of data that was then narrowed down to information pertinent to this study. The primary purpose of these narratives is to create composites that provide deep insight into the participants' experiences in a narrative style. Consistent with Madison (2005), "these narratives can be read through a critical ethnographic lens which, at its core, takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control" (p. 5).

#### **Ashley**

*But change can also occur in the private, personal space of an individual woman's consciousness. Equally fundamental, this type of change is also personally empowering. Any individual Black women who is forced to remain motionless on the outside can develop the inside of a changed consciousness as a sphere of freedom. Becoming personally empowered through self-knowledge, even within conditions that severely limit one's ability to act, is essential (Collins, 1990, p.129).*

Ashley is 25 years old and a supervisor in child protective services whose career in social work reflects her ambitions to work within the community. Ashley attended a private Christian college for her undergraduate degree, earning a Bachelor of Science. She was able to take advantage of courses in high school that applied to her degree. Originally, she wanted to attend medical school, but after meeting some social workers, she decided that the profession of social work better aligned itself with her values. Ashley was accepted in a social work graduate program. At the age of 22, she was able to earn her Master's in Social Work from a prominent university. Ashley was fortunate to be hired with the agency where she completed her internship. In addition to working long hours, one of the hardest parts of her job is having the feeling that her co-workers have a hard time accepting her because of her young age. Ashley would like for her co-workers to give her credit for her skill set and knowledge in the field and look beyond her age.

Misjudging individuals without fully knowing the person is a valuable lesson that Ashley learned from a client. Ashley misjudged an 18-year-old female client who had been abandoned by her family. When she came into the office, she was dressed in name brand clothing; her hair was freshly permed; her nails were manicured, she carried a name brand purse, and had braces on her teeth. She was requesting assistance with getting the braces removed since she was a minor. Ashley thought to herself, "this client is requesting assistance?" Her appearance led her to believe she had the financial means necessary to fulfill her request. According to Ashley, she heard the client's story about getting great deals from shopping in thrift stores and having her cousin practice doing nails and hair on her so she was able to save money. Ashley realized she had misjudged the client based on her looks. Ashley realized that it mattered less how people presented themselves, how well-spoken they were or their level of education; what mattered was

the need to conduct a thorough assessment on them, just like anyone else. Ashley then understood the need to not judge her clients based on their looks, but rather to conduct an authentic assessment on them.

Ashley defines cultural competency as knowing and understanding different cultures. She stated that many social workers are culturally aware of differences but in order to be culturally competent the social worker must take time to study beyond the textbook perspective. This shows the need to possess the awareness that everyone has cultural variations. Her perception of colorblindness is when people, for any given reason, have the perception that all people are equal regardless their color. Ashley feels offended when others say they do not see color, as she believes it means they are not recognizing the struggle that people have gone through or still with.

### Carla

*To learn to speak in a unique and authentic voice, women must jump outside the frames and systems authorities provide and create their own frame (Collins, 1990, p.110).*

Carla is 25 years old and is working at her first professional job with people who have developmental and intellectual disabilities. She remembers thinking in elementary school that she wanted to be in a career where she could help people. When she entered college, she followed the degree path of psychology. Carla loves doing anything associated with therapy, counseling, and working with groups and families. The more she explored her passions, the more she felt like she belonged in social work courses. After speaking with her counselor, she realized that she needed to change her major to social work. Also, she has several relatives who suffer with mental illnesses, and being a social worker has enabled her to have important insights into the impact of such ailments on both patients and those around them. It was challenges such as these that compelled her to help others in similar situations.

While working on her Master's degree, Carla began to understand the importance of recognizing race and cultural differences. Carla recalls a time when a White teammate repeatedly said the "N" word in a song and thought little about doing so. One day, while playing another team that only had one Black player, the person began describing the Black person in a very negative tone. Carla stated that she had to stop the teammate in the middle of her rant to tell her that it is not acceptable to discuss another person in such a negative tone. Carla believes the teammate got the message loud and clear because she never used the "N" word again while singing and her conversations about descriptions of individuals changed.

Carla defined cultural competency as being knowledgeable about a person's culture and what their experiences may have been and what they prefer in certain situations. Carla stated that social workers must be able to work with diverse clients and face unique challenges. She defined colorblindness as neglecting to see oppression or racism. She does not accept the wording colorblind because she feels that would make one blissfully ignorant of another person's experiences. When a person states they do not see color, she believes it is in her rights to educate the individual on why they should see color.

### **Amber**

*In traditional African American communities, Black women find considerable institutional support for valuing lived experience. Black women's centrality in families, churches, and other community organizations allows us to share with younger, less experienced sisters our concrete knowledge of what it takes to be self-defined Black women (Collins, 1990, p. 278).*

Amber age 26, earned her Associate's degree in general studies from a small college in the rural south. Amber was accepted at a university where she pursued a Criminal Justice degree that would help her advocate for individuals and families. During her college years, Amber volunteered in the community. She was paired with families living in a housing development,



allowing her to understand how children growing up in poverty interacted with their peers and with the volunteers. There were times when parents would ask her questions about why she was volunteering or about her education. Amber felt like the parents wanted their children to attend a university, but they were not sure how to navigate a large system. This was one of the reasons that led Amber to choose social work; she felt the need to link individuals and families to resources.

Growing up in a rural community, Amber developed a keen understanding of how poverty affects children and their parents. She noticed that children were in need of help and someone to advocate for their needs; they lacked someone who would listen to their grievances and understand their struggles. Her experiences led her to notice that people seemed to misjudge these children based on their preconceived notions of where they came from. The challenges she witnessed such as poverty, lack of a good education, neighborhoods with high crime rates, among others, motivated Amber to explore the field of social work, with the intention of helping such people.

Amber took her first job at the age of 24 as a child and family advocate. In her job as an advocate, Amber's role was to assist children that had been abused either sexually, physically, and/or mentally. Amber remembers how growing up in the rural south taught her how individuals could dislike others because of the color of their skin. She recalled a time when a child was living with her grandmother who openly stated that she did not want to work with a Black person. Some of Amber's challenges came from the grandmother because of her dislike for Blacks. Amber had to remind the grandmother that the child would remain in her caseload. Amber remembers conversations with her colleagues in which they discussed their concern that the grandmother was so caught up with her dislike of Blacks that she forgot that the child was in

need of serious help. Regardless of having a high case load, Amber was determined to offer services to all her clients, regardless of the difficulty of their cases. Amber remained positive and committed to the client. She was determined to do her best in providing optimal services available to the child and her family. Amber believes that a good social worker looks beyond people's prejudices and focuses on the client's needs. She believes that growing up in her rural community taught her that some people will always carry a dislike against another person without reason.

Amber defines cultural competency as being aware of an individual culture, ethnicity, barriers that society has placed around them and awareness that they are different than you. She stated that colorblindness was choosing not to see race or ethnicity. She has heard people say they do not see color and when that occurred she used the conversation as a teaching tool to educate the person about diversity, including stereotypes and prejudice.

### **Tamara**

*Because elite White men control Western structures of knowledge validation, their interests pervade the themes, paradigms, and epistemologies of traditional scholarship. As a result, U.S. Black women's experiences as well as those of women of African descent transnationally have been routinely distorted within or excluded from what counts as knowledge (Collins, 1990, p. 269).*

Tamara is a 29-year-old social worker who worked as a trial auditor for a private firm dealing with substance abuse issues. Before becoming an auditor, Tamara worked as a social worker in community counseling, providing services for Medicaid clients. Prior to that job, she worked with a residential facility for women. In her roles, she linked clients to services in the community, educated clients about services and their diagnoses, and served as an advocate to ensure that clients' needs were being met.

As a child, Tamara desired to become a doctor, but this idea was replaced by another profession: social work. She realized how most people were really stuck in life and needed help, and that the only method of reaching such people would be through social work. Having explored and loved social work, Tamara received her Bachelor's degree in social work, took a break, and later entered college for a Master's degree in social work. She focused on the clinical side, thereby allowing her to offer assistance to people handling their day-to-day struggles and to those experiencing loss. Tamara wanted to make sure she assisted her clients by upholding their humanity and improving their lives.

Tamara served clients that lived in mansions and some that lived in trailer parks; some had multiple cars and some had no transportation. Her assumptions of people sometimes turned out to be the opposite of what she later learned about them. For instance, she and her colleagues visited one of her client's residences, located in a prestigious part of town. The house appeared to be huge, clean and with expensive furniture. The problem was that the son was having some type of mental health issue and the mother was very stressed. Tamara's impressions were that the family should have been able to afford health care because of their appearance; however, she learned that she should not make a financial judgment based on appearances. The client explained that the house was willed to her when her mother passed away. Before her death, the client had moved in with her mother to take care of her. She had to quit her job or either be fired because she was working with a temporary job agency. This job did not provide benefits for leave of absence. After dealing with the death of her mom, she had to direct her energy to her son's medical issues. Tamara understood that making assumptions about clients is often misleading.

Tamara's perception of cultural competency reflected her individual cultural experiences and the ability to learn from others. She, however, refuted the argument that cultural competency entails being aware of all intricacies concerning the culture of an individual. Instead, she felt that recognizing the differences or similarities of one's clients can positively inform one's role as a social worker. Her definition of colorblindness is based on the pretense that color does exist and that it is very engrained in American culture. She stated that in a functional sense, colorblindness is pretending that color does not exist. When a person says they do not see color, she states that is like saying they do not see her gender. She is not sure what the intent is when a person is making that statement. She perceives this as someone not interested in discussing race or acknowledging race. She feels as though color is what makes all of us beautiful. Tamara stated that when one does not see color while trying avoid certain conversations, they are saying they do not really see the entire person and are only acknowledging parts of the person.

### **Keshia**

*The second dimension of Black women's activism consist of struggles for institutional transformation-namely, those efforts to change discriminatory policies and procedures of government, schools, and workplace, the media, stores, and other social institutions (Collins, 1990, p. 219).*

Keshia is a 36-year-old administrator for a home health care agency. Keshia's initial dream was to become a nurse with the intention of assisting people. After taking courses relating to discrimination, poverty, and social injustices, she decided to enroll in the Bachelor of social work program in a northern university. After completing that degree, she enrolled at a university in the South in their Master's program for social workers. The South was very different from where she was reared. Her first job was in the north as a social worker where she worked with mostly Caucasian and Korean senior citizens. She feels as though people in the South tend to show their racism more explicitly. In her upbringing, she was taught about different individuals,

different races, different backgrounds, and different national origins. However, one of her major issues was she was not taught that as a Black female social worker, there would be some clients and some co-workers who would hate her merely because of the color of her skin.

When Keisha completed her Master of Social Work, she remained in the South. She applied for a job at the home health care agency and is now its executive director. One of her most memorable learning experiences involved a visit by two clients. To her, the White clients did not seem like they would accept her services. They kept on asking too many questions and remained stubborn regardless of her efforts to explain everything to them. She asked them to give her program a chance to work, and they did. To her surprise, two years later, the clients were still actively engaged in the program. She defined cultural competency as the need to identify and respect the wishes of others while not imposing one's perceptions on them. Keshia stated that a social worker should acknowledge a person's color. She does not understand how one can deny services to an individual based on what one sees, meaning their color. She believes that one does not have to make a statement about not seeing color, rather, it should be based on one's actions.

### Cassie

*As each individual African American woman changes her ideas and actions, so does the overall shape of power itself change. In the absence of Black Feminist Thought and other comparable oppositional knowledges, these micro changes may remain invisible to individual women. Yet collectively, they can have a profound impact (Collins, 1990, p. 293).*

Cassie earned her Bachelor of Arts from a Historically Black University in the South. Graduate school helped her to prepare for a career in social work. The biggest push came from an African American professor who motivated her more than other instructors. She thought that the professor was picking on her, but as she got to know the professor, she appreciated the

motivation that transpired. The professor helped Cassie to grasp the challenges that she would encounter in the field of social work.

Cassie is a 36-year-old primary care worker for veterans. She wanted to become a psychologist because of her desire to assist individuals and families. She researched becoming a pediatrician, a psychologist, then a family and marriage therapist. One of her friends told her to consider social work and this was the impetus for her career. She enrolled in a social work course, chose it as her major and upon graduation, commenced her work as a social worker. Cassie once believed that individuals with addiction problems may seem damaged beyond assistance and one might render them irredeemable. However, she learned that no one is beyond assistance; all it takes is getting to know the patient comprehensively and accessing the means to help them.

Cassie's first job was working with child protection services. She was in this field for five years in which she learned that people will judge others without hesitation. She remembers going into homes of highly educated individuals only to be spoken to in a condescending manner. This gave her the insight that she should always remain professional, perform her job responsibilities, and investigate the situation appropriately. Cassie was able to reach back to her graduate courses to help guide her through situations that would challenge her. She realized that she would have to be grounded in her career, and at all times act professionally which often meant not allowing her client's words and actions to control her emotions or actions.

Cassie defined cultural competency as being cognizant of the population with whom one is working. She further stressed the need for being sensitive to the values of others, regardless of how different they may be from one's own values. Cassie was perplexed by how anyone would be colorblind, since someone's skin color is the first impression upon initially meeting someone.

She has an issue with people saying they are colorblind because it is obvious that they see color. Cassie believes when this statement is made people need to be challenged in a respectful way about their reason for making this statement.

