



Culturally Sensitive Research Approaches: An African-American Perspective

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This article contributes to discussions about culturally sensitive research approaches in qualitative research. The author argues that the use of culturally sensitive research approaches in research focusing on African Americans can use the cultural knowledge and experiences of researchers and their participants in the design of the research as well as in the collection and interpretation of data. The author presents a rationale for the use of culturally sensitive research approaches for African Americans, a theoretical framework for culturally sensitive research approaches, and a discussion of culturally sensitive research in practice. This article concludes by discussing some implications for teaching and practice in educational research.

The purpose of this article is to contribute to current discussions about the use of culturally sensitive research approaches¹ within the field of qualitative research. Specifically, I argue that the use of culturally sensitive research approaches in research focusing on African Americans² can use the cultural standpoints (Dillard, 2000) of both the researcher and the researched as a framework for research design, data collection, and data interpretation. According to Boykin (1985, 1994), the interrelated dimensions³ of African-American culture suggest a need for expanded conceptual and research frameworks that more fully capture the range of experiences of African Americans, particularly in educational contexts. Additionally, the use of culturally sensitive research approaches can be a catalyst for educational change (Kershaw, 1992). As Lee and Slaughter-Defoe (1995) have pointed out

Educational research and practices that reflect a cultural paradigm emphasize cultural solidarity, education for self reliance in the African American community, and specific ways in which cultural knowledge, practices and values that characterize the historic and contemporary African American experience can be drawn upon to improve the education of African Americans. (p. 361)

Culturally sensitive research approaches both recognize ethnicity⁴ and position culture as central to the research process. In what follows, I posit a theoretical framework for culturally sensitive research approaches for African Americans based on culturally congruent research methods, culturally specific knowledge,

cultural resistance to theoretical dominance, culturally sensitive data interpretations, and culturally informed theory and practice. The framework represents theoretical and methodological possibilities for more culturally informed research, theory, and practice. When research about African Americans is approached from a culturally sensitive perspective, the varied aspects of their culture and their varied historical and contemporary experiences are acknowledged.

From a culturally sensitive perspective, shared knowledge and understandings of the phenomenon under study are implied, and the individual and collective knowledge of African Americans is placed at the center of the inquiry. I acknowledge that all research can be considered culturally based and that culturally sensitive research approaches can be applied to people of color in a broad sense. However, my discussion will focus on African Americans as an example for the larger argument.

Emerging paradigms in qualitative research have presented opportunities for collaboration, insider perspectives, reciprocity, and voice. Although there appears to be a shift toward more culturally engaged research approaches within the field of qualitative research, educational research specific to African Americans represents only a small segment of the research that appears in mainstream journals.⁵ In addition, the knowledge and experiences of African Americans is often subsumed under the categories of minorities, people of color, and women and minorities. These issues suggest that there is a need to consider research frameworks that can help researchers to more fully capture the experiences of African Americans—their struggles as well as their successes.

The discussion shifts now to a rationale for the use of culturally sensitive research approaches for African Americans. I will then articulate a theoretical framework for culturally sensitive research and discuss several examples of culturally sensitive research approaches in practice. I conclude this article by highlighting some implications for teaching and practice in educational research.

A Rationale for Culturally Sensitive Research Approaches

Culture can be conceptualized and defined differently depending on one's worldview and one's particular needs as a researcher and scholar. Eisenhart (2001) has noted that "increasingly, this is the case in educational research, too, where culture may mean one thing to bilingual educators, another thing to educational anthropologists and something else to ethnic scholars or cognitive psychologists" (p. 16).⁶ African-American culture(s) has been described as (a) differing from European-American culture(s) in various ways that include individual and collective

value orientations, language patterns, and worldviews (King, 1995); (b) a shared orientation based on similar cultural, historical, and political experiences (Lee & Slaughter-Defoe, 1995); and (c) “cultural deep structure,” suggesting a complexity of behaviors that undergird cultural distinctiveness (Boykin, 1985, 1994). Gwaltney (1990/1993), in his anthropological study of African Americans in urban communities, discussed a “core black culture” that includes values, systems of logic, and worldviews, one where “most black people agree, on all levels of consciousness and in their overt actions, on what the standards of the culture are” (p. xxiii). These perspectives speak to the multidimensional aspects of African-American culture(s) and the possibilities for the resonance of the cultural knowledge of African Americans in educational research.

Drawing on the work of King (1995), Hilliard (2001), and McCarthy (1998), I define *culture* as a group’s individual and collective ways of thinking, believing, and knowing, which includes their shared experiences, consciousness, skills, values, forms of expression, social institutions, and behaviors. This definition does not presuppose a singular view of African-American culture; rather it implies a shared cultural knowledge. Thus the concept of culture can exist along many dimensions and considers the commonalities as well as the differences among African Americans.

