

Community Mothering

The Relationship Between Mothering and The Community Work of Black Women

The role of Black women in American society is said to be unique (Grant, 1989; Omolade, 1994), in that the institution of slavery rendered the gender of Black women almost null and void. Though women, they were treated in the same manner as Black male slaves, and different from white women. They were expected to bear the burdens, the lash and children for their respective masters (Omolade, 1994). The ability to perform these feats left the Black woman at a disadvantage for the protection of her virtue as a woman (Gilkes, 1985; Collins 1991a, 1991b), while also continuing her historical role in her community as keeper of culture and preserver of traditions (Payne, 1989; Reagon, 1990).

The historical role played by women in African communities has had the concept of mothering as central to its practice (Collins 1987). Motherhood in this setting was different from the norm, which was defined by dependence on men and separation from the community by functioning in the home. Greene states that “the role of mother itself is an important one for many Black women and is accompanied by tasks not required of their white counterparts.” (1990: 208). According to Orleck the accepted though inaccurate definition of motherhood is one of women who are “apolitical, isolated with their children in a world of pure emotion, far removed from the welter of politics and social struggle” (1997: 3). Reagon defines mothering as “the holding of life before birth, the caring for and feeding of the young until they assume independence. (1990: 177). Collins (1987) in her reference to the reassessment of Afro-American motherhood cites the work of Dill (1980) who in her study of Black domestics made note of the strategies they used to ensure that their children would succeed. Gilkes (1980) is also cited based on what Collins termed “the power of Black motherhood.” Gilkes observed that many of the Black female political activists had become involved in politics as a result of their earlier

agitation on behalf of the children of their community. Effective Black mothers were said to be the ones who are “sophisticated mediators between the competing offerings of an oppressive dominant culture and a nurturing Black value-structure” (Hale, 1980).

Reagon relates that the practice of this type of mothering is a clear choice: “a woman must come to terms with herself, her life, her sanity and her health as well as with the health of life around her” (1987: 178). She asserts that this type of mothering is not based solely on biological reproduction, and meshes with scholarly and other professions. Clark-Hine (1986) supports this assertion in her work documenting the roles Black women played in the struggles for freedom, woman’s suffrage, and education for girls among other things. The teaching profession was seen not only as laudable for Black women during the late 1800s and early 1900s (Harley, 1982), but also substantiates the professional, scholarly mode of mothering presented by Reagon. The roles community and church mothers played may be due to: (1) recognition of familial influences on social functioning, (2) the tradition of female leadership in Black society, (3) the fact that these women served as bridges between the worlds of men and women (Gilkes, 1986). The title of ‘mother’ was often conferred on these often older women who were seen to possess wisdom and experience tailored to their communities’ needs in particular, and to the needs of the race in general.

Black women’s mothering experiences: othermothers

James (1993) defines othermothering as acceptance of responsibility for a child not one’s own, in an arrangement that may or may not be formal. She states that this practice stemmed from West African practice of communal lifestyles and interdependence of communities. The experience of slavery saw the translation of othermothering to new settings, since the care of children was an expected task of enslaved Black women in addition to the field or house duties. James states that the familial instability of slavery engendered the adaptation of communality in the form of fostering children whose parents, particularly mothers, had been sold. This tradition of communality gave rise to the practice of othermothering. The survival of the concept is inherent to the survival of Black people as a whole (Jones, 1984), since it allowed for the provision of care to extended family and nonblood relations. James also views the concept as forming a link toward developing new social transformation models that are Black and feminist.

Community Mothers

The role of community mothers often evolved from that of being an othermother (Gilkes, 1983; Reagon, 1990). In reporting on Black community workers, Gilkes found that these women often “viewed the Black community as a group of relatives and other friends whose interest should be advanced, and promoted at all times, under all conditions, and by almost any means” (1983:

117). Her subjects were all middle class professional women who possessed a sense of “nation consciousness.” The term describes a group of middle class people who in its political and social agitation seeks social change by allowing the needs of the Black community to influence their individual orientation in educational and employment activities. Gilkes refers to the term “going up for the oppressed” to describe the activities of this group. She defines going up for the oppressed as “a type of economic and career mobility that comprises a set of activities aimed at social change and the empowerment of the powerless” (1983: 119). Three characteristics describe the career mobility of these women: acquisition of a focused education, the dialectical career, and commitment maintenance.