**MTR**

*Thus, one important issue facing Black women intellectuals is the question of what constitutes adequate justification that a given knowledge claim, such as fact or theory, is true. Just as Hemmings's descendants were routinely disbelieved, so are many Black women not seen as credible witnesses for our own experiences (Collins, 1990, p. 273).*

MTR is a 38-year-old adjunct professor at a university who also works in a private practice setting where she specializes in working with families, couples, and children. Her career began in psychology, but this did not satisfy her, and she sought a career in social work. Regardless of her initial lack of knowledge about the social work field, MTR conducted comprehensive research on the profession, and then decided to pursue a career in this field. She completed her Master of Social Work and went to work in a counseling center. MTR is currently licensed in three southern states where she has held four jobs. After working as an Executive Director for an agency at a church, she decided to earn her PhD in family therapy. She moved to her current location in the South and is the owner of her own business.

She explained her experience with a White male parent whose son needed some services after getting into trouble. According to MTR, the son was diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), and the father needed to get him back on track. The father revealed his explicit racism when he asked MTR whether or not she was a “nigger.” This made MTR feel morally low and hurt. However, she did not quit but rather treated the client’s son with diligence. She responded by informing the son that color did not matter; rather what mattered were the services delivered. While MTR had the right to react negatively concerning the father’s hate speech, she sought to make the best use of the opportunity and retained the son as her client. Her lesson

shows that regardless of the manner in which a client lectures or speaks to her, she must remain focused on the client's needs.

MTR defined cultural competency as the desire to become knowledgeable of a particular race or ethnicity. She further described ethnicity, race, age, gender, faith, and religious belief as key components of cultural competency. She indicated that social workers need to familiarize themselves with various cultures of different clients and become better aware of other people's belief systems. MTR perceives that colorblindness is nonexistent, and she has a hard time defining that concept. When she has heard the statement, "I do not see color," she has felt like the person is making an inappropriate statement because color does exist. MTR feels that she has the responsibility to share a different perspective about colorblindness and to educate the individual on the need to see a person's color.

### **Warrior**

*Linked in symbiotic relationship, White and Black gain meaning only in relation to one another. However well-meaning conversations among women of color concerning the meaning of color in the United States may be, such conversations require an analysis of how institutionalized racism produces color hierarchies among U.S. women (Collins, 1990, p. 98).*

Warrior is a 55-year-old woman who works with veterans. Her choice to become a social worker emerged after her initial desire to become a nurse. Warrior knew that she wanted to be in a helping profession but was unsure of a career path. She was accepted into a nursing program at a Historically Black University. While attending class one day, her concern about giving a patient the wrong medicine overwhelmed her. She asked her peers what would happen if she made a mistake; she was concerned that her possible mistake would bring harm to a patient. Her peers reassured her that she was smart, and she would succeed in this career, but she decided that nursing was not going to be a good fit for her. After meeting with her advisor and understanding



all of the career paths in social work, she decided that social work was what she wanted to do. After receiving her Bachelor of Social Work, she enrolled in a university in the South to complete her Masters in Social Work. She was fortunate to get a job after graduate school working in a state health care facility. Warrior was able to retire from this job and start another job working at a veteran's hospital. This was Warrior's second job.

One memorable learning opportunity Warrior had was when she encountered what she perceived as a "redneck" racist individual. He yelled at her and threatened to report her to her superiors since she could not help him at that moment in time. She explained to him that she would assist him after she finished assisting the person in front of him. He did not give her the chance to assist him before walking away very upset. Some days later, he came back a different person; his attitude and his tone were calmer. She was able to work with him with no issues. He explained that he was having a hard day, and things just were going wrong. Warrior stated that she misjudged the individual. She noted that in this profession, people will come to you upset, and you cannot label the person or assume that they are one way or the other until you know the entire situation.

Warrior's definition of cultural competency is that extensive knowledge is required regarding the culture of an individual to serve them better. Warrior was, however unable, to define "colorblindness" and said that she was probably not colorblind. She recalled that when she heard people say, "I do not see color," she replied, "I do see color." She wondered what they were referring to when they made such a statement. She further said that she provided equal services to all her clients, regardless of color, even though she was aware of clients' racial backgrounds.

### *Felicia*

*Education has long served as a powerful symbol for the important connections among self, change, and empowerment in African American communities (Collins, 1990, p. 225).*

At age 61, Felicia is an assistant professor of social work at a university. Felicia earned a Bachelor's in Chemistry from a university in the north. While completing her undergraduate degree she often spoke with her advisor about what she really wanted to do with her career. Her advisor asked her to speak with some social workers and research the profession. After graduation, she went to work for a social service agency working with families. This opportunity gave Felicia the needed insight into the field of social work. She enrolled in a university in the South and completed her Masters of Social Work. Her internships in the master's program allowed her to work in school, and the next placement was in a counseling agency. This helped Felicia to focus on wanting to teach social work to college students. Felicia earned her Ph.D. in Social Work.

Felicia's best learning opportunity came from a young Caucasian couple who she believed would be uncomfortable working with her due to her color. Quite the opposite, the couple was very willing to receive Felicia's services and even after the first session, they were extremely content. She learned that it is not wise to assume the behaviors or reactions of other people prior to fully interacting with them.

According to Felicia, cultural competency entails educating one's self about the customs and interactions of a culture different from one's own. On the other hand, she failed to offer a specific definition of colorblindness. She believes that people should not be defined by the color of their skin. Felicia stated that individuals do notice a person skin color to which is obvious; however, she thinks people fault is assigning a color to a person to and not noticing differences. She had heard people claim that they do not see color. When this occurred, she would ask the

person making the statement to explain themselves because she felt as though they should see an individual's color. She used these opportunities to explain to persons that they saw her color, and it did not affect their interactions negatively, so acknowledge the color.

**Shuv**

*Once inside, many Black women realize much more than getting hired is required to bring about change. Black women find themselves searching for innovative ways to foster bureaucratic change (Collins, 1990, p. 300).*

Shuv is a 65-year-old recently retired social worker. Shuv's passion for helping individuals first presented itself when she was in high school, and she had the opportunity to work at a veteran's hospital this led her to her passion of wanting to help individuals. Shuv's first choice as a career goal was to work as an occupational therapist. However, while attending college, she decided, with the help of friends, to pursue a career path in social work with an emphasis on working with individuals with disabilities. Shuv graduated from a university in the South with her Bachelor's in Social Work and nine months later completed her Masters of Social Work in 1974. In the 1970's, jobs were scarce for social workers. She held several jobs from supervision to case management. Shuv worked for over 20 years as a school social worker in the North from where she retired. The population in the school consisted of kindergarten to age 26. The students were in a segregated facility for children with severe behavioral and emotional problems.

Shuv recalled several instances where she judged her clients as not being cooperative. However, upon getting to know them and their situation, it allowed her to see that sometimes a client does not mean any harm, and as she notes: "you have to realize your client has a heart." She learned that regardless of how harsh clients may seem, it is always wise to take the time to get to know them better. Shuv defined cultural competency as being aware of the cultural

manifestations specific to the cultures or clientele with whom one works. On the other hand, she described colorblindness as not defining people by their color but rather through what is inside of them. Shuv stated that she has said she does not see color, because God has created humans all the same way.

### Mary

*The importance of Black women's leadership in producing Black Feminist Thought does not mean that other cannot participate. It does mean that the primary responsibility for defining one's own reality lies with the people who live the reality, who actually have those experiences (Collins, 1990, p. 39).*

Mary is a 70 year old retired medical social worker. Her choice of career in social work dates back to her teenage years. Mary was very interested in doing anything related with helping other people. During her college years, most African American females were pursuing degrees as teachers, but Mary wanted to venture into another field. It was her professor who encouraged her to research and pursue a career in social work. Mary earned her Bachelor of Arts from a Historically Black College in the late 1970's. She was able to take a job at a local hospital as a researcher and work on her Masters in Social Work. Mary took her time earning her degree because she was employed full-time. She graduated five years later from a university in the South in her Masters in Social Work. When Mary graduated she was able to move from the hospital to the rehabilitation facility. Mary was hired as the first African American employee social worker for the rehabilitation hospital center.

Mary recalled an example of working at one of her jobs with foster care. She received a referral to place a young Black girl with a White family who only had boys. Mary had reservations about placing the little girl in the home, but she worked with the parents and children, which helped her better understand her own biases. Nine years later, Mary was glad she

overcame her preconceived notions about what a family unit should look like. The family loved and cared for the little girl just as they did for the boys.

Mary defined cultural competency as the ability of an individual to understand and interact with different people of different ethnic socioeconomic backgrounds and cultures. She further defined colorblindness as not being able to define or help people based on the color of their skin. To Mary, if her clients needed anything, she would always give her best regardless of their color. When the comment is said to her that a person does not see color she thinks that the person is trying to justify to her that color has nothing to do with their ability to work with her.

### **Powerful**

*Despite social class differences among Black women, this tradition of becoming educated for Black community development has permeated U.S. Black women's activism (Collins, 1990, p. 230).*

Powerful is a 75-year-old retired medical social worker whose aspirations can be traced back to her formative years. While working on her degree in social work, Powerful considered the option of medical social work, and later interned with an organization in a state in the northern part of the United States. She encountered individuals who attempted to take advantage of the system. This opened her eyes to the fact that some people would tell falsehoods in order to receive public assistance. Powerful learned that it is important to ask a client questions to understand their circumstances. She learned not to assume anything but rather to engage in conversations to determine what services they needed.

Powerful's journey began with earning her Bachelor of Science Degree from an Historically Black College in the South. She then enrolled at a university where she completed her Masters in Social Work. Powerful began her career as a case manager for a rehabilitation center. After a few years, she decided to take a supervisor's position at a children's hospital. She

was promoted to director of the social service department where she was the first African American to hold that title for 32 years.

Powerful defined cultural competency as whatever a person brings to the table regarding what they have learned about their culture. She further considered culture to include one's dress code and eating habits, among others. According to Powerful, if she did not know a lot about a client's culture, then she needed to read and study about it, because the Social Work Code of Ethics tells us that people come to us in need of service. She further explained colorblindness by indicating that, "You do not see color, you do not see it. You see the person. You see the human who has come, who is in your midst for whatever reason." When asked about how other people respond to being colorblind, Powerful described how people definitely see color, but more importantly, how one sees the person, not the color.

### Ann

*Developing Black Feminist Thought also involves searching for its expression in alternative institutional locations and among women who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals (Collins, 1990, p. 17).*

At the age of 77, Ann is a social worker retiree from working with veterans. Her choice of the social work profession can be traced to a young age when helping people was her desire in life. Ann received her Bachelor of Science from a Southern university. After earning her degree, she enrolled in a master's program at a university. While working on her Masters in Social Work, she had to complete her internship. She was placed at a veteran's hospital. Ann has only had one job as a social worker, and that was with the veteran's hospital.

Her father was her role model, as he had a very warm heart in terms of helping other people. Ann faced clients from different races but gaining their trust was quite difficult. Regardless of the complexity of her responsibilities as a social worker, Ann had to learn how to

cope with a diverse range of people and the feelings they exhibited. Ann realized that the clients' backgrounds cannot be the same, so dealing with them requires high dedication and discipline.

Her definition of cultural competency is being able to offer different services to people with different cultures without discriminating against people based on culture. Ann further defined colorblindness as the ability to see people for who they are rather than their skin color. When someone has said I do not see color she said she does not react to the statement, because she loves everybody.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Chapter Five is organized around four themes: colorblindness, cultural competence, communication, and racial discrimination. The first section focuses on colorblindness - focusing specifically on Black female social workers' perceptions of this notion. The second section focuses on cultural competence and Black female social workers' perceptions of this notion. The third section explores the components of effective communication, with a specific focus on non-verbal, verbal, and complex communication as experienced by the Black female social workers in the practice. The fourth section explores various perceptions held by Black social workers concerning discriminatory perceptions and practices attributed to the behaviors of White clients. In particular, this section deals with discrimination, the use of the "N" word, and racism at large. Each section in this chapter is accompanied by relevant excerpts from practicing Black female social workers who participated in the study.

### **Colorblindness**

Many scholars, such as Abrams (2009) and Apelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, M.I., (2008), are exceedingly skeptical of the idea of colorblindness. They argue that it is a mechanism that perpetuates racial inequity but is relatively hidden compared to the types of racist behaviors that were common when racial segregation was open and legal. The idea of colorblindness was central during the civil rights movement in the last half of the previous century, as it represented a seemingly strong ideology in championing the treatment of all people as equally as possible regardless of their race, ethnicity, or cultural beliefs; it aligned with the notion that we are "all



human”. Recent research has highlighted how the colorblindness approach shapes institutions, individuals, and groups in addressing issues related to diversity (Abrams & Moio, 2009).

During the first half of the 20th century, it was legal to discriminate against African Americans to limit their access to jobs, voting, housing, and other rights. However, the civil rights reforms of the 1960s, led by Martin Luther King, Jr. and others, made racial discrimination illegal. Since then, laws prevent anyone from practicing racial inequality through, for example, open refusal to sell or rent houses to African Americans, redlining, or segregation. Nevertheless, racial discrimination still exists, working through an amalgamation of economic, institutional, and social operations (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Additionally, many Americans pretend not to recognize color, although this comes at a cost. According to Abrams and Moio (2009),

By arguing that they do not recognize race, they also can avoid their eyes from the actions in which an individual engages in activities that recreate discrimination, that is activities that harm ethnic minorities in the job market, and backlog opportunities in activities that reserve admittance to better employment for Whites. (p. 2)

In this study, participants critiqued colorblindness - criticism that reflects the findings of academic scholars, such as Patricia Hill Collins. The participants noted that colorblindness denies the racial oppression of Blacks in the US and is a manifestation of White privilege. As the participants argued, Blacks in the US, including social workers, cannot claim colorblindness because they live racialized lives every day.