My argument for culturally sensitive research approaches for African Americans builds on a long line of scholarship with historical roots. W.E.B. DuBois (1973), Anna Julia Cooper (1892/1988), and Carter G. Woodson (1933/1977) believed that plans for advancing the education of Black people should be predicated on understanding the cultural and historical contexts of their lives and that attempts to portray Black people and Black culture(s) by persons who have limited knowledge of Black life leads to inaccurate generalizations. Today, the concerns of DuBois, Cooper, and Woodson are still relevant when considering the consequences of the privileging of voice and unequal power relations in educational research. In the absence of culturally sensitive research approaches, there will continue to be a void in what the larger research community knows and understands about the education of African Americans and, as Dillard (2000) has noted, how African Americans understand and experience the world.

Gordon (1997), in a report of the Task Force on the Role and Future of Minorities in the American Educational Research Association (AERA), made an argument for culturally sensitive research approaches in the following statement:

Racially and culturally sensitive paradigms, although perhaps new to AERA, are not new in social science scholarship. Educators of color

have argued for years that mainstream research, despite claims to objectivity, is biased and almost always frames communities of color as “deficient.” Racially and culturally sensitive research challenges the claim of universality and political neutrality of knowledge. (p. 48)

These arguments suggest that culturally sensitive research approaches must be viewed as legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding the experiences of African Americans, particularly in educational contexts.⁷ But as Gordon indicates, the recognition of culturally sensitive research approaches has been minimized given the tendency of some researchers to study people of color from deficit perspectives.⁸

This discussion may raise questions of who should conduct research in African-American communities and whose knowledge should be privileged. (Some of these questions have been discussed in *Educational Researcher*. For example, see Banks, 1998; Gordon,

1997; and Scheurich & Young, 1997.) Are culturally sensitive research approaches for African Americans the exclusive domain of African-American researchers? Should or can Whites conduct this type of research? Pillow (in press) addressed this issue by posing the question “What do race-based methodologies tell us about who should study whom?” Put another way, can majority scholars (like Pillow) engage in research about African Americans that treats race and culture as central to the process of inquiry? The discussion here is not intended to suggest that a researcher must be African American to use culturally sensitive research ap-

proaches in qualitative research. Rather, it is important to consider whether the researcher has the cultural knowledge to accurately interpret and validate the experiences of African Americans within the context of the phenomenon under study.⁹ Culturally sensitive research approaches for African Americans can facilitate the cultural knowledge of both the researched and the researcher.

Re-Conceptualizing Culturally Sensitive Research

There is a growing body of literature focused on conducting research under the umbrella term *people of color* and the use of qualitative research approaches that place the cultures of an ethnic group at the center of the inquiry. For instance, African-American scholars (Stanfield, 1994), Native American scholars (Lomawaima, 2000), Chicana and Chicano scholars (Gonzalez, 2001), and Maori scholars (Bishop, 1998) have argued for the use of research approaches that recognize the explicit cultural knowledge and norms that exist within a group. The *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education (QSE)* and *Qualitative Inquiry (QI)* have featured conceptual, theoretical, and empirical work on culturally sensitive research approaches. For example, a special issue of *QSE* titled “Through our Eyes and in Our Own

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Words—The Voices of Indigenous Scholars” (Rains, Archibald, & Deyhle, 2000) featured work about American-Indian/Native American intellectualism, culture, culture-based curriculum, and indigenous epistemologies and paradigms. A recent special issue of *QI* (Lynn, Yosso, Solórzano, & Parker, 2002) contributed to the literature on critical race theory (CRT)¹⁰ and education. Contributing authors explored the connections between CRT and qualitative research epistemology and methodology and offered a variety of perspectives on culturally sensitive educational research.

The various dimensions of culturally sensitive educational research are further examined in a forthcoming book by López and Parker, *(Im-)Positions: Interrogating Racism in Qualitative Research Methodology*. Collectively the chapters address several issues that are central to the use of culturally sensitive research approaches including culture, race, and alternative epistemological and methodological approaches to research in education. This book adds to the emerging conversations among scholars who investigate these and other issues in educational research.

An argument for the use of culturally sensitive research approaches within the field of qualitative research and the framework presented here is based on the assumption that interpretive paradigms offer greater possibilities for the use of alternative frameworks, co-construction of multiple realities and experiences, and knowledge that can lead to improved educational opportunities for African Americans. That is, the use of qualitative research can facilitate “cultural intuition” (Bernal, 1998)—the unique viewpoints of African Americans. Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2000) also alluded to the use of culturally sensitive research approaches in their five interpretive paradigms of qualitative research. The feminist, ethnic, and cultural studies paradigms can be described as both critical and praxis oriented (Kershaw, 1990). Some of Denzin and Lincoln’s criteria for evaluating the research (Afrocentric, lived experiences, accountability); theoretical grounding (standpoint, historical, and social criticism); and presentation of data (interpretative case studies, ethnographic fiction, storytelling) are similar to the framework for culturally sensitive research presented here. Thus, the use of culturally sensitive research approaches for African Americans builds on and adds to what we already know and practice from a culturally sensitive perspective.