Black Clubwomen

Another example of community mothering came in the form of the Club movement by Black women. The Club movement stemmed from the arrival of a Black middle class as the first collective crop of formally educated Black people living in Black communities. Education and the social privileges it brought placed this group in positions to appreciate and achieve the American dream. They were also in the best position, literally and figuratively, to uplift the race.

Formal inception of the Club movement is dated as occurring on July 21, 1896 in Washington, D.C. at the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church (Kendrick, 1954). At this time the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) came into being as the representation of the collective body of colored women’s clubs. Impetus for the formation of the Clubs was also provided by the horrors visited upon the Black community through lynching. The protection of white female virtue as a reason for lynching was also attacked, as well as the sexual abuse perpetrated on Black women by white men. According to Lerner (1974), this expression provided ideological direction for Black women organizing to defend Black womanhood as an integral part of defending the race from terror and abuse.

Black Clubwomen were professionals themselves, or married to professional men. In either case, given their status in the community, they possessed access to economic, political, and legal resources necessary to address many community needs. Community mothering was now done in the form of Clubs designed by prominent community women desiring to address the needs most prevalent in their communities. They formed these Clubs and charged themselves dues which were used in turn to implement their programs. Their middle class status was seen as a means to the end of racial uplift, and in line with the motto of the NACW, of “lifting as we climb.”

Church mothers and civil rights women

The Black church has been described as the only autonomous organization functioning specifically to address the needs of African-Americans (Lincoln

and Mamiya, 1990; Morrison, 1991; Marshall, 1970). Women have been the majority of congregants and, consequently, church supporters (Levin and Taylor, 1993). These Black church women have contributed their efforts toward community development and maintenance, often without the rewards afforded to men who have done the same (Gilkes, 1975; Grant, 1989). Despite the lack of acknowledgment, they continued in their determination to “uplift the race” through different community-based interventions.

The concept of othermothering in giving rise to community mothering is also exemplified in the work of church mothers. These are a particular type of community mother in that they conducted their work primarily through the church. Use of the church as an organ of intervention was based on their vision of the need for moral mothering of the community (Gilkes, 1985). Club membership was by invitation only, and said invitation was only proffered to professionally trained women (or women married to professionals), therefore, in some regions, the church provided an almost professional means of mothering which could be recognized by the community. Work conducted by church mothers centered on teaching Sunday school, conducting home visits, caring for the sick and missionary work. Often the mission field was their community.

These women took up membership in church women’s groups, female auxiliaries to fraternal orders, and benevolent societies, which often required less affluent lifestyles, less active public roles, and had more practical benefits for their members than did predominantly middle-class reform associations. (Harley, 1982: 260)

Though the women were not perceived as leaders, they nevertheless formulated strategies and tactics to mobilize community resources for their collective actions (Barnett, 1993). In examining the experience of power wielded by church women in the African Methodist Episcopal church, Dodson (1988) suggested the concept of surrogate leadership. Women of this church possessed the numbers, organizing talents, and resources which are prerequisites for participation in power relationships. As a result they were able to exercise influence on church policy to a certain degree.

The civil rights movement is said to have been precipitated by the expansion of the community roles of Black church women in responding to needs in their community (Burks, 1990). Prominent women in this movement, such as Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Rosa Parks, relate the influence of older female family members whose Club or church work served as examples which they followed in their work. Ella Baker is said to have reported seeing her mother caring for the sick and needy in her community, and being someone to whom people went to for advice (Payne, 1989). These were women who came up in the church, were schooled on their role of racial uplift, being “race women,” and who also believed in the strength of their religious faith to pull

them through their trials.

Work for community improvements was a continuation of Black women's work as leaders in the struggle for freedom, education, and self improvement (Cantarow, 1980). Payne (1989) in his tribute to Ella Baker states that she worked for social change by building organizations while encouraging the growth and empowerment of individuals. Baker was the first full time director of the Southern Leadership Christian Conference and was considered the mother of its activist phase. She was instrumental in the formation of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee as a separate organization, and was an advisor to Martin Luther King Jr.