While all the participants agreed that colorblindness is a detrimental lens through which to approach seeing race in the United States, they differed somewhat in their interpretations of how colorblindness plays out in their own work and the specific ways in which it leads to discrimination. The Black social workers in this study did not approach their work through the lens of colorblindness. In fact, they were quite critical of how colorblindness erases the history of oppression of Blacks in the US. Further, they noted that it is often Whites who espouse

colorblindness, because they do not experience discrimination on a daily basis as do Blacks in this country. To be colorblind is a privilege not afforded to Blacks. The following excerpts illustrate these social workers' critique of colorblindness. These quotes also illustrate how they felt that recognition of a person's color as part of their unique identity signifies cultural acceptance:

Carla: To me colorblindness means, neglecting to see oppression or neglecting to see racism. I do not, necessarily accept the term colorblindness, 'cause I do not think people should be colorblind. I think if you are colorblind then you are like blissfully ignorant of people's oppressions and people's negative experiences involving race and particularly Black people. If a White person would say, "I do not see race, I am colorblind," well that is not necessarily a good thing. Maybe you should, you know, see, that Black people are oppressed and – and try to understand that you can be better or do better or teach people to do better or be better.

Keisha: Because to deny color just in general, denies somebody's heritage. It denies where somebody came from and I would- I do not wanna take that from anybody. So when I say, "I do not or not see color- like I said earlier - I am just saying I am gonna treat everybody the same. So when you start saying colorblindness, then you- you are really saying that everybody is just a plain canvas. And we are not all plain canvases. And that is the beauty of everybody is that we are all different Asian, Indian, Hispanic, you know, whatever we are, we need to acknowledge that. And we need to learn more about different cultures and be more inclusive as to just saying, "I am colorblind." Now, if we are gonna have colorblind, colorblind needs to be incorporated into culture competence.

Cassie: I think if someone says they are colorblind they mean they do not see color but I do not-- That is very interesting because I thought about that earlier, I do not see how you can be blind to someone's color, that is gonna be the first thing that you see, and it is not-- To me that is not wrong. If I have a client that comes in, the first thing that I am gonna notice, it is a White male, it is a Black female. I am not gonna be blind to that. Not that-- Is that gonna affect the way that I do my work?

No, it is not gonna affect the way that I do my work. It is not. But I do not-- I see color, I see male, I see female, so, that is how I guess I can define it, if that helps.

These quotes illustrate the significance of recognizing the color/racial identity of a person and the uniqueness of particular cultural groups. Colorblindness fails to acknowledge the

significance of cultural diversity in the population. Acknowledging cultural diversity is paramount, as it allows society to recognize the implications of racism and discrimination facing minority groups. Advocating for colorblindness only serves to advance oppression as opposed to addressing the underlying factors influencing discrimination on the basis of skin color.

Participants are aware that others, particularly White co-workers and clients, often employ colorblindness, and they respond to it in different ways. Black social workers readily concede that they see color and that “colorblindness” is not a lens through which they approach the world. This is in contrast, as they point out, to many of their White clients and co-workers, who can comfortably ignore and possibly deny the existence of racism under the guise of colorblindness.

Because social workers provide a service to a wide diversity of individuals with unique backgrounds, needs, and concerns, many of whom espouse colorblindness, the Black women in this study are required to deal with the manifestations of colorblindness in their daily work life. This is often complicated by the fact that many of their co-workers and clients are also women, who may share similar experiences of oppression based on sexism but not racism. Their White clients and colleagues are less likely to experience discrimination based on the color of their skin and enjoy the benefits of White privilege at the sacrifice of people of color. White women are given numerous opportunities to develop themselves in an individual capacity as opposed to Black women who must overcome rampant disparities before they acquire an opportunity to develop their individual capacities. While espousing a colorblind approach, many Whites are able to ignore the tribulations endured by Blacks due to their race.

The women in this study are well aware of how colorblindness is often deployed by their White co-workers and clients and, based on their own subjective lived experiences, respond to it

in different ways. According to Ashley, colorblindness may be used in the context that all people are equal. However, this can be offensive at times, as the term fails to account for cultural diversity and can be interpreted as disrespecting other cultures. Colorblindness is particularly used in reference to people of color. Thus, colorblindness leads people to be blind to the heritage and uniqueness of racial identities.

Ashley: Whenever they say that, I may not react, you know, verbally because you think that is the most appropriate thing to say but when you really say, "I do not see color," that is more offensive to me because what you are telling me is that you do not recognize the things- you do not recognize the struggle that my people have gone through or the things they may still be going through or the reason why we act the way we act because of our history. So, when people say, "I do not see color," to me it is kind of putting a blanket over everything and you are not- you are not or you are not respecting where different people come from.

Carla tries to be understanding of why people may approach the world this way but recognizes its limitations:

Carla: I think people are using it, in a different way. I have – have heard, examples of other definitions. So for example, people who say they are colorblind may say it with good intentions. I am – I am sure they do say it with good intentions, just to say that I am not racist, I do not care if you are Black or you are Asian or whatever it may be, I am colorblind, I do not care. I understand – I understand that, and I understand what they mean, but like I said I do not think it should be used, or I do not think people should, you know, feel that they are colorblind, because they – we do need to know the experiences of other people in order to understand them and to be sensitive around them and around their issues and their problems and negative experiences.

Felicia and Tamara feel very strongly that the colorblind approach is detrimental not only to Blacks personally but to the field of social work:

Felicia: Okay. So, people often say that I do not agree with that from a professional standpoint and I believe that you have to understand how people fit in the world and their culture is part of it, and as social workers, we are about, improving the person's fit in the social context, and so, therefore, because we live in a country, or in a world where color of skin dictates people's status and access to power, then as social workers, I just do not believe that you can ignore the color of someone's skin. Because, if we are gonna help empower people and people identify their power, we have to understand about the barriers to that, and then also, what are beneficial tools that people can use.

Tamara: I feel like color is why we are in the mess that we are in. I mean, if we are honest, the social injustices that we work for, the stigma that we see, anything from, "Oh well, minorities are less likely to engage in mental health services because the stigma," or, "Minorities are more likely to make less money, to achieve less educational achievements." All of the mess that we are in, the issues that we fight for as social workers, our whole role is based off injustice.

To separate injustice from race is impossible, so, I do not think that there is any room for that in our field at all.

Today, social work is not taught as an acceptable lens for viewing clients or determining the best services for them. The participants in this study believe that understanding different races is essential for social workers, and race can play prominently in determining services for clients as illustrated by Ashley:

Ashley: I always see color because there is some way that I have to evaluate things. So for instance, we may get a call or we may get a report saying, "Hey, this child came to school today and she said that her mom has not washed her hair in three weeks." So the first thing I am gonna look at or try to find out is, what race is this child? Because if it is a Caucasian child, something's going on but if it is a Black child, okay, is her hair in braids? You know, that is not uncommon for, you know, for an African American child to not have their hair washed that frequently. So I- I think I would have to see, just to make the appropriate call because you know, it may be neglectful for one culture but not neglectful for the other culture.

While recognizing the importance of seeing race, the participants emphasized that ultimately race should not affect the overall goal of social workers, which is to provide appropriate services. Ashley's comments show it is paramount to understand different races along with their uniqueness, as this understanding can be critical in designing appropriate interventions. Colorblindness can jeopardize the ability of social workers to effectively interact with clients. Further, colorblindness promotes ignorance of some vital and genuine concerns held by minority groups. This is an unethical stance as it fails to acknowledge the problems faced by marginalized groups. MTR explains:

MTR: I feel like colorblindness does not align with our ethics as social work. So if you are walking in a door and saying I see no color and I do not see race but they look in the mirror and they see it every day or they are at work and they are dealing with it every day, then that means you are not asking certain questions or you are not addressing certain concerns that they genuinely have. So if you have that belief I feel like it is unethical because you are not going to be able to completely start where the client is in your work with them.

While the participants in this study avoided a colorblind perspective, they were united in their commitment to serve their clients. Warrior believes that social workers need to focus on providing the best possible care to those they serve.

Warrior: I see the person who comes in the room and I know that I need to provide them services regardless of who they are. That is what I see. That is what I know. That is-- You know, whether they accept me as a person or not, that is another thing, and that is really on them, but I know what I am there for, you know. I am there to provide the best possible care.

This strongly indicates that understanding the needs of a client is paramount, as it guides a social worker through the development of an appropriate intervention plan. Moreover, because social workers usually work as representatives of oppressed and vulnerable individuals in society, they work to spread knowledge on, and sensitize people to, race. Their main objective is to ensure the equality of all people, regardless of race or color.

## **Cultural Competence**

As illustrated in the discussion about colorblindness, the social workers in this study approached their practice with the acknowledgement that race matters and one cannot afford to be colorblind. They embody what is commonly called cultural competency. Cultural competence empowers social workers to acclimatize and react to people's, groups', and families' needs, beliefs, attitudes, and values to facilitate more culturally competent involvement, practice, and support (Abrams & Moio, 2009, p. 248). For social workers, evaluating all forms of clients'

beliefs, attitudes, values, and religious beliefs is crucial in understanding clients' whole biopsychosocial histories. Creating and understanding cultural competence is a unique process that requires the social worker to evaluate the self at all times. Cultural competence involves appropriately responding to a distinctive combination of cultural dimensions and variables. Therefore, culturally competent social work programs must maintain a set of appropriate perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors. This begins first with the acknowledgement of the existence of diversity in the world at a personal level:

Keshia: And the only way you are going to understand is when you are willing to sit down and have a true conversation or truly- and not only help an- individuals. How many friends do you have? We do a culture competence game here. Will we give out different color beads? How many Hispanics do you know? How many this do you know, how many of that do you know? Is your doctor White? Is your doctor Black? To see how diverse your world is. If your personal world is not diverse you are not- you definitely not going to be able to go out and help somebody else.

Cultural competence is essential in providing quality services in a respectful manner as illustrated in the following:

Warrior: Yeah, you know, we try to...to accommodate people based on their race, you still treat them with respect, everyone across the board, treat them with respect. You provide the services that they need so they will be able to, you know, Yeah, an Asian person, you are gonna try to learn as much as you can so as not to offend them, you know? Uh, I do not know. That is all I can say.

Shuv: I had Hispanics and I even took a Spanish class in my old age because thinking well- but I took it so I could understand and relate to them as well as their parents. And one of my students was the one that helped me to do my homework, so it was neat.

Shuv: Thank God I was able to be hired in because their perceptions of people was so off base. It was like they had people being psychotic or whatever, based on eating and like I never forget this. You know, they had described this client as eating sour dirt and all that as being, you know, weird and crazy, you know, bizarre; that was the term they used. Bizarre? I said, "Oh, that is a cultural thing that came from Alabama, people there eat sour dirt," and I said, "You sure not crazy," and they said, "What?" So it was like, "Oh, you need to go back and correct those- that stuff in his records," you know. [laughs].

Warrior and Shuv acknowledged the significance of accommodating individual preferences in social work services.

Most participants defined cultural competence as one's attitudes, skills, and behaviors that enable one to work successfully in a cross-cultural setting. They agreed that social workers should adopt and value existing diversity, be aware of the identity biases in different cultures, and be able to treat and manage diverse people. Additionally, culture is the fundamental principle for developing and cultivating self-identity.

Warrior, Ashley, Cassie, and Ann suggested that cultural awareness prepares social workers to better provide appropriate services based on knowledge learned about various cultural groups.

Warrior: You gotta learn who you are working with. I mean, the race-- I would say cultural competency, because you really can offend someone if you say the wrong thing, offend their culture, maintaining eye contact with someone who does not believe in-- You know, they might-- If they are late, really really late for an appointment, you may be offended but for them that is, you know, part of their culture, so, just learn that they may be late. That is who they are.

Ashley: I think we should be more culturally aware of individuals. I think culturally competent is deeper than what we are taught.

Cassie: You need to still be aware of different cultures, so you would know how to approach them. If you have a difficult time approaching different cultures, I mean, with the Hispanic population, it is frowned upon for you to always, you know, talk directly to the female so just being culturally competent about that culture. It does not mean that you are gonna treat the person differently but you just wanna be respectful of that culture.

Ann: Okay. Well I notice that I will have to interact with people who maybe have a different culture from what I have and I realize that and have to respect that. Understanding their culture in order to move on forward and also to gain their trust because I know in different cultures, they may not -- well they are not the same as what we would do. So, I have to respect that. For example may be one who does not believe in a blood transfusion and they may need one. So, I have to understand what their belief may be in order to work with the individual.



Keshia: So I am - I am just gonna tell- but sometimes you can not be as raw and real with the Korean population, you have to kind of say it a different way. Even with Caucasians. Like with African American moms I get real to them and say, "Hey, this is the situation." You know. "They are gonna come here and we are gonna do an uh an evaluation of your home. If you do not do what you need to do, they are gonna take your kids." You know. And sometimes you just have to break it down like that. You have to get on any- any one level who you are dealing with, get on their level. With the Korean population, I may have to say it in a different way where, you know, "I- I know that you may have family members that you rely on. You know, is there anybody that you can really rely on in order to be able to help you?" Get an understanding you know. "Is- is there something that I can do?" I will do the same thing for both but it is the way you say it and convey it. You have to be able to- to- to let those individuals know that you are sincere. And people can see fake, they will see it. They will see it a mile away if you real and you are sincere or if you are just there just blowing smoke.

Keshia discussed the importance of being culturally competent and its importance in dealing with various clients.