In making an argument for culturally sensitive research approaches within the field of qualitative research, I acknowledge that culturally sensitive research can also apply to studies using quantitative frameworks. Although the focus of this discussion is qualitative research, it is important to note that some researchers who primarily use quantitative frameworks have made similar arguments regarding the recognition of culture in research. For example, Boykin (1985) used the term *cultural contextual synergism* in his work with learning styles of children; Graham (1992) referred to socially sensitive research in psychology; Smith (1993) argued for the use of sensitive survey inquiry in survey research on African Americans; and Hood (2001) used the term *culturally responsive evaluation* when discussing evaluation research. Additionally, Hood reported that recent evaluative models and approaches “appear to be open to the central importance of culture when evaluators work with and within communities of color” (p. 31).¹¹ In his discussion of culturally responsive evaluation, he suggested that the researcher is called upon to be a cul-

turally responsive evaluator “who orchestrates an evaluation that culminates in a reporting of findings that comes closest to letting the audience see, hear, and touch the essence of the program and how it is functioning” (p. 37).

In addition, Sleeter (2000) has argued, “quantitative research can be used for liberatory as well as oppressive ends” (p. 240). According to Sleeter, “emancipatory researchers”—“those who conduct research that emerges from and embraces the social histories of historically marginalized communities” (p. 235)—may “choose to use quantitative methods to seek prediction and generalization, but at the same time do so in collaboration with specific historically disenfranchised communities, and with full regard for local complexities, power relations, and previously ignored life experiences” (p. 241).

Toward a Conceptualization of Culturally Sensitive Research for African Americans

The theoretical framework for culturally sensitive research approaches for African Americans offered here draws on Dillard’s (2000) expanded notion of Collins’ (1990/2000) “endarkened” feminist epistemology and Kershaw’s (1990, 1992) Afrocentric emancipatory methodology. Dillard used the term *endarkened feminist epistemology*

to articulate how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender and other identities and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance of African-American women. (p. 662)

Six assumptions form the basis of Dillard’s notion of an endarkened feminist epistemology:

- (1) self-definition forms one’s participation and responsibility to one’s community; . . . (2) research is both an intellectual and a spiritual pursuit, a pursuit of purpose; . . . (3) only within the context of community does the individual appear and, through dialogue, continue to become; . . . (4) concrete experiences within everyday life form the criterion of meaning, the “matrix of meaning-making”; . . . (5) knowing and research extend both historically in time and outward to the world: to approach them otherwise is to diminish their cultural and empirical meaningfulness; . . . and (6) power relations, manifest as racism, sexism, homophobia, etc., structure gender, race, and other identity relations within research. (pp. 672–677)

Language is a key feature of Dillard’s framework; that is, language must “possess instrumentality: It must do something towards transforming particular ways of knowing and producing knowledge” (p. 662).

Kershaw’s (1990, 1992) Afrocentric emancipatory methodology focuses on the cultural, historical, and contemporary experiences of Blacks, the significance of those experiences, the uniqueness of Black experiences and their relationships to others, and strengthening relationships between the academic and nonacademic community. Centrism, the generation of transformative knowledge by those “who are products of a *particular* historical and cultural context” (p. 160), is a key feature of Kershaw’s framework. An Afrocentric emancipatory methodology consists of (a) using qualitative methods to generate practical knowledge about forces that affect the lives of African Americans; (b) using

understandings generated from qualitative inquiry to describe and analyze empirical realities of the relationships identified; (c) identifying any apparent contradictions as well as convergence of the group's understandings and "objective" reality; (d) participating in a program of education and action with the individual(s) under study by presenting findings and developing tools that empower the individual(s); and (e) identifying and conducting research that will generate practical and emancipatory knowledge and new theories.

Dillard's (2000) and Kershaw's (1990, 1992) work emphasize culturally sensitive approaches that include the connectedness of the researcher to the research community, uncovering and discovering the multiple realities and experiences of African Americans, collaborative (co-construction) interpretation of the data to produce emancipatory knowledge, and the generation of African-American theory. Both Dillard and Kershaw placed African Americans at the center rather than on the margins of the inquiry, thus offering possibilities for endarkened perspectives. Building on these perspectives I outline a framework for culturally sensitive research approaches for African Americans based on culturally congruent research methods, culturally specific knowledge, cultural resistance to theoretical dominance, culturally sensitive data interpretations, and culturally informed theory and practice.