Church women who participated in the movement were sometimes influenced by other women who worked primarily in the community. Annie Bell, Robinson Devine, and Unita Blackwell all indicate having a spiritual purpose in persevering through their work as civil rights workers. Crawford (1993) traces resistance strategies used by these women activists to three factors: First, their inherited spirituality and early church upbringing, which assisted them in facing the rigors of activism; second, exposure to older community women who served as role models; and third, a level of individual autonomy which allowed them to be willing to challenge the status quo.

The examples presented indicate the roles played by Black church and community women. The expected courtesy based on their contributions should have been acceptance into leadership positions, since their support has been intrinsic to the survival and functioning of the Black community. Black women working for their communities have beliefs such as going up for the oppressed (Gilkes, 1983), lifting as we climb (Peebles-Wilkins 1989; Shaw 1991), the knowledge that ignorance of needs observed could affect the survival of the community (Reagon 1990), and an inborn heritage of mothering and nurturing the community (James 1993). According to Clark-Hine,

The creation of educational, health care, and recreational institutions spearheaded by diverse Black women's clubs and voluntary organizations followed no standard pattern. Rather, women launched new projects or worked to transform existing institutions into structures more adequately designed to address the needs of their respective constituencies. Recurring concerns were for education for the young, food, shelter, and clothing for the aged, medical and nursing care for the sick. (1986: 238)

Method

Reagon (1990) suggests that mothering may be used as a source for data categorization, and as a method of data analysis in acquiring a historical picture of the Black community's method of evolving and surviving. Of this she states,

using mothering as a data category affords the researcher the potential

of examining mothering in its ideal form, where each generation is born into a situation that is very healthy and affirming for them.... When applied to the examination and analysis of cultural data, it can reveal much within the historical picture of how a culture evolves and how and why changes occur in order to maintain the existence of a people.” (1990: 177)

James (1993) provides three reasons for the usefulness of an understanding of the roles of othermothers which gives shape to rationale and to the purpose of this study. First, understanding the roles will address feelings of importance by indicating historical ways in which Black women empowered themselves. Second, understanding allows for reconceptualization of power as a means toward action rather than a commodity. Third, the talents exhibited in analyzing and critiquing situations and developing workable strategies may be viewed as possible resources for addressing contemporary community needs. Given these premises, the study investigated the concept of mothering as it relates to the community work experience of Black women, through use of phenomenological research methods.

Qualitative research methods such as interviews and observation were used to collect and analyze the data. It is a useful method in this instance because it is inductive, and aims to gain valid knowledge and understanding by representing and illuminating the how and the why of people’s experiences. Aspects of qualitative research such as unstructured interviewing and observation were used to produce data supportive of the mothering experiences of the women. Nine women who work in Black communities and churches participated in the study. The women were chosen based on their involvement in community work, and because they were at least at the ages at which the title of “mother” is conferred. They ranged in age from 43 to 84 years old. Except for those used to gather demographic information, questions asked were open ended. A total of twenty-one questions were used to investigate the concept of mothering in the community work of the women who were chosen. Constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze the findings.

Results

Eight themes and subthemes emerged for the data. For this paper, mothering (theme) and work, choice and need (subthemes) are discussed. The theme, mothering, does not fit the entire definition of emerging. Though it was later allowed to emerge, its presence was assumed prior to the beginning of the study. The others emerged in true qualitative style. The women participating in the study are presented (using their initials) as well as excerpts of their statements as they relate to the themes being discussed.

Community women reported holding positions on the Parent Teacher’s Association (PTA), designing and implementing programs, volunteering in community organizations, and sitting on local community boards. Settings in

which the church women worked often included different church organizations and community boards designed to assist church members or to provide services to the community.

Few differences were found between the two groups of women in this study and the work they did, or the methods they used. Church women tended to work primarily with older adults in the community through visitations and providing comfort and counsel. Community women on the other hand worked primarily with children, and to a lesser extent, with adults. There were church women who also worked with children, and there were community women who worked with adults. All the church women provided assistance in the community as well as the church. One community woman reported working in the church in addition to community work, while the other three did not report church activity.