Cultural competence is essential for Black female social workers to understand clients' self-identity and cultural identity. With no awareness of culture, Black female social workers will add to the negativity that exists when dealing with culturally different individuals (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Keshia described her experience with cultural competence by providing examples from her own experiences:

Keshia: [laughs] No, I was not taught it. I think that over the process of just trying to treat people the way I expect them to treat me and learning. You know, learning about different cultures. Like a lot of people do not know about German culture. You know and when you go and you talk to a German individuals and you go into their homes, say you are a friend of theirs and they offer you something to drink, you know, in- in German culture, if you say, "I will have water." They are gonna bring you a Seltzer water like- or uh- uh- uh what do they call it? spark- like a sparkling water. You would have to tell them "tap water" in order to be able to get just regular water, like a water bottle.

Keshia: With the Hispanic population you can say, you know, you are gonna go, you are gonna speak to the- to the father maybe primarily first. And, you know, out of respect you always wanna go into the home with respect. So, whoever needs to be the person that you need to talk to and go in, have that respect for those individuals and go in and then ask permission.

Felicia took it one step further by explaining how you can use probing questions to avoid making assumptions about your clients:

Felicia: [One client] said, "Well you know in Hispanic culture, family's very important and getting together during, particularly the holiday season." So, then I had her explain to me even more, "Tell me what that means culturally", and she was telling me how it is very important to do certain rituals, or certain gatherings during the holiday season, despite the fact that her parents are divorced, and to be inclusive. They are divorced but the family is really everybody they are involved with and how creating opportunities for them to all be together is crucial for them, and she was telling me about the different things that they do. And so, the way I used cultural competence is really-- I could have assumed, "Yeah, I understand people get together at the holidays," but cultural competencies is, "Oh okay, tell me what it means in your culture," and then I can say to her, "Now I understand in a different way why it is so troubling to you when your father wants to separate from your mom, uh, and particularly on the holidays," because it runs through-- this is kinda the values. So, it helped me in terms of what kind of intervention I suggest that she apply.

The responses from the interviewees strongly indicate that cultural competence is more than being aware of an individual's belief system. It involves understanding some of the nuances enshrined in the belief system of the client.

### **Importance of Being Culturally Competent in Verbal and Nonverbal Communication**

Effective communication is an important skills for social workers (Sidell & Smiley, 2008). Social workers' jobs involve communicating with clients to acquire information and assess it appropriately in order to accurately make critical decisions. Effective communication can be verbal or nonverbal. Poor communication skills may be damaging because they may result in miscommunication, which can lead to damaging decisions (Sidell & Smiley, 2008).

Social workers are taught that effective communication skills are based on the successful practice of learning how to become an active listener and a good communicator. To understand clients' needs better, social workers are taught to be good listeners who pay attention to details,

which includes body language. Active listening skills also require social workers to avoid showing negative body language such as doodling, yawning, or appearing disinterested as a way of showing disagreement with the way the client may be communicating (Sidell & Smiley, 2008). When learning listening and interviewing skills, social workers are taught that it is necessary to obtain information from clients, even from those who are unwilling to disclose it or cannot express themselves well. Using alternative tactics such as word association or role play helps social workers get information from such clients (Sidell & Smiley, 2008). Being culturally competent allows social workers to be more sensitive in both verbal and nonverbal forms of client communication.

### **Verbal**

It is of utmost importance that social workers exhibit effective verbal communication skills. For verbal communication to meet the needed intention, it has to have the right tempo, tone, clarity, and ease of understanding (O'Rourke, 2008). Verbal communication is often accompanied by nonverbal communications. The centrality of communication concerning different races is determined by the respondent's and the communicator's backgrounds and the different problems encountered by the clients (O'Rourke, 2008).

When Black female social workers have complex conversations with their clients, the success of the intervention is based on both parties having a mutual understanding, which should be built on trust. The social worker needs to make adjustments, such as allowing the client to voluntarily express inner thoughts and expressions. A social worker can make an adjustment when conflict with the client arises. With clients who are not cooperative during the session, a social worker may decide to bring in an impartial party or a moderator who will assist in

resolving the conflict (Sidell & Smiley, 2008). Ethically, a social worker is obligated to refrain from any form of threat and from raising her voice with clients when conflict arises during conversation.

When the social worker and the client are from the same social background, mutual understanding tends to be easy, especially in facilitating two-way open communication. For a social worker to understand and better address the client's problem, it is important to make sure that there is some connection in terms of emotions and bodily responses. Ensuring an environment conducive to an effective communication environment makes it easier for clients to implement suggestions that arise in the course of conversation. According to the participants in the study, this is easier when clients and social workers share the same racial background. Keshia uses the term "keeping it real" to describe the connection she is able to forge with her Black clients because of their race:

Keshia: Sometimes with— with the African Americans, I would— you know, we had this term, you know, an internal term, try and keeping it real.

Carla spoke about how it is to communicate with African Americans by understanding the context of the conversation.

Carla: Generally I guess I would say working with, Black individuals, I think I can tell more stories that are relatable to them. Stories they can relate to, situations they can relate to, and I can speak with them, I can communicate with them in a— in a certain way that, maybe one of the White individuals that I serve and their families may not understand. They may not understand the dialect or the rhetoric or whatever.

Felicia spoke of how she connects with other individuals from African American descent and how she fails to establish a passionate connection with Hispanics and Caucasians.

Felicia: I feel like most of the time when I have African American clients, we connect on a cultural level. Uh, there is a— I— We have, Not that every African American has the same experience, but I— I always feel I recognize something in others related to our race and how it affects interaction in the world, and so, it kind of gives me a feeling, whether right or wrong, that I have a— I start at a different place, I start at a place, It is easier for

me to have rapport and engage them. That is not only true for African Americans, but also I found it is true when I am working with people who are Hispanic, Latino, Native American. With, uh, Caucasians, I do not necessarily always feel that initial affinity that has to do with race.

When clients and social workers from different racial backgrounds interact, there may be a problem understanding each other. For example, when some African Americans use slang, some other races may fail to understand or relate to its meaning. The interviewees stated that at times there is a common communication connection; however, when working with other ethnicities, there is often a sense of searching for a connection. Felicia and Keisha also spoke about their relationships with Caucasians and other races.

Felicia: I immediately have an assumption that I have some level of relationship without having to search for it with people of, uh, who are minorities, uh, that there is some common level of experience. I— I go into my interviews, or to my counseling sessions [coughs] I— I feel that, and with, uh, Caucasians, I am usually searching for ways to connect with them.

Keshia: I think that, a lot of people, White people are just afraid of race. Are afraid to— to even go there. Everything is so taboo and— and touchy feely and people will get offended easily and you know. And a lot of times, you know, White people do not see things because if it does not affect you, then you do not care about it. So, if it does not affect me, then why— why would I even mention it? Why would I even say anything? And I think that is— that is where it is. Not that we associate ourselves as African Americans in a certain class. But you know, a lot of Caucasians in the elitist is what you wanna say cuz they— they feel that they are even elitist. That is their— the— mentality. They only surround their self with Caucasian people. They only surround themselves— of course, you do not see color because you do not know. You know, in my— uh I try to teach my sons all the time. They go to a private school, the first thing that they were— we were told when we went to the private school was, “Hey, they have to make sure they keep their grades up. Well cause you are coming from a public school. So, you may have had all A’s in public school but you know A’s in public schools are like Cs in private school.” But you do not see color. So, they did not say it, but immediately you are thinking, “Okay, you discriminate against my child because they had good grades in public school and do you say that to the Caucasian kids that come in from public school?” So, people more so act on and you can tell, as opposed to just saying.

Understanding the diversity of the population is particularly important, as it enables social workers to understand unique social challenges affecting their clients. This is particularly important, as it allows social workers to connect and identify with the factors influencing the perceptions and attitudes of clients in diverse populations.

A trusting relationship between the client and the social worker is critical. Having an honest conversation helps build trust and connection, which establishes a respectful relationship. MTR spoke about how class, race, and ethnicity affect her work and how she interacts with the client.

MTR: It may impact how I will work with them if I see it is an issue for them, you know. If I see that me being an African American woman is an issue then yes, it will impact. All of a sudden that will be the one that I will start to...I actually point it out. I think it is important to confront that, not talk around it, not work around it but hit it dead on and see if that means we are a good fit or if we aren't. I do not feel like it will be a huge issue from my end. So if I am sensing that then I will address it and I will ask them know that if that is a concern.

Keshia also observed the different interaction patterns and behaviors manifested by her African American and Caucasian clients.

Keshia: Tsk. Uh, when I first talk to them I— I hate to say, I think because of the work title, there is more respect with the title. But when I was a care coordinator, I would notice that a lot of the African American clients were less willing, you know and less accepting just because of the history here with health care. But the Caucasian clients, they were more willing to listen.

MTR and Keshia support the notion that race, ethnicity, and social class affect the way an individual interacts with other people. Therefore, it is paramount to understand cultural and unique factors that may influence the way they interact.

Social workers should work toward ensuring clients are comfortable when holding a conversation. Clients seek services while trusting that they will find a solution from the social worker; however, for some clients this is not easy, especially when the problem is highly

personal and private. There may be some barriers to holding a conversation, and the client may end up feeling uncomfortable. Complicated conversations may be exacerbated because of race, ethnicity or social class which may result in a setback to finding the solution to a problem; however, the social worker should be ready and able to improve this situation. The social worker is viewed as the connecting bond between society and the client (Cowger, 1977).

Communication may be complicated because social workers need to read both verbal and nonverbal client communication. Some clients may need the social worker to go the extra mile if they do not understand the questions being asked. When Black female social workers engage in complicated conversations, they must use good listening skills, and they must empathize with the client; these are the key communication skills that connect clients and social workers. Such skills create a relationship that is based on trust. Sometimes the social worker needs to make adjustments, like involving a supervisor, in cases of a conflict. Being aware of the cultural perspective and the background of the client can help the social worker. The social worker can then intervene and empower clients to reach their intended goals.

### **Nonverbal**

Equally important to a social worker's effectiveness is her nonverbal communication. According to the participants of this study, a substantial section of their daily communication is nonverbal. They respond to clients using nonverbal methods such as gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact. Nonverbal communication ranges from a handshake to observing how a client shows facial emotions. Such observations can give insight into the kind of client one is working with and how to assist in creating a connection that leads to mutual understanding and trust. Eye contact is an important technique used by social workers when speaking to their clients or

clients' caregivers. For example, a social worker may look to see if the client smiles to gauge whether the client is approachable. One of the social worker's effective communication strategies is making eye-to-eye contact when engaging in nonverbal communication. The client is involved with the social worker in nonverbal communication through signals such as a smile, which brings warmth and makes a social worker seem more approachable. Another strategy in nonverbal communication is keeping a respectful distance, which helps the social worker and the client improve the comfort level between them.

Nonverbal communication is essential in dealing with clients as illustrated in the following excerpt when asked "when you first meet your clients, what do you see?":

Shuv: I notice facial expressions.

Felicia: I usually notice— Well, I notice whether they appear comfortable, uh, when they have first noticed me. Do they give me eye contact? What I notice about them is their posture, if they are, uh, Caucasian or another ethnicity, I notice if they appear to have a relaxed posture, have a relaxed and welcome look on their face. Because I am African American, how they are— how they are physical nonverbal, verbally responding to me.

Warrior: When I first meet somebody, anybody, client or not, I see the person, whether they are Black, White, Asian, whatever it is, I am still gonna treat them, you know, with respect, but you can not help but to see, you know, what they are, who they are.

Amber: Usually I notice how— Me in general as a person, I notice how people carry themselves.

Ashley: I notice their appearance because we are assessing for the well-being and safety of children.

These responses show the importance of nonverbal communication when dealing with the client, as it provides a certain perspective of the problem, which informs the appropriate intervention.

The social worker can address poor communication by reading the client's nonverbal signals. Not all clients are open to conversations involving critical components of their lives. For



this reason, it is important to have competent skills in reading behavioral cues, which are sometimes culturally based. This can help determine if there is something the client is hiding or is uncomfortable with. As the social worker discusses a problem with the client, she can discover if the effect is positive or negative according to how the client responds. A client who is comfortable with the conversation should become more relaxed, if not happy, as the session continues. A social worker should be able to identify an uncomfortable client if there is a feeling of withholding information. Warrior and Powerful talked about how a client's nonverbal communication affects how they respond to the client:

Warrior: You know, what tone they use, you know, a Black client may come in and if he is using a certain tone of— I mean, tone in language, you know, then sometimes I will go with him on how he is— he is talking, and— and I do not mean profanity or inappropriate behavior, but if he comes in and he is talking, Ebonics, I will listen to him [laughs].

Powerful: And it takes a lot of soul searching I think in the moment. But I have had people, depending on when they came in, they were Black or White, whoever that they came in with a gentle spirit, one that was demanding and haughty and angry. And I related to that. I have to say I relate to how you approach me. You come to me with a smile, or you come with me with the frown, angry, demanding, and so on.

Felicia described how she came to learn the importance of visual clues from a lived experience in her youth.

Felicia: Well, when I was— When I was younger, and I— I lived in a, uh, large multiracial, multiethnic metropolitan community. But there was a lot of division in the community. I was very conscious of when I met someone who was my client about checking out, like, visual cues whether they would be accepting of me, and if they were, uh, evaluating me because of my race. That would— That would just be the first thing I would be thinking about.

However, Cassie thinks that non-verbal communication can potentially have a negative impact on how clients respond to an African American social worker. This initial negativity requires further interactions in order to understand the perspective of the other party in the communication process.