Culturally Congruent Research Methods

Culturally sensitive research approaches use qualitative methods such as interviews (individual, group, life history), observation, and participant observation. These and other qualitative methods are used to investigate and capture holistic contextualized pictures of the social, political, economic, and educational factors that affect the everyday existence of African Americans, particularly in educational settings.

Culturally Specific Knowledge

Culturally sensitive research approaches use the particular and unique self-defined (Black self-representation) experiences of African Americans. The researcher is committed to and accepts the responsibility for maintaining the cultural integrity of the participants and other members of the community. Researchers carefully consider the extent of their own cultural knowledge, cross-race and same-race perspectives, and insider and outsider issues related to the research process.

Cultural Resistance to Theoretical Dominance

Culturally sensitive research approaches attempt to reveal, understand, and respond to unequal power relations that may minimize, marginalize, subjugate, or exclude the multiple realities and knowledge bases of African Americans. Research privilege is questioned, as well as claims of neutrality and objectivity in educational research. Research practices that place the perspectives of African Americans on the margins of the inquiry are challenged. The cultural standpoints of those persons who experience the social, political, economic, and educational consequences of unequal power relations are privileged over the assumed knowledge of those who are positioned outside of these experiences.

Culturally Sensitive Data Interpretations

Culturally sensitive research approaches for African Americans position experiential knowledge as legitimate, appropriate, and

necessary for analyzing, understanding, and reporting data. Analysis and presentation that is appropriate to the research topic and the individual or group under study is co-constructed. Storytelling, family histories, biographies, narratives, and other forms of data presentation may be used. The cultural standpoints of African Americans provide endarkened analyses of their particular experiences in American society.

Culturally Informed Theory and Practice

Culturally sensitive research approaches can lead to the development of theories and practices that are intended to address the culturally specific circumstances of the lives of African Americans. Researchers rely on participants' perspectives and cultural understandings of the phenomena under study to establish connections between espoused theory and reality and then to generate theory based on these endarkened perspectives. Researchers use culturally informed knowledge to propose educational change¹² and work to build meaningful, productive relationships with the nonacademic community.

The elements of this framework are not linear because in reality the stages of research are rarely distinct or separate; rather the stages of research most often overlap. Additionally, Bernal (1998) has cautioned that culturally sensitive approaches do not necessarily include the complete range of research possibilities. However, the framework presented here can provide opportunities for thinking about research from a specific position of color, an important and necessary distinction from traditional frameworks.

Culturally Sensitive Research in Practice

In this section I present exemplars of research on African-American faculty and administrators, teachers, and students.¹³ The exemplars presented here are illustrative of culturally sensitive research that places the cultural knowledge and experiences of African Americans at the center of the inquiry and emphasizes the relationship of the researcher to the individual or the community under study. These exemplars are also illustrative of the variation in the kinds of research topics studied, research approaches used, and experiences of the participants in the studies.

The Commission on Research in Black Education

AERA's Commission on Research in Black Education (CORIBE)¹⁴ implemented several research demonstration projects that used African-centered¹⁵ perspectives as theoretical and conceptual frameworks guiding CORIBE's work. These alternative perspectives served as analytical tools used for the development of epistemological, ontological, axiological, and methodological strategies to address research on Black education. The perspectives used in the CORIBE projects focused on several African-centered tenets: interdependence, cooperation, collectivism, synergism, movement, and verve (see also Boykin, 1985, 1994).

One of the demonstration projects was an on-line, internet-based investigation of the experiences of Black faculty and administrators in predominantly White institutions and Historically Black Colleges and Universities. West-Olatunji (2001), an African-American woman, approached the research with a personal commitment to understand issues affecting the experiences of Black academics. West-Olatunji believed that as a new faculty member, the findings of the study would be relevant to her own

professional development. Her goal for the study was to transform the African-American academic community regardless of the thematic outcomes generated by the data. West-Olatunji anticipated that the transformation would occur during the data collection phase and in the dissemination of the results within the Black academic community. West-Olatunji noted that this transformation did take place during a reader's theater presentation of the research at the 2000 AERA Annual Meeting. During the question and answer period, members of the audience related their own successes and struggles in academia, and how their experiences affected their productivity as well as their relationships with colleagues and students. Members of the audience also offered suggestions to new and experienced faculty on ways that they could continue the long tradition of making meaningful contributions to research and practice.