Another small difference was means of involvement. While church women more readily reported being asked, or being chosen to do community work, community women usually reported responding to needs they observed. This difference seems to be in keeping with the settings in which the women function most intimately. Church mothers for example, are in more of a position to be approached by someone in the church or surrounding community because of familiarity and consistent contact. A community woman on the other hand would be more likely to respond to a need she observed in her child's school or community rather than being asked to do so partly because of a lack of this type of familiarity.

Both groups of women reported using innovative means to conduct their work. For example, one church woman reported her work in the Progressive Committee, raising funds for scholarships or for purchase of a sign for the front of the church. The money is raised through whatever means are deemed best and that will result in the most funds. Community women reported determining the existence of needs through observation, but then meeting them through coalition building and protest or support of each other.

The following excerpts are some of the ways these women express their community mothering. NJ and LM responded to being asked to define community mothers, and whether they believed the description could apply to them (the other excerpts occurred spontaneously):

NJ: I consider myself to be a neighborhood mother, because whatever neighborhood I live in I automatically get to know all the children around, and my house becomes the Kool-Aid house. I immediately adopt all the children in the neighborhood.

KW: I don't know why they do that, you know, some people I didn't know they, um, mentioned this the other day, they will mention things to me that they won't mention to somebody else. You know like a member could come and say "hi sister so-and-so how you doing today?" and they may say "I'm

all right. "You need anything?" "No." But then I could call, I don't know why it's like that and they'd like say, "I do need so-and-so and so, if you don't mind, or if you have time..." But I don't know why. You know, I don't know why. But that happens.

HR: *So I'm very close to the family and you know they consider me more or less as their mother. And it's quite interesting that my neighbour on this side often says, "I want to be just like you when I grow up." And my other neighbour that owns the house on the other side—she's moved out—she uses that same terminology.*

TA: *Because these are children who walk up to me and hug me, and I fuss at them, I yell at them, I scream at them "why are you doing that, don't you know better, why did you say that word."*

TA: *But on Mother's day all of them chipped in and got me the film Sankofa. And they got me a card saying if we had a mother to choose it would be you. And so to me that was much more prestigious than any award anyone could give me, or recognize.*

This type of behavior resembles mothering because it is spontaneous, nurturing, supportive, and it is accomplished in a familiar way. For example church mothers are older, respected members of the congregation, who are also familiar with church members. These women could enquire as to the whereabouts of absent members without seeming intrusive. Based on the response to their inquiry, a plan could be developed to meet any needs arising from the reason for the absence.

In both groups, the spontaneous choice and subsequent helping behavior is reminiscent of mothering. Though this may resemble the simple act of volunteering, it is not, since once the need was recognized, the woman usually had to devise a way in which to meet the need (Collins 1991a). Statements describing this subtheme include:

HR: *She has a roomer but the roomer works all the time. And so that's my individual project in the neighborhood to take care of that one.*

TA: *And some people may say it's selfish, but I think everyone must listen to what their calling is and I don't think that my purpose is to sit in meetings. My purpose is to talk and tell the story and uh, and get as many people to listen, both white and Black.*

SG: *Because there are lots of young people in our community as well as our church that need some activities as well as things to do.*

LM: *I started out as a tutor because there was a definite need.*

HR: *And also during the period of time that I worked there I had to apply for a notary seal. So I would be able to notarize different documents and my notary is still active and I have community members that often call upon me to notarize different things for them.*

UR: *I was interested in what they were doing and I just decided that I would do whatever I could to help.*

KW: *I feel a lot of times our service means a lot more to people than money, than going in to give them a donation of flowers.*

SG: *And I'm the type of person would work anywhere I'm needed not just no special place.*