Cassie: I felt bad because they also compared their interaction with me to the interactions of a big group of people, so yes, the parents, they get to meet me for five minutes. So, you

know, “Hey, I am Cassie and this is what I am here to do,” and the response that I got is that they thought everybody else was— the majority of the other families were White, the majority of the other workers were White as well, and it is that they made the comment that everybody else seems to be getting along with their social worker but they did not get along with me. I did not understand that because as I was partnered to them the husband seemed— He did not make eye contact with me so I am kinda aware when I notice things. But the wife was just very giggly and funny and laughing, but when I got their report I am like, “Okay, I am confused,” and when the supervisor said that she was not gonna change me over, I texted the— I reached out to the family and told them, “If there is anything that we need to discuss, please let me know, I do not want you to feel uncomfortable.” It took them a few days to respond, and eventually when they responded, and I met them again in person, I tried to clear the air and asked them what was going on, what was the concern, and I said it again, my role in the, so they could understand. I think, it went okay after that, but as we talked, and I wanted to understand their point of view and I gave them my point of view and we kinda came together, I think it was better.

All participants agreed that visual clues are essential in communication. They provide a wider overview of the person’s intentions, along with setting the mood in any discussion.

In most cases, communication is interpreted as passing information from the source to the recipient; however, there are times when the interpretations received by the recipient can either be accepted or misinterpreted, depending on how the information was processed. Social workers should use the information that they have collected to improve the clients’ lives. Social workers should be good listeners who give clients time to talk through issues. Additionally, they should be ready to hold clear conversations that clients can understand. Sometimes, they should repeat what they have said or heard to ensure that the social worker and clients all understand.

As demonstrated in this section, cultural competence may help the Black female social worker to critically evaluate the body languages of their clients and inform their decision in providing the best services for them. Moreover, the social workers themselves must avoid communicating negative messages through their body languages themselves. The importance of nonverbal communication should not be understated as it can have a significant impact on the social worker and client relationship.

## **Racial Discrimination: Social Workers Living Race Every Day**

The fourth theme of this study focuses on how social workers deal with and respond to the rampant racial discrimination and denigration experienced in their professional lives. Most people feel as though racism is taught or learned from others who feel the same way as noted by Amber:

Amber: If you are raised in the deep south, usually more than likely, in the older days, you—you know you—you were raised by some people who probably had some stereotypes and some prejudices towards, you know, minority people, and you—I mean, you still have that, that is part of your heritage, that is part of your family, and you respect that part of your family. When it comes to working with children, most kids they do not—like, they are innocent as possible, they do not know much about racial issues, they do not know much about, you know, the prejudice—the prejudice, situations that go on in the world, and so, when you talk to younger kids, you can really just talk to them.

If racism is taught or if children are socialized into being racists, how can one counter these deeply engrained beliefs? This is a question that plagued the social workers in this study as they simultaneously felt empowered and oppressed in their jobs. Black women empowerment and access to social justice cannot be fully experienced if one must contend with racial prejudice and negative stereotypes at work (Collins, 2001b).

What was readily apparent was that every participant had her own story about the many ways in which she had experienced racial discrimination. Two examples are illustrious:

Warrior: I turned in my resignation because my supervisor was giving me hell for no reason that I could think of. All of my evaluations stated, exceeds work expectations. I thought, definitely age, and race, for sure because they started hiring social workers there are young, White females, and here it is, I am older than they are. I was encouraged to resend my resignation because HR did not know anything about it. So, when I went back to work in January. I always told my boys, you know, "You have gotta fight, you can not just give up, you gotta fight for whatever you believe in." I was not sleeping, eating, just to think somebody could hate you so badly that they want you, you know-- a career that I have worked for all these years, they were trying to get you fired.

Mary: When I worked in hospice care, there was a family, it was the wife who—I have forgotten what her diagnoses was anyway her husband called our medical director and

said, "I do not want a Black person in my home. "And, my medical director said, "Well then we can not provide services to you," because at that time, I was-- and I-- well because I was-- throughout that day, I was the only Black professional on staff, and he knew that that was prejudice on the part of that husband, and so, our medical director said-- I am sorry, I will turn that off-- and my medical director said, "Well I am sorry that, your social worker has to come and make that visit, and you know, you might want to seek hospice care from another agency that can accommodate you."

Black female social workers often witness White service providers giving more attention to White clients than Black clients, and there is nothing much they can do about it. Cassie narrated her encounter with discriminatory practices within her work environment.

Cassie: I think I notice it sometimes more with, with White patients, I notice it more with them that their White counterparts might get a service booked quicker or, may get treated better because of their race.

Cassie: We have two homeless gentlemen, one's Black, one is White, I-- I can see sometimes people would maybe help the White person faster than you may help the Black person but they are both in the same situation. That is something that I-- That is like my pet peeve, I do not like that, and even with a medical service-- from a standpoint, do not quickly provide a service to one and kinda-- kinda shove or push away what someone else could be telling you because you may not believe them. Or what they look like, or what they sound like, and sometimes, within that field, with any field such as social work I have noticed other professionals, it could be doctors, or nurses, or anybody else, you'll look at the person first and then you treat them according to how they look. Or if you notice, like, their level of education-- maybe they can not speak as well and that is how you treat them and that is not right. But I do notice that.

Cassie denounced discriminatory practices within social work services, as it is not right to discriminate against a person due to the level of their education, or how they appear, etc. Cassie witnessed how power and privilege continue to operate in today's society.

Some clients base professional competence on gender and race, and for this reason, they do not consider Black female social workers as competent. The participants noted that many of their White clients act as they do not believe they belong in the field. Others choose different social workers and would not consider working with a Black female social worker. Some of the

clients felt that a Black female social worker had not been trained or licensed to offer such services. The following illustrate this point:

Ashley: Oh, I think that growing up in south Mississippi—so where I work at now is pretty much where I grew up and this is the norm here. Just growing up, you just hear people saying, “Look, I do not wanna work with you in school because you are Black,” or I know when I was on homecoming, I asked one of my White male friends to be my escort and he said, “Well I have to go home and talk to my parents and grandparents because you know, you are Black and we are White and I do not have a problem with it but I think my family may.” So just being here, it is just kind of—I hate to say, it is the norm here in south Mississippi. So personally, I think my skin has just become accustomed to it but professionally, sometimes it really hurts because it is like, you do not know that there is a Black social worker over here who actually with their master’s and also is the one who is licensed, versus the White social worker who you think you want, you know, they may just be finishing up school. They have not, you know finished school yet or sometimes professionally because okay, I have gone to school, I have done all of these things. I have, and you do not even want me based on the color of my skin.

Tamara: So, in that particular job, I always felt like nine times out of 10 that they had my back, so, I was not as concerned as if I was going on those calls by myself. If that was the case, I would refuse to go on the call. I remember a specific call where it was a lady, she was calling for help, she was suicidal, and she was in a domestic violent relationship. So, she called for herself, we got there, but it said in the triage that the abusive boyfriend was racist. She said that we better not send a Black person out there. So, in that regard, we dialogued with the lady and when it came to trying to coordinate with the boyfriend, we refused to unless police were on site. That was how we handled that particular situation. Yes, when we needed to involved law enforcement we would, for protection, which is a little ironic these days but at that time, that was the best option that we had.

Clearly, racism complicates the interventions of Black female social workers by increasing the amount of emotional burden when it comes to the provision of effective and efficient services.

These experiences point to an argument that Collins makes African American women continue to remain oppressed in the United States due to a variety of injustices tolerated, perpetuated, and maintained by the White power structure. One of those injustices, as Collins (2001b) notes, is the pervasive and persistent negative image of Black womanhood that leads to the further objectification, oppression, and discrimination of women in the workforce, including

social workers. Despite these injustices and the numerous barriers faced by Black women, they have managed to produce intellectual work.

This research took place in the South which cannot ignore nor escape its racial history and its oppression of Black people, of which the participants in this study were very aware as illustrated in the following:

Ashley: I think prepare, just based on life and just how it usually is in south Mississippi. I do not think it is something that is really being taught in schools or really just- or maybe it is taught at schools but it is not emphasized that this is probably going to be the reality or whenever you do graduate or whenever you start working but I would think here, being in south Mississippi, you know, this is probably and it is something we dealt with, growing up. So we are kinda already prepared because we've dealt with this so much in childhood and young adulthood, things like that. So it is kind of the norm for it to trickle over into our profession but I do not think it is something that in schools that they really emphasize.

Keshia: - I- I figured the South would be a bit different. But not in the sense of just them be and just outright blatantly racist in a- in a lot of things just downright racist discriminatory, not only against African American females but against women, you know. And but I have learned to adjust being able to work here and being able to work in the North has you know, how to see the differences has prepared me to really be able to open up my eyes and see, you do mean cultural competences is very important.

Shuv: There were times, being in the state of Michigan, which is different because I was the first Black social worker in the school system, the whole county of Muskegon. So I was not readily accepted by a lot of the clients or parents. Students, it does not matter, you know, some of who we were like this, see if they would rub off my skin tone because of what they were taught at home but you know, I was a touchy person as a matter of fact.

One of the most insidious forms of discrimination and prejudice experienced by these social workers is hearing the “N” word either directed at them or to other African Americans. Many of the participants felt this was a direct result of the horrific history of the oppression of Blacks in the South and the continued prevalence of racism and White supremacy in the South. A central component of a successful social worker-client relationship is trust, rapport, and

respect. However, as illustrated below, many African American social workers have had to endure the ultimate form of disrespect - being called the “N” word.

The “N” word is widely considered synonymous with slavery and was predominantly used to refer to African Americans. Black people were barred from certain areas, especially those dominated by Whites. As a consequence, the “N” word is widely perceived as a way to demean and discredit African Americans in contemporary society, particularly when it is used by a White person referring to an African American. It is also considered derogatory and hence not accepted within the social sphere. The “N” word is considered impolite and in some instances as an abusive word. When it is used within the field of social work services, the “N” word is considered racist and is often used to discredit the person’s ability to deliver quality services. Referring to a Black female social worker with the “N” word may also be considered an intimidation tactic used by the client to indicate their supremacy over the African American race. For instance, some of the Black female social workers had this feeling:

Carla: I have to be—sometimes I have to be careful in, you know, what I say or how I approach myself, ‘cause like I said I have some older White males on my case load who will say the “N” word, who will look at me like you are a young Black girl, you do not know what you are talking about, or—or maybe not the individual thinking or saying something like this but their family may say or think something like this. I have a person on my case load now who I am struggling—I am struggling, to communicate with her family, because, you know, they are White, they come from money, they have this, you know, aura about themselves that, you know, that appears to me to be a little superior. And so I have to make sure that I am confident in what I am talking about, I am competent in what skills I am trying to, get the individual to learn, or I am confident about, you know, what I am putting out and putting on paper and having them sign. I am—I have gotta make sure that, you know, I know what I am talking about, and, and I think—so like I said I have to be careful in how I portray myself. But I think—I think beyond that I just need to—I just make sure that all my ducks are in a row, and, you know, I am not portraying myself in a way that is gonna—I do not know. I think I need to—I do not know it is kind of hard to explain this one.

MTR explained how she has met a few clients using derogatory comments against African Americans.

Yes, I have heard a racial comment quite a few times. My client stated that he can not work with anybody or have anybody work with his son if they were a nigger. That was an example of what he believed as for associating with a person of color and not being willing to work with me because I was a person of color. That was because of the color of my skin and I wouldn't be able to help him.

Powerful also remembered how badly she felt when a person called her a "N" at a young age:

It is rough, it is rough. You can still see I get teary of the fact that that man called me a nigger back 50 years ago it seems. Because he was looking at me through his eyes, and he saw me the way he had been raised or taught about Negroes at that time, the Negroes or Black people. And I guess it affects me the same way maybe because it makes me feel like I am not good enough, or bad enough, or educated enough, that I am accepted by that person. And when I come home, I put myself through the wringer, saying, "Well –" it is just like in healthcare when you lose a patient, when someone dies, and I had to deal with those kinds of feelings as well, no matter what color. I had those thing kinds of feel of loss and hurt and grief for that individual. I go through the same emotions when somebody calls me a nigger, or says, "I do not want to work with you." I still go through – I would have gone through those same kinds of things. I went to those same kinds of things with that woman in my office said whatever she said as I was walking out the door. I had to come home, and I had to pray over that one, Karen. I really did, because I said, "Well, I got to go back in there, and I got to deal with these people, and I can not let what she said color my thought process when I am thinking about raises for her, or evaluations for her, or case assignments for her." It's a real torture, I mean it is a real learning curve, learn how to do that and master that, and not feel biases.

These testimonies indicate the magnitude of racism and how it has affected the Black female social workers in this study. It demonstrates the amount of emotional distress facing minority groups and how that does not simply disappear once one enters the workforce. Such experiences make the work of Black female social workers difficult. Being looked down upon because of the prejudices associated with the Black race and knowing that the client is not ready to accept one's professional advice is difficult for a social worker. It shows that some Whites associate incompetency with the person's color and gender.

Most of the Black population has, in one way or another, been addressed using the "N" word, which is cruel and discriminatory. Use of the terminology, according to Collins (1990), is toxic and affects how the worker handles the client henceforth. In such cases, there is bias and



discontent between the two parties. For instance, referring to a Black female social worker using the “N” word may lead her to develop a certain attitude towards the client. This may also be the case from the client’s perspective as exhibited by the use of the “N” word, which leads to the creation of a hostile environment, which eventually affects the quality of social work services rendered. The “N” word was mostly used during the enslavement of Black people by their masters, and its current use shows disregard for empowerment, especially among Black women (Collins, 1990). It shows that the fight against domination as well as racial and gender discrimination is not yet over. Full empowerment of the Black women can only happen if there is a concerted effort to accept them in society.