Interviews and on-line responses to questions that were posted on the CORIBE website represented the primary methods of data collection. The inquiry used socially constructed knowledge through participant interaction and focused on the self-preservation, resiliency, and transformation of African-American faculty and administrators. West-Olatunji (2001) noted that culturally sensitive research approaches could be used to generate theory that is based on the collective experiences of participants. One finding from the study revealed that Black faculty encountered problems of cultural suppression and scholarly alienation in their careers. West-Olatunji noted that this finding suggests that research on successful strategies for resisting scholarly alienation is needed. This finding is indicative of one aspect of the lives of Black faculty—their common struggles to become visible, productive members of the academy. The use of culturally sensitive research approaches can also be useful in making explicit positive aspects of the lives of Black faculty and administrators: for example, their contributions to theory and practice and their efforts to increase the numbers of Black students and faculty in predominantly White institutions.

Research on Black Teachers and Students

Michèle Foster (1991, 1993, 1997), Annette Henry (1996, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 2001), and Christopher Dunbar (1999a, 1999b, 2001) have employed culturally sensitive research approaches to study African-American teachers and students. Foster used the cultural knowledge of Black teachers in ethnographic studies to “understand how teaching has been experienced and understood by blacks engaged in the profession” (1997, p. xx). In her book *Black Teachers on Teaching* (1997), she detailed not only teachers' professional and personal experiences but also their philosophies about and motivations to become teachers. Foster used community nomination (exceptional cases) to get the community's perspectives on “good” Black teachers. Elder, veteran, and novice teachers were representative of the “class, age, and geographic diversity within the black community” (p. xxiii). Twenty different perspectives about teaching and about Black life represented variation in their social, cultural, and educational experiences. For example, some of the teachers grew up in segregated communities, while others had no firsthand experience with legalized segregation. Additionally, participants had teaching and administrative experience in elementary as well as secondary schools with predominantly African-American student populations in 21 school districts across the country.

Using life history interviews, Foster's (1997) inquiry focused on teachers' family, community, cultural and economic backgrounds, schooling and teacher training experiences, pedagogies and philosophies of education, and the educational contexts in which they taught. Although these teachers attributed some of their success to factors that were specific to their particular backgrounds, collectively they indicated that they were successful because they had confidence in the abilities of African-American students, believed that they could make a difference in the lives of their students, were committed to the success of the students, and understood and used the cultural norms of the community to successfully communicate with students and their parents. Several of the elder teachers felt that they were successful because they had been students as well as teachers in segregated school systems and that their experiences allowed them to witness and understand the changing racial and social climates that affected their community's perspectives on education. Elder teachers were also successful because they learned to address class and cultural differences within their own Black communities. A female elder teacher noted that cultural and class differences often made it difficult for her to immediately establish positive relationships with students and their parents. She explained that she had spent her career trying to overcome these differences and trying to “find a way to relate to the kids in order to teach them better” (p. 20). Novice teachers indicated that they chose teaching as a profession because they wanted to contribute to students' lives and because they believed in the importance of Black teachers for Black students, not only as role models but also as persons who would interact with students in the same way that family members would.

Elder, veteran, and novice teachers held similar views about the importance of not only teaching subject matter content but also preparing students for social, political, economic, and educational success in the larger society. As one novice teacher pointed out, “When I work with the children in my classroom, I try to remember myself at that age, what the obstacles were and what my teachers and other adults did that helped me to believe that I could overcome the odds, persist, and become successful” (Foster, 1997, p. 184). This account, as well as others in the book, is in contrast to some research that has described Black teachers as cruel, uncaring, and lacking a commitment to the educational excellence of Black children (Foster, 1994).¹⁶ Foster noted that the use of the cultural knowledge of participants in educational research can reveal the range of experiences within a specific context (in this case, Black teachers, schools, and communities).

Henry (1996, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 2001) conducted ethnographic studies of Black teachers in the United States and Canada and their use of literacy strategies that are “culturally resonant” (1998c, p.127). These teachers created learning environments where children of African heritage could not only develop literacy skills but could also learn their social histories and their personal identities. Community nomination was used to identify participants who were “working toward the cultural and academic success of Black children” (1996, p. 121). Henry's research framework drew on “critical theories of pedagogy, language, and schooling, emancipatory Black pedagogy, and Black feminist thought” (1996, p. 120). Interviews, participant observation, and life histories were used to investigate Black teachers' use of culture and language to make meaning, and how Black cultural forms and content were used as instructional techniques. Henry