These excerpts are similar to the points made by Gilkes (1975, 1983, 1985), Reagon (1990), and James (1993) regarding the types of behaviors community mothers and othermothers engage in as they perform mothering activities. Reagon's (1990) reference to othermothers as culture keepers and James' reference to them as being central to the community is signified in the behavior of these women in responding to recognized needs without being asked, or, being asked with the confidence that the request would be honored. Based on the way the church women reported being chosen, it seems there is an expectation of being mothered or handled in a motherly manner on the part of the recipient; for example, congregants in the experiences related by KW (members bypassing other women and seeking her out to ask for assistance) and HR (members telling her they just felt she could help them). In these instances the recipient believes that the women are capable of providing the service before they make the request. TA and LM, who are community women, report mothering behavior in their administration of community work. As the following excerpts indicate, the women have particular methods of doing community work, and often their community work in method and implementation includes motherly behavior, or what seemed to be a motherly frame of reference. This behavior and the accompanying expectation may be seen as an example of how these women use strategies that are not only innovative but also motherly when doing community work. For example,

LM: *A community mother would make sure that if you see a child walking up and down the street and the child does not look like he or she belongs on the street, they would at least say "Baby where you going?" Not that it could be any of my business.*

I think that's a role they see me in. Because they know that if they do something wrong and I catch them I will get on the phone and call their mother. And I think the children understand that it's not snitching on them, it's caring. If I see a child crying in the hallway for no reason, I will come

home that night and call the mother and I'll say, "you know I say so-and-so crying in the hall and I couldn't find out why, and it was just too early in the morning, and no one could find out why and I just want to let you know so you can find out what happened."

And our children don't feel protected. And they see me outside the school building and I'll break up a fight. And I'm not scared of them. And that's another thing, too many of us adults are scared of children. The children know I'm not scared of them, and I think they appreciate that. I think they see me as more than just my daughter's mother. I think my daughter gets jealous sometimes, but I think they see me as more than just my daughter's mother. By how they respond to me.

SG: And so anyway, after they all went back in and I went upstairs and I came back down she said ... and she was standing there laughing. And I said ... "what are you laughing about?" And she said, "I'm laughing because of what the kids [said] when they saw you come out. They said 'here comes the principal.'" I said, "the principal? I'm not the principal." I said, "that's bad." She said, "no, no, no, no it's good." She said, "they respect you enough to know that when you come out you want them to go back in. You know you don't have to say anything, they know if you want them; in other words they're not supposed to be out here congregating in the hall."

Discussion

Mothering emerged in review of the literature and provided a framework to investigate the underlying, motivating factor for Black women doing community work. Therefore mothering was studied as a phenomenon intrinsic to the work. As suggested by Gilkes (1983) and Omolade (1994), open-ended questions were used to allow the uniqueness of these Black women and their community work experiences to be reported accurately. Dickson (1987) and Murray (1987) also suggest caution in researching predominantly ignored populations such as women.

Mothering was an expected theme in doing this study. Statements were made that both directly and indirectly described the concept. Direct mothering may be seen when the community or church woman attempted to influence another; for example, scolding a child, providing some type of service that is nurturing, or satisfying a need. Indirect mothering may be seen through the responses of others to the presence of the woman, or her assumed presence, or expectations tied to her presence without her direct input. Examples include others changing their behavior due to the woman's presence or knowledge that she is approaching, and continuing behaviors she had suggested without the woman being present to reinforce the behavior.

Mothering is present in the reasons given for choosing to do community work. Johnson-Reagon (1990) and Collins (1987) report on othermothers who wielded influence by the knowledge of their presence as well as their actual

work. These women served as role models for young Black women by behaving in a manner that was often entirely different from what society prescribed for women in general, and Black women in particular. One participant (TA) stated her role in providing an “unconventional” example for her daughters and their friends. Gilkes (1985) provides examples of the legacy of community work done by mothers of the Sanctified church, and Grant (1989) supports this indirect work through her statement of women being the literal and figurative “backbone” of the Black church. According to the literature and statements made by the women in this study, the work was accomplished without expectation of an expression of gratitude.

Though the discovery of mothering was not a goal of this study, it served as a framework to investigate the community work of Black women. Its presence in the review of the literature and its influence on the choices of early church, community and othermothers raised the question of whether mothering continues to influence the community work of contemporary Black women. Additionally, its presence in the language of the women in the study solidifies its intrinsic presence as a motivating factor and possible reason for doing community work for contemporary Black women.

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