Black Feminist Thought provides a helpful theoretical framework for social workers in their fight for justice for African American women both individually, collectively, and professionally. Black Feminist Thought provides helpful strategies to fight racial discrimination and the use of the “N” word in their occupation. As a Black female social worker, there are times when you are overly cautious due to rules and occupational ethics. In this case, Black female social workers often guard themselves to ensure that when working in such difficult situations with prevalent racial prejudice, they always try to keep themselves safe.

### **Dealing with Racial Discrimination**

Black female social workers have to devise their own personal strategies for dealing with the rampant racism and discrimination both in their personal and professional lives. For Warrior, she leans heavily on her spirituality and faith to help her deal with the implications of racism in her life:

Warrior: With the Lord's help and the support of a lot of people. That was-- That was my saving grace. That is been, you know, just faith, and because it was a test of faith, it was

just a bad situation. You are talking about one of your worst nightmares that someone could have such hatred that they would interrupt your life, or try to interrupt your life so much that, you know, they would even tell lies on you to get you out of your position, and then, you know, you decided, you know, "I am just so tired of this. I am just so tired."

The last theme of this study examines the strategies Black female social workers develop to deal with racism. One of the most common strategies Black female social workers use is to remember why they entered the field in the first place and to remind themselves constantly of their own competence and self-worth. Most social workers enter the field because they wanted to help individuals and families who are poor and living in substandard conditions. They consider their profession a calling or a passion. Social workers have embraced the code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers, which also offers guidance on how to respond in the event that discrimination arises. The passion to help an individual or family facing a major problem should not be stopped by a derogatory statement on race. Instead, it should act as motivator to show the positive side of the Black female social worker.

Amber: - You know, I am from the South, so I know how things are. I have been in the shoes where somebody has, you know, put prejudices on me, stereotyped me, so, I do not want my clients to feel like that and I do not want to make anyone, you know, feel uncomfortable. Because if I was not qualified to do my job, I wouldn't be here, and so, I laugh it off most of the time. It is offensive but like I said, if I was not qualified to do my job, I wouldn't be here, and so- it is uncomfortable, but, I still have a job to do and I still have to provide services for that client, I still have to make sure that, no matter, you know, what they say, how they treat me or my co-workers, or you know, whatever the situation was with her case and why she came here, and how it made me uncomfortable and my co-workers uncomfortable, we still had to do the best we can to provide the appropriate services to her and her family.

The participants in this study developed the strategy of remaining true to their calling first and foremost, and to remain professional in all instances. Sometimes, they saw it as their professional duty to help prejudiced clients understand that racism harms the positive relationships among social workers and their clients. Participants expressed that it is possible to

perceive and interpret racist treatment and remarks as not directed at them personally, either as professionals or as individuals. In such situations, failing to help prejudiced clients would mean that social workers have failed to live up to their own expectations by accepting the client's classification. However, when they overcome the negative derogatory reference, they are in a position to show the client that prejudice is wrong. Some of the Black female social workers expressed their willingness to continue working with racist clients despite suffering racism, as illustrated below:

Warrior: I mean, I am who I am, [laughs] you know? I am a Black female am I gonna think they may not wanna deal with me because I am a Black--? Sometimes I feel that, but I usually go with how they are responding to me, and I am still gonna provide them whatever services they need, you know, my race should not make a difference, but I know for some people it does. So, I am not gonna treat them any differently. Whatever it is that they need, I am -- If I do not know what the answer is, I will find out for them.

Ashley: When the clients come in and they request to have, you know, specifically a White social worker it is problematic because we do not have any White investigators or any White supervisors on the investigation unit. So sometimes you have to go via supervisors from a different department, just so the client can feel like their need is being heard and that you know, we are respecting their wishes.

Tamara: If I am trying to help a client who does not look like me, or I feel that we may have some issues, then we should have the conversation. "Do you feel uncomfortable? Are there any issues?" and you can engage in that conversation, I think that is very therapeutic not just for the client who may at that point in time say, "Oh no, it does not matter I feel fine," or, "You know what, I do prefer to work with somebody--." I think it is very therapeutic for both the client as well the clinical to be able to have an honest conversation about how race, or ethnicity, or religious differences may interfere with work.

The interviews indicated that three women were willing to continue working with racist clients, despite being subjected to various tribulations and ordeals, with the intentions of creating awareness about the social effects of racism and discrimination in contemporary society.

Another strategy they develop is to seek out help from their supervisors. In a social work setting, it is always important to work as a team whose members believe in each other.

However, when the supervisor does not believe in the team, a lack of trust develops, and leadership skills suffer. Instead of looking up to a positive leader who acts as a role model, the Black female social worker feels let down and not accepted by the team. The social workers I interviewed thought that the clients were rendered a disservice when such preconceived, prejudiced attitudes were accommodated as explained by Cassie:

Cassie: Okay. I had an instance to where I did have to work with a White family and, the first day I met them of course my objective is to get to know you. The next day I got a call from the lady which is White she said, "They have a problem and they wanna switch workers." I was like, "Okay," and I asked her why. She was saying because they did not feel I guess a good, happy vibe. So, I would say that made me feel uncomfortable because I wanted to see what was going on, especially if you are saying that you want to be a foster parent and foster any ethnicity.

Negative feelings about race can arise when supervisors relieve Black female social workers of a case involving a White client because the client is uncomfortable. Warrior narrated how she was let down by the supervisor and the feeling that engulfed her in the process.

Yes, I have had that to happen, and-- and I still disagree with that to this day, and that happened probably about 20 years ago. I had this White family, man, they were giving me a hard time, and I kept thinking, Why? you know, I am nice to them, I am trying to be as resourceful as I could. But then, my supervisor called me in and she said, "You have this family who's complaining about you," and she said, "So, I am going to move them to a White social worker," and I thought that was just the worst thing for her to do because this is just-- you have to work with people, and feel like she fed right into their hands, and to this day, whenever I see this woman I always think about that. Why did she do that? She-- She told me, she said that, "The family, they are prejudiced." Well I knew that, but I was willing to work with them, but she-- she switched them, and I felt that is giving in to racism, and I did not think that was a good thing for her to do but she did.

On the other hand, Cassie had no problem following the displeasure of the clients due to her race, as she knew that even a replacement would be a Black female co-worker.

Cassie: Actually I have had, patients that say, you know, "I wanna change clinics because I want a new social worker." So, they wanna change their doctor, everything, their doctor, just to get a new social worker, and I am fine with that and I promote, "Hey, whatever's gonna help you," but-- and only for them to realize the next social worker is a Black female. So, I do not tell them that, because they probably have not really expressed that

to me is that the reason they wanna move, so they will probably tell my boss who is a White female that they probably would rather get services elsewhere not knowing the next place that they go to get services the majority of us are African American females so you really cannot get away from it, and sometimes if I find out that is the reason and I can maybe be able to express that to the person and see is it something that I did. If it is something I did personally then of course I want you to get your service elsewhere that is gonna be okay. But if it is because of race then I need to tell you whatever social worker you are gonna come in contact with, they are gonna be an African American female, and I do not know if that is something that you need to get used to or it is that-- if you need to get your care elsewhere, but I do want them to be aware. I do not remember if it is really happened to me, it could have and that is okay because I work with a lot of older people too.

Whereas some Black female social workers feel let down when clients request for their replacement with a White practitioner, others are willing to let go, as they understand the nature of the workforce as related by Cassie.

A third strategy employed by the participants in this study is to confront racism directly. When White clients tell Black female social workers directly that they do not want to work with them, it is hurtful and demeaning. This is direct provocation and prejudice that leads to outright feelings of disregard. In most cases, the White clients fail to acknowledge the social workers' professional training and associate Black female social workers with failure and incompetence. The interviewees stressed that it was hard to understand such feelings by Whites. Collins's (1990) *Black Feminist Thought* has been addressing this issue, especially in terms of empowering Black women. Ashley gave a detailed account:

Recently we had a whole family who came and who told us, "Y'all have so many Black social workers. This is why we have all White children foster care because y'all do not take any of your own children," which is probably false. Like I said, I think there may be more Black children in foster care in our county than White children. Or they tell you directly, "I do not wanna work with you because of your race," but the thing is, we cannot always provide good quality services because just off the top of my head, I think we have three White social workers. I mean there are probably about 25 of us and there may only be three White out of those 25. So we can not always provide good quality services to them because they are limiting themselves to just a particular social worker and that worker may not be able to- you know, be available to take on new cases or what have

you. So sometimes you just basically just have to just explain, "Look, I understand your request but at this time we can not honor it," and just try to work with them but sometimes they remain kinda distant. They do not want any services, it takes them longer to get their children. So it isn't always a win-win situation.

This further supports the notion concerning the importance of addressing racial discrimination, especially against Black female social workers in attempts to enhance the effectiveness of this profession.

As they continue to fight injustice, even in 2018, Black female social workers are still dealing with White clients' racism. After so many years, it has become devastating and demoralizing for Black social workers to have to deal with these injustices. Many White clients continue to make Black female social workers' professional lives hectic and difficult to carry on. Mary also gave her encounter manifested by clients due to racial prejudice.

Mary: Well, it just made me realize that there is still a lot of prejudice out there, and no matter how well prepared you are, prejudice can overshadow practice. So, I felt for this man who was so prejudiced that he was willing to forego a service that would benefit him because he is so prejudice. As far as my employer was concerned, oh, I just admired him from that day until his death that, you know-- Sometimes, like I gave you the example earlier of people saying, "Oh some of my best friends are Black," or, "I have got Black friends. He did not have to say that. He stood, -- He said what he stood for, and that is, "We do not operate like that." So, I felt really, you know, just really good that he took that stand.

This scenario indicates how far some White clients are willing to go to forgo important services just to cater to their racially prejudiced egos.

Collins found that such issues can be addressed through Black Feminist Thought. Black female social workers need to express an independent consciousness to counter the inferiority perspective. When Black female social workers share a common experience, they may be predisposed to develop a distinctive group consciousness that can help to articulate the group

view and fight against these prejudices. As a group with a certain viewpoint, they could shape a better response to unjust power relationships.

To ensure that all individuals occupy their own personal space and stop looking down on others, there is a need to develop an effective anti-racist and anti-gender discrimination strategy that involves engaging Black female social workers with White client groups. Prejudice and stereotyping norms need to be broken to create a generation free from these societal vices, especially in rural areas of the United States. According to Collins, Black feminism is still important in the 21st century because American Black women still constitute an oppressed group. Black women remain subordinate within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, even as they carry out their duties as social workers. The presence of intersecting oppressions means that Black Feminist Thought and similar oppositional knowledge are still relevant (Collins, 1990).

Working as a Black female employee in relation to social work comes with its own share of issues related to racism. Whether coming from fellow White colleagues or alternatively, White clients, a Black female social worker may be perceived as being inferior and out of place in contrast to their White counterparts. Such treatment often subjects these social workers to unbearable emotional hardships. The fact that the Black female social workers often undergo such emotional burdens is unfair considering the tremendous contributions they make to the field.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Black female social workers face particularly raced and gendered challenges when it comes to remaining professional in their practice settings. The findings of this research bring these challenges to the forefront – including issues around communication, racism, discrimination, ignorance, and the awareness of clients’ personal and emotional wellbeing. In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss the implications of this research and make recommendations accordingly. I will end by addressing the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

### **Summary of Findings**

In this study, I addressed the primary question – how do Black female social workers view their clients through the lenses of colorblindness or cultural competence. Through the use of narratives excerpted from interviews, I describe in rich detail the many ways in which race plays out in the professional lives of social workers. This study demonstrates that Black social workers, despite their own personal beliefs about the merits of colorblindness vs. cultural competency, live race every day. By simply being Black and female, they are subjected to a host of discriminatory practices and must find ways to deal with the many affronts they suffer every day in the workplace. Their stories demonstrate how deeply embedded racism is in our society, and that Black women, more than any other group, are called upon to dig deep within themselves to ignore blatant racism in order to provide services to those they are charged with helping.



While professional training on ethical conduct is important, it is not sufficient in giving Black social workers the tools needed to combat racism in their workplaces.

The Black social worker interviewees had mixed reactions towards how they themselves deployed a colorblind approach within their workplaces. Each had her own nuanced perspective towards the concept of colorblindness. In some cases, they reported that they tried not to see anything other than a client who needed their help. Their race and ethnicity, they felt, should not play into the bottom line of providing the best possible services for their clients. However, the majority of them noted that in most cases they did employ cultural competency in working with their clients. They noted that it was hard to simply ignore cultural differences, and doing so would in the end make their clients, particularly their non-White clients, invisible and unappreciated. They noted many instances when being culturally competent allowed them to communicate better with their clients, understand them better, and to develop rapport with them. They felt that cultural competency allows them to understand a wide range of cultural backgrounds. Several of them readily admitted that they felt more at ease with their African American clients because they felt they shared a cultural understanding with them. They often reported feeling the least at ease with Whites because of their presumed cultural differences. They noted that being culturally competent allowed them to express pride in their own culture as well as to appreciate the culture of others. Ignoring their own culture or the culture of others could potentially erase this pride.