found that the teaching and learning of literacy functioned in several important ways in these classrooms: It sustained cultural ways of communicating that are common to African Americans; re-transposed Black social texts and used them in literacy development; and used cultural ways of behaving and knowing to teach literacy that typically are not valued by the dominant society (1996, p. 124). Thus, teachers in Henry's study used language and culture in liberating rather than disempowering ways. An example Henry (1998c) used is of two boys who tease the darkest child in the class by calling her "Black." Henry noted that many (White) teachers might have ignored such an uncomfortable situation. According to Henry, the teacher realized that literacy also included understanding the historical legacy of colonialism and how skin color prejudice was a dimension of power and oppression in the Black community. The teacher stopped her morning preparations and talked to the children about hurting people's feelings and name calling. Then, moving on to the taboo topic of skin color prejudice and the ambiguities of race and skin color she said, "I am not the same color as this [black] umbrella. But I am Black." She finished by turning to Derek, a "brown" Jamaican who initiated the name calling, and said, "My mother was lighter than you, and she had blue eyes. And she is Black" (1998c, pp. 141–144). Henry's research is significant because she attempted to study Black teachers and students using approaches that challenge some of the negative ways that the larger society constructs meanings about African Americans. However, she acknowledged the tensions created when one lives at the intersections of these cultures: for example, as Black and female in a predominantly Eurocentric society.¹⁷

The cultural knowledge of African-American male adolescents enrolled in an alternative school¹⁸ informed Dunbar's (1999a, 1999b, 2001) understanding of how Black male youth are affected by social, political, and economic forces. Dunbar wanted to study the lives of "an increasing number of African American male students placed in alternative school environments" (1999a, p. 130). The students in this study understood their uneasy status in American society, and as a researcher Dunbar used his particular knowledge of being Black and male to investigate the lives of students who had experienced academic and discipline problems in traditional school settings. Students in Dunbar's study came from a variety of backgrounds—some lived in foster homes, others lived in two parent or single parent homes. Some of these middle school age students had been in and out of the court system, while others were first time offenders.

Dunbar noted that the process of inquiry caused him to reflect on his own status in American society. During the research process, Dunbar was asked to testify in a juvenile court hearing on behalf of one of his participants. He realized there was little that he could say to help the student (after all, he too was a Black man and might be viewed in a similar way as his student). After the student was sentenced to be "locked up," Dunbar noted that "tears rolled down my face thinking about all of the things that had gone wrong in the boy's life" and about "a boy who learned only to survive in a world less kind to him" (p. 137). Dunbar and his participants discussed some of the difficulties of participating in both traditional and alternative educational systems. One student, Bobby, articulates his feelings about this in the following statement:

Education is, like, for a Black man, you have to fight to stay free, you have to fight to have freedom, you got to fight to stay out of jail, you got to fight to get your education. That's for a Black man. For a White man, you don't got to do nothing but do it. (p. 138)

Bobby, as well as other participants in Dunbar's study, had knowledge from a specific position of color about their particular circumstances; their experiences as Black men with police, courtrooms, attorneys, and juvenile prison. The need for recognition and attention and experiences with disappointment were common themes in Dunbar's study. Students wanted to be recognized and perceived as having worth at the school, in the courts, and in the larger society. They also wanted attention—attention from their parents, teachers, other school personnel, and peers. In many cases, the students experienced disappointment—disappointment from the same people from whom they wanted recognition and attention. The desire for recognition and attention and their experiences with disappointment led many of the students in Dunbar's study to be evasive and suspicious of adults (and particularly researchers). Dunbar noted that most students in the school had been "interviewed, tested, incarcerated, restrained, denied, abused, lied to, and misled so many times" (1999a, p. 138) they had developed a series of appropriate responses to his questions.

Dunbar placed the students' knowledge at the center rather than on the margin of the inquiry in an attempt to understand issues that affect Black men in today's society, as well as the institutionalization of alternative schooling as a way to socially and racially isolate particular groups of students. Dunbar also continued to be in contact with the participants after completion of the study, using his findings to conduct new research and generate theory that would promote educational change and that would help to establish meaningful relationships between himself (as a university professor and researcher) and school systems.

The exemplars presented here are representative of some of the important research on African Americans in educational settings. Findings reveal individual as well as collective perspectives on faculty and administrators, teachers, and students. Yet it is particularly noteworthy that although there was variation in the approaches to these studies as well as within the groups studied, findings from each study also revealed shared experiences and collective ways of knowing. West-Olatunji (2001), Foster (1991, 1993, 1997), Henry (1996, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 2001), and Dunbar (1999a, 1999b, 2001) used the cultural ways of thinking, believing, and knowing (Black self-representation) of African Americans as critical to their research and considered the collective meaning systems of African Americans. The researchers also established relationships (connectedness) with the research community. For example, Foster and Henry used community nomination to locate their informants. Although this approach is not in and of itself culturally sensitive (it is similar to the snow ball approach), both researchers sought direct contact with members of the Black community and Black teachers to validate Black community knowledge. Thus, community nomination from a culturally sensitive perspective allowed Foster and Henry to locate participants with a range of social, cultural, geographic, and professional experiences that represented their perspectives as Black teachers. In addition, Dunbar attempted to establish pos-

itive relationships between the academic and nonacademic community by following up on his students. The use of interviews, observation, participant observation, ethnographies and case studies, collaborative interpretation of the data, and reports in the form of short stories, life histories, and narratives (an emphasis on the oral tradition) can be found in these exemplars.

