

Intraracial Women Friendships as a Strategy for Healing Black Women

by

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Sisterhood has been something that I've sought after in my life frequently. I have noticed that there is power in the connection amongst black women that offer spaces of safety and comfort. A sister friend in my life has been defined as a friendship between black women. Having a sister friend is important in the world as a black woman for many reasons. This essay will explore the connections between black women friendships and healing within spaces created specifically for them. I will also explore strategies that will further provide spaces for healing black women. According to Civil Rights Leader Malcolm X, "The black woman is the most disrespected, unappreciated entity in America" and there is a history to prove it. Black women are the receivers of oppression in two different ways, sexism and racism. The othering of black women happens in tons of spaces, medical, domestic, judicial. Black women's, bodies and minds are constantly degraded and policed worldwide and in their own community. There is a necessity to create homogenized safe spaces for black women because of the lack of protection within integrated society.

My experience as a black woman is similar of many other black women's experiences. In quoting Dubois, I fell under the "Exceptional Negro" category, I was revered for being smart but I was still viewed and treated like a black child. That includes criminalization, adultification and racist discrimination. My educational progress did not apply in many classrooms if that meant me talking about the oppression of African American people. In those instances, my intelligence was milled down to anger and complaints instead of me presenting historical facts that provide the framework for how black students operate in America. Even in my home, I had to be extremely responsible as a child, I was aggressively policed and groomed to be constantly aware of how and my body was a weapon against myself. From the ages of five, I remember feeling responsible to not only protect it from racial discrimination but from the gaze of men.

Zora Neale Hurston once said, “I feel the blackest when thrown up against a sharp white background”, but that is not just the case for black women. We feel that way in our communities as well as in our families.

The most rewarding experience of being a black woman is friendship amongst other black women. We create the stronghold of our communities but we also hold each other up. We have the proper tools to take care of each other, to undo what patriarchal standards have submitted us too and to heal the generational wounds we have endured. There are already cultural practices we involve ourselves with in effort to preserve ourselves such as hair care. Most black women friendships foster proper healing practices for black women because they are devoid of pity and are action based. Traditional Western therapy while necessary for some, can most times be culturally deaf and westernized. For black women to feel comfortable to unload the generational trauma and everyday trauma that they are affected with, there must be a culturally inclusive and culturally competent space that allows for them to express themselves free of guilt.

Background context

Medical Institutions and their relationships with Black Women

In history, Black Women have been mutilated at the expense of medical advancement. Black women slaves were operated on without anesthesia for gynecological advancement made by James Marion Sims (Ivy, 2016; Washington, 2017). Sims did not administer any anesthesia because he believe the surgery did not qualify for the risk of administration. He did not just perform the surgery on African American women without anesthesia but he also recorded performing unwanted surgery on an enslaved African American man with a cancerous jaw. The

man had refused surgery due to the pain and Sims ordered doctors to hold the enslaved man down to remove the jaw without anesthesia. This would be a conversation about unethical practices instead of targeted racism if Sims had chosen not to administer anesthesia to other races, but there are recordings of Sims using chloroform or ether for white women experiencing painful vaginal contractions. Sims believed that African Americans did not feel as much pain as their white counterparts and treated them like animals to experiment on. He experimented on these enslaved women ruthlessly, partly because in the eyes of society they were not human and additionally because they did not have the right to refuse operation (Washington, 2017). This is a clear example of the disparity of trust between medical institutions and black women. Not only did this doctor operate on black enslaved women, but he also was upheld in the medical community until recently. For his ruthless advancement, he was elected president of the American Medical Association in 1875 and president of the American Gynecological Association in 1880 (Ivy, 2016). His statue was up until April 17th, 2018 in front of the New York Academy of medicine, with a plaque that stated “His brilliant achievement carried the fame of American Surgery throughout the world,” Sims’ unethical practices being commemorated and upheld in the medical field for a vast amount of time highlights the disconnect between the medical community and the humanity of not only people of color but especially black women (CNN, 2018).

Black Women and Traditional Therapy

The way in which the media cultivates images of black people and especially black women has a big role to play when it comes to client success in traditional therapy. (Ashely 2014). Racism influences the practices and attitudes in psychotherapy. Many times, in traditional