The participants were suspicious of claims of their White co-workers or clients who purported to be colorblind. They felt that all too often this approach provides a forum for White individuals to manifest their racist actions publicly by hiding behind the guise of colorblindness. The social workers in this study noted that many of their workplaces advocate that managers,

employees, and clients practice colorblindness; however, they believe such approaches, while perhaps good intentioned, are naïve and ineffective and often result in a failure to address racism. These Black female social workers often saw their White co-workers' assertion of colorblindness to be disingenuous as there are clear racial disparities among them.

Despite their professional or personal feelings about the pros and cons of adopting either a colorblind or cultural competent approach, the social workers in this study often found themselves denigrated, erased, or silenced because their clients, and sometimes their supervisors, practiced neither colorblindness nor cultural competence. They exhibited explicitly racist attitude and actions from clients refusing their service because they were Black, to requesting a change to a White social worker, to being routinely called the “n” word. It was in these circumstances that the social workers were called upon to suppress their personal feelings and reactions and deploy a professional approach to servicing their clients. They relied on their training and their professional set of skills and dispositions to try to treat clients equitably regardless of their economic, racial, and/or ethnic background and regardless of how they treated them.

Overall, the social workers in this study felt that colorblindness was not a useful tool for fighting racial discrimination or for dealing with diverse individuals with a variety of needs. They stress the importance of cultural competency in dealing with their clients. They felt that many White supervisors, under the guise of colorblindness, perpetuated racism in the workplace.

## **Implications**

Based on findings of this study, I define a social worker's cultural competence as providing a respectful, efficient, and effective response to people regardless of their race or ethnic background. This research demonstrated how a sense of cultural competence empowers

social workers to react to the needs, beliefs, attitudes, and values of people, groups, and families to facilitate more culturally competent involvement, practice, and support (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Thus, for the Black female social workers in this study, evaluating all forms of the client's general and religious beliefs, attitudes, and values are crucial in consideration of a client's whole biopsychosocial history. Cultural competence involves appropriately responding to a distinct combination of cultural dimensions and variables. Therefore, Black female social workers must be culturally competent to ensure an appropriate set of perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors. Among these are practices that honor human dignity and social justice.

As illustrated in this study, the ability of Black female social workers to practice ethically depends significantly on their professional and individual socialization. The social worker must have knowledge of how inequalities affect their clients. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) states that social work students must be educated to be responsive, critical practitioners who can ask questions, observe, and speak against injustices (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Training on cultural competency facilitates the development of social work students' reflexivity, a skill needed to supplement their procedural competencies and contribute to their professional and personal socialization. Such training can add another necessary layer of depth to justice advocacy in social work. This advocacy begins with the first interaction between social worker and client. How social workers engage with their clients sets the stage for a productive working relationship.

The Black female social workers in this study worked diligently toward ensuring that clients feel as comfortable as possible when engaging them in conversation. Clients who seek services trust that they will find a solution from the social worker. Difficult discussions may lead to setbacks in resolving the client's issue; therefore, the Black female social worker should be

equipped to appropriately intervene in such conversations to put their client at ease. The social worker is viewed as the connecting bond between society and the client (Cowger, 1977). For this reason, social workers should act as intermediaries with the best interests of the community and the individual in mind; this can help reduce complications with the client (DuBois & Krogsrud-Miley, 2002). Because the social worker serves as an intermediary, the conversation between social worker and client should focus on benefitting the client.

## **Recommendations**

### **Improve communication skills**

Black female social workers spend the majority of their time communicating with clients and engaging in interactions that require them to practice clear and competent communication skills. Communication is both verbal and non-verbal and usually work in tandem. Black female social workers, therefore, need to learn about and understand diverse communication styles present among different races and cultures to effectively perform their jobs.

### ***Verbal communication***

Verbal communication is the primary channel of communication between a Black female social worker and her client. Black female social workers, however, face challenges when engaging with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. For example, some clients may possess racial stereotypes, prejudices, and hatred toward the Black race, in general, a disposition which hinders or prevents them altogether from listening or comprehending anything that the Black female social worker is attempting to get across. A significant number of Black female social workers in this study indicated that they felt that their services had a more substantial

impact whenever they engaged with clients who shared their racial background. This shared perception may be attributed to the fact that individuals who share the same cultural background often have common verbal communications. For example, the use of the “N” word between two African American individuals does not likely have the ill motive compared to the same scenario with a White individual. Similarly, Black female social workers may not relate to the challenges that a White client faces who seeks advice from her. Because people from two races experience completely different lives in the same country, a White client, for example, may present a problem to a Black female social worker who, to the social worker, seems like a privileged White elite. Black female social workers must make sure to have open lines of communication. A Black female social worker cannot assume that communication is clear between themselves and the client. The Black female should always ask for clarification when needed in order to gain a clear understanding of the client’s intent.

### ***Non-verbal communication***

A Black female social worker also engages in non-verbal communication with a client from the moment their eyes come into contact during their first meeting. The need, therefore, for Black female social workers to understand and be able to communicate effectively non-verbally is paramount. The effectiveness of non-verbal communication, however, largely depends on the cultural background of an individual. As stated by the interviewees, the first impression presented by a client depends on his/her ethnic background. A Black female social worker, for example, may be at ease with the giggling and informal greetings presented by a Black client. The challenge, however, presents itself when a Black female social worker is assigned or receives a client whose culture varies from hers. The Black female social work has to interpret

all non-verbal clues such as lack of eye contact, handshake, and body gestures when working with all clients. The non-verbal impressions of the first client meeting may affect how both the client and the Black female social worker interact for the remainder of their meeting sessions. Black female social workers must develop a skill set for reading non-verbal communication. The Black female must trust her intuition when interacting with the client. If the client does not want to shake hands with the Black female social worker, for example, the client has the right not to do so. The gestures that the client does or does not present are non-verbal cues that the Black female notices and, in time, can learn how to develop coping skills that allow for a respectful exchange.

### **Discrimination**

Racism is not an innate characteristic but a learned behavior that is gradually acquired. So while a child who has perhaps begun to learn racist behaviors early on cannot turn down the services of a Black female social worker, the same child may do so in future if their racist beliefs continue to exacerbate. As demonstrated in this study when faced with racism, Black female social workers tended to continue to want to remain in the profession. However, Black female social workers were understandably discouraged when a client refused to work with them because of race. Some of the interviewees faced stigmatization and became demoralized when, for example, they were assigned a certain family but ended up getting turned down by these families on the basis of their skin color. Some White families, for example, dismissed their social worker and requested another when they did not have a connection with the Black social worker. Such racial judgments mean that Black female social workers were subjected to discrimination on the basis that they were considered to be professionally incompetent to work as a social

worker with White families. When this occurs, the Black female social worker needs to be mentally prepared for the possibility that all clients will not welcome the services provided by a Black female social worker. When the client makes a request for another worker, the Black female social worker must adhere to policies governing the work setting. The Black female social worker should not feel as though they have done something personally wrong but must have the understanding to acknowledge that clients have a right to deny the Black female social work services even if this could lead to negative outcomes for the client.

The “N” word has been used for over a century to refer to Black people. This word has continued to hurt Black female social workers significantly. Participants shared that there were times when clients would refer to them using this word. Despite such violent language, the Black social workers continued to work. Such words, however, negatively impact the relationship between the Black female social worker and her client. However, the participants in this study continued to set aside their personal feelings and worked towards resolving their clients’ issues. The Black female social worker should not feel as though she is obliged to teach basic skills such as respect and tolerance when working with a client that exhibits racist behaviors. When a Black female social worker is called the “N” word, they must report this to their supervisor and be allowed a safe space to discuss how they are personally dealing with the event.

When a client uses the “N” word against the Black female social worker, supervisors need to have training on how to help the Black female social worker work through the mental and emotional anguish. Supervisors need training that goes beyond discussing or teaching self-care. Self-care could involve walking, going to a movie, shopping - it refers to how the individual can care for themselves. However, when dealing with toxic words, the Black female social worker must have a means to safely dispose of the toxic wording that has been placed on

them. This means having more safe spaces for the Black female social worker to discuss how they are feeling while helping them to understand that they do not have to play the role of superhero teacher to the client by absorbing the “N” word.

### **Cultural Competence**

“What doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger.” This saying relates to the challenges faced by Black female social workers in the United States. Their strength has lied in their ability to cope with racism in both their personal and professional lives. The most effective defense mechanism in the face of such racism has been their firm understanding regarding their purpose in pursuing and remaining in a social work career. Just like priests who consider their jobs a calling, Black female social workers strongly believe that their careers and passion in social work provide them with a reason to keep going despite the challenges of racism. Furthermore, the code of ethics in their profession provides them guidance on how to deal with such scenarios. Some Black female workers looked to other forms of strength, such as their faith in God which keeps them strong enough to undergo the racist challenges.

Moreover, Black female social workers believe that continued support for prejudiced clients provided them with an opportunity to demonstrate the disadvantages of racism. These workers diligently worked with all their clients regardless of race and ethnic affiliation. To these social workers, the best strategy for dealing with racist clients was to provide them with the best services. Some supervisors supported the Black female social workers by replying to the clients that they could not support the removal of the Black female social worker. When this occurred, the Black female felt empowered to continue her work and felt supported by the supervisor. However, when the supervisor removed the Black female social worker because the client



refused to work with her for no known reason, the Black female felt like an injustice had been committed against her. In order to resolve this issue, the supervisor and the Black female social worker must establish communication practices where the Black female feels supported. The Black female social worker must be given the opportunity for dialogue within a safe space. The Black female social worker and supervisor must be trained on how to have a dialogue about balancing clients' rights with the Black social worker's rights.

Cultural humility is an undated concept that NASW is emphasizing. The Black social worker is having to mentally negotiate how to best fit this concept into their practice. The Black social worker wants to empower the clients and learn from the clients. However, when the client is not supportive of the Black social worker it is hard to empower the client when the power of words is negative.

### **Preparing students for prejudice and ignorance in the field of social work**

Prejudice refers to negative ideas and attitudes formed about other people without having knowledge and facts about these people. Racial prejudice will continue to occur in the field of social work, and this will continue to affect Black female social workers when carrying out their tasks. The NASW has a Code of Ethics that guides social workers on how to handle their duties; these codes can assist Black female social workers on ways to remain professional. However, the Code of Ethics is a guide for all social workers from which to govern themselves. The CSWE needs to make additions in the curriculum to help prospective social workers prepare themselves for real-world situations. This includes information on how to equip the Black social worker to effectively manage both conflicts with clients and the internal coping mechanisms related to the discrimination they are bound to face. Social work professors who are in a prime position to

impact future social workers need to emphasize these issues in their courses. In order for this to be a mandate, CSWE needs to address the conversation in deeper thought beyond what is taught about self-care to include practical guidelines on how to effectively navigate prejudice and discrimination within the social work profession.

Schools of Social Work need to devise opportunities in the formal curriculum to equip their students in effective strategies to address prejudice, ignorance and discrimination. One way to do this is to devise role playing activities in the class room setting. The CSWE requires specific courses for students to work with individuals and families, groups, and communities. An internship is also a required part of the social work curriculum. These classes provide excellent opportunities to incorporate role playing and discussions on what a person of color will experience at some point in their professional career as it relates to prejudice, ignorance and discrimination. These role playing opportunities will also provide guidance on how people in positions of leadership can help mediate or alleviate prejudicial interactions from clients and other professional staff. Such courses also need to emphasize the importance of personal self-care in handling negative situations. Students will need reflective time to journal about how they will address when another professional staff person or client will affect them with prejudice, ignorance or discrimination. A plan of action is what the student is building and the professor can assist by providing feedback that will help to guide the student when the situation occurs.

All social workers are required to have continuing education credits to enhance their professional development. Hours and trainings vary depending on the state. Many states, including the one in which this research study took place, require each social worker to have three hours completed in social work ethics. These professional development opportunities addressing ethics are the ideal place to weave in discussions and strategies on how to address

prejudice, ignorance and discrimination. Self-care is a major concern of social workers and the conversation of how to provide personal self-care through journaling, walking, going to the movies and other activities are worthy topics to be addressed in continuing education..

Additionally, professional training on what to do with toxic words when they are placed on the social worker is another important topic to be covered during continuing education.

### **Prejudice, ignorance, and xenophobia in the field**

Hatred and fear of foreigners and people of other ethnicities which result in discrimination and leads to hate are called xenophobia. Xenophobia and prejudice are not that different because they involve negative beliefs and attitudes towards people of different races. Racial ignorance is the misinformation that occurs between people of different races where a person from one race is ignorant about people from another race. Black female social workers will experience xenophobia, prejudice, and racial ignorance in the field in different ways. Since the task of social workers is to educate and promote social justice, social change and equality in society, Black female social workers should be equipped to inform people of the importance of cultural diversity. Many clients do not have the information needed to understand their actions, and some of them are misinformed. A Black female social worker should educate individuals on cultural diversity to help to reduce racial prejudice in society.

### **Safe spaces for Black female social workers**

Black female social workers provide services for many people under different circumstances. Black female social workers are often the targets of verbal abuse and racism, and it is vital to have a safe space where these workers can discuss their experiences and feelings.

Having trained professionals who understand the various impacts that Black female social workers face and creating safe spaces is essential because this will allow Black female social workers the opportunity to reflect and seek guidance on a regular basis, thereby increasing their effectiveness and job satisfaction in the workplace setting. Cultural humility is a concept that must work for both viewpoints, the clients as the expert and the Black female social worker as expert. When the safe space is created, the Black female social worker needs to be empowered to tell their story while others learn from their experiences.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The first limitation of this study is its sole focus on Black female social workers; this is a limitation because social workers from other minority groups also experience racism on the field. The second limitation is the focus on Black female social workers; there are also male Black social workers and the choice of the study to focus on only females limits my finding to only one gender. The third limitation was the limited sample size of the study; if the sample size were larger, the potential for generalizability could have increased. The final limitation of this study was its narrow geographical scope the Black female social workers all worked in the United States South.