The exemplars also emphasize the importance of the cultural knowledge of the researcher. Discussing her work with Black teachers in the United States, Henry (2001) reported, "certain commonalities in cultural background with my participants have facilitated aspects of my research" (p. 64). In addition, Foster observed that a central issue in life history research is whether "outsiders or insiders (individuals from the same cultural and speech communities) are better suited to conducting research in communities of color" (1997, p. xxi). That is, even when the researcher is a member of the same community, other factors may present an insider-outsider dilemma. Foster, who was a member of the same community and who had also been a teacher, noted, "But I was separated from a number of my narrators in equally important ways" (p. xxi) (i.e., age, geographical and educational background). She wrote that despite the differences, her interactions with her participants were "generally positive, marked by empathy and trust" (p. xxi).

Each of these exemplars features elements of the culturally sensitive research framework I have presented in this article. Interpretive paradigms were used to capture the lives of African Americans from their unique perspectives, and the commitment of the researcher to the research community was evident. More importantly, findings from these studies have implications for the education of African Americans in a variety of educational contexts; these findings can be used to generate new and emancipatory theory and practice based on endarkened perspectives that can be used to promote educational change. A more extensive reading of these as well as other works (such as those referenced in this article) will reveal that differing perspectives and methodologies of researchers can lead to similar conclusions regarding the necessity for culturally sensitive research approaches as a way to uncover the variation in the experiences of African Americans. As Henry (1996) has noted, "We need to seek out these stories that perplex, confound, and create controversies" (p. 106) in an effort to understand the complexities of African Americans' individual and collective experiences.

Implications for Teaching and Practice in Educational Research

hooks (1994) has observed that attempts to question or critique mainstream research frameworks may be viewed as disruptive and negative by both colleagues and students. Thus, as an African-American female professor in a predominantly White institution, I acknowledge the risks of presenting an argument for the recognition and inclusion of perspectives that are different from the majority. The difficulties of presenting this argument can be problematic, for as Stanfield (1994) has argued, "no matter how people of color define themselves, there are still the more dominant stereotypes embedded in public culture that define their status and identities" (p. 182). Nevertheless, it is important that we begin to implement new teaching strategies, begin new discourses,

and create paradigms and models of educational research that are not only inclusive of culturally sensitive research approaches for African Americans but also have the potential to significantly change their lives and their communities in emancipatory ways.

No prescription for culturally sensitive research approaches has been offered here. Nor have I attempted to present a culture versus race argument. Indeed, there are similarities in many of the perspectives on race and culture in educational research. In addition, I have not argued that all portrayals of African Americans are negative or that the use of culturally sensitive research approaches for African Americans will, in and of itself, eliminate research that portrays this group as deficient. Rather, I have attempted to extend the conversations about culturally sensitive research approaches for a specific ethnic group—African Americans. Future discussions in *Educational Researcher* might focus on specific approaches that align themselves with the framework I have articulated here. Like other alternative approaches, such as the application of CRT to education, the usefulness of culturally sensitive research approaches for African Americans will, to a great degree, be determined by scholars who conduct research and write about this group.

Those of us who teach educational research courses can begin to work toward a pedagogical and paradigm shift by critically examining our cultural biases and our teaching strategies (content of the syllabi, class structure, classroom discourse) and attending to the research needs and concerns of all students. This shift can be accomplished in a number of ways including offering special topics courses that focus on culturally sensitive research paradigms, epistemologies, and methods; selecting textbooks and readings that adequately address theoretical and methodological issues associated with culturally sensitive research approaches; and providing students with opportunities to conduct research projects that allow them to explore their own theories about culturally sensitive research in practical situations. Creating classroom environments and discourses where students are granted rather than denied the opportunity to articulate their perspectives on culture-based research and research by and about African Americans and allowing students to challenge our assumptions and biases should be integral to our teaching. We must move beyond the type of teaching that promotes one paradigm over all others.

There are a myriad of persistent and complex social and educational issues affecting African Americans that should be of concern to educational researchers. They include—but are not limited to—tracking, standardized testing, gifted and talented education, curriculum debates, school funding, school choice, and access and retention in higher education. The 21st century will see these issues take center stage in the continuing struggle for educational equity almost 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*. As Meacham (1998) has observed, "There is no space from which to be distant from the conditions facing education. We are all immersed within processes which are connected to and constitutive of the disparities and inequalities which characterize the educational landscape" (p. 405). Research frameworks that are grounded in the knowledge and culture of African Americans can not only contribute to educational research, but more importantly, validate knowledge that can promote educational excellence for this group.