therapy health care professional will assign client's shortcomings rather than addressing their own racial biases that they brought to the table. According to a study, 61% of African American clients did not continue their treatment because they believed their therapist treated them with biases that affected their treatment negatively (Yamamoto, 1968). Culture incompetence can be upheld by any therapist of any race and gender but the effects of the cultural incompetence within white therapist/black client space and black therapist or POC/black client spaces are different. In white therapist space, there are many times implication of control and therapist guilt. It is possible that stereotypes and implicit biases affect the treatment of Black Women in therapist spaces by white therapist (Jackson, 1983). In many cases of stereotypical biases, healthcare professional has developed an idea of a culture through media, and instead of doing the work to unlearn media cultivated images of people they will blame clients for not being the image of what is acceptable. Black women get this kind of treatment not only in the medical field but in life as they are affected by the "Angry Black Woman" or "Sapphire" trope. This stereotype highlights aggressive or hostile behavior from black women as irrational and primitive. By doing so, it reduces the experience and cultural impacts of race and gender intersectionality that black women endure and penalizes them for the historical oppression they face (Ashley, 2014). On the other hand, the client relationships between black therapist and black clientele can be influenced by the westernized teaching of traditional clinical psychotherapy. Psychotherapy still remains westernized and the history of westernization is usually cultural exclusive to the concepts of patriarchal whiteness. So instead of black therapist being able to treat clients with cultural competence they are trained to treat clients with implicit westernized bias (Jackson, 1983). This is to the effect of Black healthcare professional earning professional credibility that do not understand the cultural pressures that the clients are affected with. Also,

the relationship with traditional therapy is strained because mental health is a taboo topic explored within black communities. Because of the lack of trust in the medical healthcare system, black people are weary of participating in traditional therapy and being blamed for the trauma imbedded in their history.

Black Women and Sister Hood

Microaggressions and macroaggressions in predominantly white spaces are the biggest threat that I've faced in my life as a black woman especially on a college campus. They are not a threat because they are harmful physically but because of the lack of agency I have to control the space and get the perpetrators of the microaggressions to understand the problematic nature of their actions. As a black woman, I find myself in a room searching for another black woman because it makes me feel safer to express myself. Attending a predominantly white school with a predominantly white faculty has been difficult because I constantly find myself in classrooms and being told that I am "aggressive" or that I take things "too serious". I've been told to calm down by my white professors after addressing racialized comments in a classroom setting while my white counterparts were allowed to be microaggressive without the same repercussions.

This narrative is not far from what many other black women deal with. According to a research by Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder, (2008) Black women in college tend to not confront microaggressions in classrooms because they are only as real as the white perpetrators will allow them to be. The white perpetrators of microaggressions have the racial privilege to negate the feelings of black woman under the scope of them being "overly sensitive" (Davis 2018). Black women do not feel comfortable checking microaggressions because many times they are silenced or disregarded as angry and complainers. That is where sisterhood comes into play. I have sat in

a classroom checking microaggressive behavior and I have only had the support of other black women in the room. Black women offer a safe space for other black women to share their stories because of the similar experiences black women face. Black women in college “received support” to understand how to react to microaggressions from a network of black women. By doing so these women will reaffirm their identities as well as self-esteem (Lewis et al 2013). Black woman believe that intra-racial friendship is important because there is an authenticity in interacting with women that can understand your position in the world in both a racial and gendered way. (Davis 2015)

Hair Care as a Strategy to Heal

Black women often treat hair care as a rite of passage, growing up it was an honor to be taught how to braid and twist your hair as well as getting your own relaxer. Now that there has been a surge in reclaiming our natural hair black women are connecting simply because of the fibers that grow out of our head. There are movements to embrace ourselves and reaffirm of self-identity, such as the Natural Hair movement. Growing up, I would be in salons watching as black women who’ve never met commune and give each other support and care for each other.

Black women all have the same similar story growing up and going to the hair salon, sitting in there for hours and watching our aunts or mothers divulge the intricacies of their live to their hairstylists. Hairstylists happen to be the crown jewel of the community that black woman create. As someone who does hair themselves, I understand the intimate place that hairstylists hold for their clients. Often during the process of getting their hair care, clients rely on me as a bouncing board for the mentally challenging events that have happened in their life since their last appointment. Black hairstylists should be given a licensed therapist course track option in

addition to receiving their hair license because many women in the community can negotiate the importance of the upkeep of the hair and by having therapy and hair care in the same space it can create a culturally competent space for Black women to heal. It is an inclusive alternative to traditional therapy because traditional therapy usually is devoid of culturally inclusive procedure to create a healing space for black women. Due to traditional therapy being westernized it does not acknowledge the practice of the Black Salon experience but I have seen many women healed and protected in the salon rather than marginalized in traditional therapy. Recent studies have identified black hair salons as “spaces that create comfort and safety for a black woman,” (Mbilishaka 2018) and it makes sense because the process of black hair care usually takes about 4 to 5 hours. It is hard to not unravel when in such close proximity to someone for practically most of your day, especially when they are a part of the community as well. It is reassuring when black women gather because most time our stories align and we are able to heal in the similarities. Black salons tend to the environment of the community by creating a space similar to a healing circle for black women.

Closing Remarks

This essay provides a framework for the importance of the connections between black women and why it has been effective in providing healing spaces for black women. While promoting same race, same gender spaces for healing is one solution, there is more ways in which we as a society must challenge the narratives that create the insecurities within our medical system. We must also challenge the way in which we perceive and treat black women in every setting and dismantle the narratives that negate the lived experiences of black women. In the meantime, using the framework in this essay we can find ways to integrated culturally inclusive ideal into

therapeutic settings that will allow for treatment success and long-term treatment options for black women.

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