### **Recommendations for Future Research in This Area**

This study only focused on the experiences of Black female social workers. Further research is needed on social workers from other minority groups to understand the challenges they face in their professional lives. Another area of research ripe for study is that of the Black male social worker. How do his experiences compare to those reported in this study? Further, a

study comparing the experiences of Black social workers to White social workers would be illuminating. Do Black clients request transfers to Black social workers? Do White social workers more readily adopt a colorblind approach than those reported in this study? Do White social workers report feelings of frustration when working with non-White clients? These are but a few of the questions that could be explored. Research must also be conducted around the curriculum and climate of social work graduate programs and how these factors impact both Black female students and non-Black students of all genders.

## **Conclusion**

As Patricia Hill Collins and other Black feminist researchers have noted, African American women, including Black female social workers, are inherently likely to face racism in their line of work due to America's history of systemic discrimination and inequities (Cowger, 1977). They will experience an intersectional form of oppression via their gender and racial identities. For this reason, it is essential that research address racism and other forms of discrimination faced by Black women in the workplace. Although the National Association of Social Work (NASW) provides explicit ethical guidelines on how to deliver professional services, it does not explicitly address how Black female social workers should respond to the discrimination and racially motivated prejudice they may experience in doing their jobs. This study highlights the importance of understanding the lived realities of Black female social workers, including how they interact with clients who exhibit explicitly racist behaviors. Social workers are legally and ethically obliged to provide high-quality services without prejudice, regardless of how their clients treat them. This is not an easy task. Black Feminist Thought teaches us that Black females need to be heard and recognized. In the counter-narratives found

in this study we discover how Black female social workers find the fortitude and courage to persevere despite obvious affronts based solely on their race.

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## APPENDIX A

### IRB Requirement

Karen Thompson

Sections of the IRB Application

**Title of Research Project:** The Imitation of Life: Visibility and Invisibility

#### **Procedures:**

##### 1. Purpose and Design of the Research

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore how Black female social workers in the South perceive their clients' racial identities and how these perceptions have an impact on their professional practice. I will investigate whether these social workers apply the cultural competence and/or colorblindness in their professional practice. This study is significant because it can contribute knowledge to the field of social work regarding how its practitioners theorize and practice interactions when serving their clients of diverse racial backgrounds. Specifically, it can be foundational for future research that seeks to understand the use of self as related to cultural competence and colorblindness.

## 2. Participant

In this study, I will purposefully select eight Black female licensed social workers who work in the South and have been employed for two years or more at a social work agency. Participants will be required to meet the following criteria:

1. Identify as a Black woman.
2. Employed for at least two years or more as a social worker.
3. Must be a licensed social worker from their respective state.
4. A participant can be currently employed (two years or more) or retired as a social worker.

## 3. Informed Consent

Prior to the interview each participant will be given a consent form for competition (Appendix A). Each participant will be told about the purpose of the research and procedures. Follow-up interviews for clarification of responses may occur after transcribing and coding interviews. I will assure the participants of anonymity and confidentiality and obtain informed consent before beginning the interviews. The researcher will record all the interviews using an audio recorder application on an iPad. As a back-up, I will use my cell phone to record if needed.

University of Alabama  
Informed Consent for Research Study  
Interview Protocol

Dear Prospective Participant:

You are being asked to take part in research study that will examine how Black female social workers perceive their client's racial identities and how do these perceptions impact their professional practice. Participation will be conducted by a primary interview and a follow up interview if needed. You will be volunteering for this research project. Your information will remain confidential. Your interview will be contacted by Karen Thompson, a doctoral student at The University of Alabama.

Sincerely,

Karen Thompson

I have read and fully understand this consent form. By signing this form, I agree to participate in this research project. A copy of this consent form has been given to me. If I have any questions, I will contact Karen Thompson at (205) 454-5557.

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Signature of Research Participant

Date

---

Investigator

Date



## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Interview Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study. The purpose of this study is to explore the various approaches Black female social workers use in working with their clients.

Your interview is scheduled for \_\_\_\_\_ at the following time:

\_\_\_\_\_. This interview will be held

at \_\_\_\_\_.

Please complete the following survey before the interview and return it in the enclosed, self-addressed envelope.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Gender \_\_\_\_\_

Race \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number \_\_\_\_\_

Where do you work?

\_\_\_\_\_

What is your job title?

\_\_\_\_\_

How long have you worked at your current job?

\_\_\_\_\_

What college(s) did you attend?

Undergraduate \_\_\_\_\_

Year graduated \_\_\_\_\_

Degree earned \_\_\_\_\_

Graduate \_\_\_\_\_

Year graduated \_\_\_\_\_

Degree earned \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have a professional license? \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, what is the license? \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you practiced social work? \_\_\_\_\_

## Interview Protocol

1. Tell me where you practice social work and what specifically you do in your role as a social worker.
2. Describe a typical workweek for you.

**Follow-up questions.** Tell me about the highs and lows of your week.

3. Why did you pursue social work as a profession?
4. How has your educational background and training helped prepare you for the realities of your job as a social worker?

**Follow-up questions.** What do you think might have prepared you better?

5. What are the current demographics of the clients that you serve?
6. Thinking back on other jobs you have had as a social worker, are the current demographics of your clients different? Explain.

## Cultural Competence

1. When you first meet your clients, even before having a conversation with them, what do you notice?
2. Pretend this photo is your client. What do you notice?
3. How does your client's race or ethnicity affect your perceptions of them?
4. Can you give me an example of a time when your initial perception of a client turned out to be incorrect? What did you learn from that? How do your client's race and/or ethnicity affect how you interact with them? Are there other factors that affect how you perceive them and interact with them?
5. Do you think your client's race (or other identifying factors) influences you? Which factors influence you the most?

6. How does your approach in dealing with clients change based on your client's race?
7. How does your approach in dealing with clients change based on your client's ethnicity and/or cultural background?
8. How does your racial identity affect the ways in which you interact with your clients? How does your gender identity affect the ways in which you interact with your clients? How does your age affect the ways in which you interact with your clients?
9. Do you interact with a Black male client differently than you do a White female client? If no: How have you reached a point that race and gender do not influence you in your work? If yes: Can you explain further?

### **Colorblindness**

1. What does the term "colorblindness" mean to you? How does this apply or not apply to your work with clients?
2. Have you ever heard someone say, "I do not see color?" How did you react to this comment? Can you explain from a social work perspective what that statement means to you?
3. Do you think that colorblind theory has a place in the field of social work? Can you tell me if there are times you do not "see race" when dealing with clients?
4. Would you say that all of your clients are the same? Please explain your answer.
5. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "All men are created equal and should not be judge by the color of their skin..." What does this statement mean to you? How relevant is Martin Luther King Jr.'s statement to your work as a social worker?

## **Cultural Competence and Colorblindness**

1. In your training as a social worker, did you learn about colorblind theory? If yes: Tell me what that term means to you.
2. In your training as a social worker, did you learn about the theory of cultural competence? If yes, tell me what that term means to you.
3. People often describe being “colorblind” as not seeing race or the color of someone’s skin. Does that term (color-blind) have any meaning to you or your work? Do you ever use the colorblind theory when dealing with clients? Explain.
4. People often describe being “culturally competent” as recognizing the race or ethnicity of people and changing your interactions accordingly. Does that term “cultural competency” have any meaning to you or your work? Do you ever use the cultural competency model when dealing with clients? Explain.
5. In your current job, do you rely more on the colorblind theory or on cultural competence theory, or do you rely on both equally?
6. Would you consider yourself more “culturally competent” or “colorblind” when it comes to your approach to social work? Explain your answer.
7. Can you give an example of how you utilize one or both of these concepts when working with your clients?
8. Do you think it is better for social workers to work from a perspective of colorblindness or cultural competency? What factors in your job prevent or impede you from adopting that perspective?
9. Please describe a time when you used colorblind theory in your work.
10. Please describe a time when you used cultural competence theory in your work.

Last question

1. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) states that I must give you a pseudonym for this research. If you are not able to provide a name, one will be assigned. What would you like to use as your pseudonym for this project (e.g., “Jane Doe”)?

## APPENDIX B

### IRB Certification

THE UNIVERSITY OF  
ALABAMA

Office of the Vice President for  
Research & Economic Development  
Office for Research Compliance

December 18,  
2017

Karen  
Thompson  
School of Social  
Work

The University of  
Alabama Box 870314

Re: IRB # 17-0R-434, "The Imitation of Life: Visibility &

Invisibility" Dear Ms. Thompson:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

*(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.*

Your application will expire on December 14, 2018. If your research will continue beyond this date, please complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, please complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, please complete the Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms to obtain consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your  
research. Sincerely,





## AAHRPP DOCUMENT #136

### UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM

**Study title: The Imitation of Life: Visibility and Invisibility**

**Karen Thompson, PH. D candidate**

#### **Institution if other than or collaborating with UA:**

This study is called, The Imitation of Life: Visibility and Invisibility. The study is being done by Karen Thompson, who is a graduate student at the University of Alabama. Mrs. Thompson is being supervised by Professor Natalie Adams who is a professor of The College of Education and Director of New College at the University of Alabama.

#### **What is this study about? What is the investigator trying to learn?**

This study explores how Black female social workers in the American South perceive their clients' racial identities and how these perceptions have an impact on their professional practice. I will investigate whether these social workers apply the cultural competence and/or colorblindness in their professional practice. Using Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Theory* as the theoretical framework, I will explore how the theories of cultural competence and colorblindness filter through the lens of Black female social workers in a practical setting.

#### **Why is this study important or useful?**

This study is significant because it can contribute knowledge to the field of social work regarding what practitioners theorize and practice interactions when serving their clients of diverse racial backgrounds. This foundational in order for future research that seeks to understand the use of self as related to cultural competence and colorblindness.

#### **Why have I been asked to be in this study?**

You have been asked to be in this study because you met the following criteria.

1. Identify as a Black woman.
2. Employed for at least two years or more as a social worker.
3. Must be a licensed social worker from their respective state.
4. A participant can be currently employed (two years or more) or retired as a social worker.

#### **How many people will be in this study?**

Eight other social workers will be in this study.

## What will I be asked to do in this study?

If you meet the criteria and agree to be in this study, you will be asked complete the face to face interview.

**How much time will I spend being this study?** The interview should take about 2 hours to complete. If needed a follow up interview for clarifying information will take 1 hour to complete. The entire study will take about 3 hours of your time.

## Will being in this study cost me anything?

The only cost to you from this study is your 3 hours of time, your mileage to the interview location and your time to complete the interview.

## Will I be compensated for being in this study?

You will not be compensated for being in this study.

## Can the investigator take me out of this study?

The investigator may take you out of the study if she feels that the study is upsetting you.

## What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?

There may be that little or no risk is foreseen as when interviews are used. The chief risk is that you may get tired from the interview. We will take a break after the interview has been in process for thirty minutes. If needed the interview can be rescheduled for any reason.

## What are the benefits (good things) that may happen if I am in this study?

Although I will not benefit personally from being in the study, I may feel good about knowing that I have helped other social workers understand the use of self as it relates to cultural competence and colorblindness.

## What are the benefits to science or society?

This study will help social workers to be more helpful to understand the use of self as related to cultural competence and colorblindness. This study is significant because it can contribute knowledge to the field of social work regarding how its practitioners theorize and practice interactions when serving their clients of diverse racial backgrounds. This study may also allow more social workers to investigate the use of self when it comes to applying cultural competences and colorblind theories.

## How will my privacy be protected?

I will ask you to suggest a place where the PI can interview you in a private room. I will ask that you be mindful if we are at your office that we have limited interruptions from others.

## How will my confidentiality be protected?

Consent forms will be kept separate from datasheets at my home office. I will be the only one with access to data, six months after research is complete all raw data will be destroyed.

## What are the alternatives to being in this study? Do I have other choices?

The alternative to being in this study is not to participate.

Revised June 2015

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 12-15-17 -11 EXPIRATION DATE: 12-14-18

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## What are my rights as a participant in this study?

Taking part in this study is voluntary. It is your free choice. You can refuse to be in it at all. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. There will be no effect on your relations with the University of Alabama.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board ("the IRB") is the committee that protects the rights of people in research studies. The IRB may review study records from time to time to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned.

## Recording of Interview

The interview will be audio recorded. By signing below, you are agreeing to have the interview audio recorded.

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Signature of Research Participant

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Date

## Who do I call if I have questions or problems?

If you have questions about the study right now, please ask them. If you have questions about the study later on, please call the investigator Karen Thompson at 205-454-5557.

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a person in a research study, call Ms. Tanta Myles, the Research Compliance Officer of the University, at 205-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066.

You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach website at <http://ovpred.ua.edu/research-compliance/prco/> or email the Research Compliance office at [participantoutreach@ua.edu](mailto:participantoutreach@ua.edu).

After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online at the outreach website or you may ask the investigator for a copy of it and mail it to the University Office for Research Compliance, Box 870127, 358 Rose Administration Building, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127.

I have read this consent form. I have had a chance to ask questions. I agree to take part in it.

I will receive a copy of this consent form to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Revised June 2015 UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB

SENT FORM APPROVED: 12-15-17

ACTION DATE: 12-14-18