NOTES

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¹ I am using the term *culturally sensitive research* for this discussion. The term *race-based research* is also widely used, and there are similarities in some of the perspectives on race and culture in educational research (see, e.g., Pillow, in press; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Stanfield, 1994).

² For purposes of this discussion, I am using the terms *African American* and *Black* interchangeably. The terms are inclusive of African Americans and other people of African descent in the United States. In using these terms it is not my intent to homogenize cultural and ethnic differences among African Americans and other people of African descent. I am aware that these terms can and do include groups such as Black Puerto Ricans, Brazilians, and Canadians, and that there are large concentrations of these and other groups who could be categorized as Black who reside in various parts of the United States such as Florida, Massachusetts, and New York. For other discussions on the origins and uses of terms describing people of African descent, see Kershaw (1992), Hilliard (2001), and McCarthy (1998).

³ Boykin (1985, 1994) discussed nine interrelated dimensions of Black culture: spirituality, harmony, movement, verve, effect, communalism, individualism, oral tradition, and social time perspective.

⁴ According to Stanfield (1994) ethnicity is the “synthesis of biological and fictive ancestry and cultural elements. As a social phenomenon, ethnicity should not be confused with tribalism and race, even though it is intrinsically related to the formation of both culturally and politically constructed categories” (p. 175).

⁵ There have been a limited number of articles that have appeared, for example, in *QSE* and *QI*. In addition, chapters by Stanfield and Ladson-Billings have appeared in the 1994 and 2000 editions of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, respectively.

⁶ For more extensive discussions of the various definitions of the word *culture* and its application to the study of African Americans see Boykin (1985, 1994) and McCarthy (1998).

⁷ Scholars in education (O'Connor, 1997; Tillman, 1998), anthropology (Gwaltney, 1980/1993), sociology (Kershaw, 1990, 1992; Stanfield, 1993, 1994), and history (Anderson, 1988; Siddle Walker, 2001) have also argued for and used research frameworks that capture the various dimensions of African-American culture.

⁸ Large-scale, quantitative research studies (e.g., Coleman et al., 1966) have often described African Americans as culturally deprived, socially handicapped, and culturally disadvantaged (Hilliard, 2001) and have excluded the perspectives of African-American participants, particularly with regard to educational issues. Willis and Harris (1997) have noted that much of the research on the First Grade Reading Studies failed to include the perspectives of African Americans who participated in and were directly affected by this research.

⁹ Hood (2001) made a similar argument regarding same race and same cultural affiliation in evaluation research.

¹⁰ Parker and Lynn (2002) defined *CRT* as “a legal theory of race and racism designed to uncover how race and racism operate in the law and in society” (p. 7). For other readings on the origins of *CRT* and its application to education, see Crenshaw et al. (1995) and Tate (1997).

¹¹ For a more in-depth discussion of the relevance of race and culture in evaluation research, see various readings in the *American Journal of Evaluation* (1999).

¹² In some instances, researchers' use of the cultural knowledge of African Americans has led to pathological descriptions of their lives. For example, see Frazier (1939/1966) and Ogbu (1989).

¹³ These exemplars do not represent the complete range of conceptual and empirical work that places an emphasis on culturally sensitive re-

search approaches. Conceptual frameworks such as Collins' (1990/2000) Black feminist epistemology and empirical work such as O'Connor's (1997) study of Black teenagers in an urban school system, Lynn's (1999) study of Black teachers, and Tillman's (2001) study of the mentoring experiences of Black faculty in predominantly White institutions, are examples of work using the cultural standpoints of African Americans.

¹⁴ Detailed information about the CORIBE project can be found at www.coribe.org.

¹⁵ In a personal communication, West-Olatunji noted that African-centered research establishes transformation as a key element from research design through analysis. At the design stage, African-centered research involves personal commitment, personal contact, and personal responsibility. Analysis and interpretation are subjective behaviors that evidence the responsibility for transformation as an outcome of the research endeavor.

¹⁶ Foster (1994), in her review of the literature on Black teachers reported that “with the exception of a few ‘balanced portrayals’ of Black teachers, the literature tends to characterize Black teachers as insensitive, authoritarian individuals who are upholders of the status quo and who are ill-suited to teach Black students effectively” (p. 228). Foster also noted that more positive portrayals of Black teachers are those that have been found in sociological studies and autobiographies written from the point of view of Black people.

¹⁷ In a personal conversation, Henry noted that her research with African-American and African-Caribbean girls in Illinois has emphasized the spaces where tensions exist in seeking a holistic, African-centered practice (see, e.g., Henry, 1998a, 1998b, 2001).

¹⁸ The alternative school in Dunbar's (1999a) study was “established to house students who have been described as incorrigible, disruptive, social misfits, and academically incompetent” (p. 1).

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