

Reflection

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As a Black feminist scholar, I have devoted my academic career to creating culturally sensitive research that addresses the complexity of violence in the lives of women, particularly women who are marginalized, such as women of color and lesbians. My recent book, *Violence in the Lives of Black Women: Battered, Black, and Blue* (2002a), is a collaborative effort to articulate a Black feminist approach that considers how living at the intersection of various forms of oppression, including racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia converges to shape Black women's experience with violence. A challenging task, indeed!

My objective was to build on previous research, while avoiding three common mistakes. Specifically, researchers have used a color blind approach, conducted inappropriate racial comparisons, and failed to investigate within-group differences (West, 2002b). In order to accomplish this goal, I turned to Gail Wyatt's (1985) article, "The Sexual Abuse of Afro-American and White-American Women in Childhood." In the not so distant past, researchers were reluctant to explore ethnic differences in sexual abuse. In fact, some investigators avoided the topic. Judith Herman (1981) explains why she excluded African American women in her study of incest survivors:

We made the decision to restrict the interviewing to white women in order to avoid even the possibility that the information gathered might be used to fuel idle speculation about racial differences. . . . There is no question, however, that incest is a problem in black families, as it is in white families. (p. 67)

Although her efforts to avoid racial stereotyping were appreciated by some researchers, the failure to explore ethnic differences will not dispel racial myths about sexual abuse. These stereotypes exist, and will persist unless we conduct culturally appropriate research. The pervasiveness of sexual violence led other researchers to take a "color blind" approach by assuming that the prevalence and circumstances surrounding sexual abuse were similar across ethnic groups. Gail Wyatt's work is significant because she critically examined racial differences, rather than ignoring or minimizing them. This has encouraged me to continue the difficult, but rewarding, dialogue about ethnic differences in sexual abuse.

Alternatively, other researchers have considered violence to be a problem that plagues people of color, particularly African Americans. Certainly race, class, and gender inequalities contribute to elevated rates of violence in the lives of Black women. Consequently, many investigators have focused their research on incarcerated or impoverished Black women, who often suffer from mental illness and drug addiction. Although this represents the experience of an alarmingly high number of African American women, the majority of Black women are not impoverished or institutionalized. Unfortunately, many researchers have made racial comparisons without considering these socioeconomic and demographic differences. As a result, what appear to be race differences are actually social class differences. Sometimes this misinformation has been used to stereotype Black women

as pathological and violent. Gail Wyatt (1985) wisely avoided these mistakes by using a representative community sample with comparable demographic characteristics of both ethnic groups. More recently she and her colleagues conducted a study that used a comparable methodology, which enabled them to investigate racial differences in child sexual abuse over a ten year period (Wyatt, Loeb, Solis, & Carmona, 1999).

Researchers also have mistakenly treated Black women as a monolithic group. In Wyatt's sample (1985) we see the demographic diversity among African American women. For example, they differ in level of education and marital status. This inspired me and other researchers to investigate within ethnic group differences. It is not enough to make racial comparison. We need to know more about the differences among Black women. For example, in a sample of Black survivors of child sexual abuse, which women are at greatest risk to be revictimized in adulthood? With this information, we can develop better intervention and prevention strategies (West, Williams, & Siegel, 2000).

I am frequently asked, "Why does your research focus on ethnic differences?" My response: "Violence in the lives of Black women is both very similar and at times vastly different from the violence experienced by their White counterparts." The challenge for researchers is to articulate the racial similarities without negating the experiences of Black women, while simultaneously highlighting racial differences without perpetuating racial stereotypes. Gail Wyatt's (1985) article achieves this balance which, in my opinion, is the most significant contribution she has made to the literature.

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