

Casting a Wider Net: Incorporating Black Feminist Theory to Support EdD Students' Epistemological Stance Development in Research Methods Courses

Stephanie Smith Budhai 

Drexel University
smithbudhai@drexel.edu

Kristine Lewis Grant 

Drexel University
ksl33@drexel.edu

ABSTRACT

This article ponders the question: “How might EdD research methods courses be reimagined to position Black Feminist Theory as a comparable theoretical framework to guide epistemological stance development and scholar-practitioner inquiry?” By introducing Black Feminist Theory as a viable theoretical framework, this article posits its potential incorporation into reimagined EdD research methods courses. After providing a more detailed description of Black Feminist Theory and its associated constructs, the ways that Black Feminist Theory can shape scholar-practitioners' inquiry is explored, including: 1) framing a problem of practice, 2) building conceptual and/or theoretical frameworks, and 3) connecting to research design and approaches. Implications for Black Feminist Theory's alignment to the CPED framework are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Black Feminist Theory, epistemology, research methods

Despite the ever-evolving socio-political environment in today's world, research methodology courses have remained stagnant. Within doctoral programs, traditional quantitative methodologies may be favored, however, for professional education doctorate (EdD) programs, exposure to more all-encompassing qualitative methods better align with the work of scholar-practitioners. Moreover, in the face of persistent racism, sexism, and other forms of inequity in US public schools, few scholar-practitioners are prepared to adequately investigate these “wicked problems” (Hopson & Cram, 2018) and their implications for practice. Traditional EdD research methods courses introduce students to dominant epistemologies such as positivism, constructivism, and interpretivism, while omitting more critical frameworks. By doing so, many students are ill-equipped to fully conceptualize complex problems of practice or develop nuanced research designs.

Black Feminist Theory presents a critical framework that enables the reframing of persistent social problems in education. When included as a viable epistemology in research methods courses, Black Feminist Theory enables future scholar-practitioners to conceptualize the complexity of research problems shaped by racism, sexism, and classism, especially those affecting the educational experiences of Black girls and women, as well as the action-oriented research designs required to envision justice- and equity-centered solutions.

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

In supporting EdD students' inquiry pursuits towards equity and justice, it is important to understand that “other epistemologies approaching research from personal/political standpoints that honor multiple, possibly conflicting, positionalities are marginalized” (Patterson et al., 2016, p. 55). Such epistemologies, including Black Feminist Theory (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 1991, 2000; hooks, 1989, 2000), are not typically taught in EdD research methods courses as credible philosophical and theoretical underpinnings. Growing out of the lived experiences of Black women, Black Feminist Theory is situated at the intersections of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1989, 2000; Hill Collins, 1991, 2000). This unique positioning affords Black women's insights on the racism, sexism, and the ways these and other forms of oppression interlock to produce persistent, systemic inequities (Hill Collins, 1991, 2000; hooks, 1990). Hill Collins (1991) asserts that Black Feminism resonates with the theme of the “oneness of all human life” (p. 39), and, from this, concludes that Black Feminism is “a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community” (p. 39), which can be carried out through scholar-practitioner research.



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing.



This journal is supported by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate: A Knowledge Forum on the EdD (CPED) cpedinitiative.org

impactinged.pitt.edu
Vol. 8 No. 3 (2023)

ISSN 2472-5889 (online)
DOI 10.5195/ie.2023.337



PURPOSE OF ESSAY

This essay ponders the question: *How might EdD research methods courses be reimagined to position Black Feminist Theory as a comparable theoretical framework to guide epistemological stance development and scholar-practitioner inquiry?* This essay introduces Black Feminist Theory as a viable theoretical framework and posits its potential incorporation into reimagined EdD research methods courses. After providing a more detailed description of Black Feminist Theory and its associated constructs, the essay explores the ways that the theory could shape scholar-practitioner's inquiry, including: 1) framing a problem of practice, 2) building conceptual and/or theoretical frameworks, and 3) connecting to research designs and approaches. In addition, Black Feminist Theory's alignment to the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) framework regarding Inquiry as Practice and Laboratories of Practice, is discussed.

GUIDING FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework guiding this paper is Black Feminist Theory (Hill Collins, 1991). Advanced by Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and other Black scholars, Black Feminist Theory "encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it" (Hill Collins, 1991, p. 22). The power of Black Feminist Theory is not limited to Black women, but is best conceived as "a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community" (Hill Collins, 1991, p. 39). According to Hill Collins (1991), Black Feminist Theory is comprised of four dimensions: concrete experience as a criterion of meaning, use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, ethic of caring, and ethic of personal accountability. These dimensions also serve as knowledge validation rules.

The first dimension, concrete experience as a criterion of meaning, asserts that knowledge is rooted in one's lived experience. Hill Collins (1991) explains, "for most African-American women, those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences" (p. 209). Related to this experience, Black women base this criterion of meaning on the wisdom derived from these lived experiences. Wisdom has been key to the survival of Black women. Hill Collins (1991) incorporates both knowledge and wisdom, distinguishing that knowledge "is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential for the survival of the subordinate" (p. 208).

Related to the first dimension, use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, Hill Collins (1991) indicates that dialogue is central to the development of knowledge. Dialogue is based on the assumption of connectedness, that two people (or more) are communicating with one another as humans of equal value and agency. Hill Collins (1991) writes, "For Black women, new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of the community" (p. 212). For dialogue to be used in assessing knowledge claims, all must engage in full and authentic participation (Hill Collins, 1991).

The ethic of care is central to the knowledge validation process in Black Feminist epistemology. Hill Collins (1991) grounds the ethic of care in three interrelated components. First, individual expressiveness asserts that "each individual is thought to be a

unique expression of a common spirit, power, or energy inherent in our all life" (Hill Collins, 1991, p. 215). Second, the appropriateness of emotions in dialogue indicates that "a speaker believes in the validity of an argument" (p. 215). Third, the capacity for empathy speaks to both Black women's capacity for empathy as well as their ability to see the capacity for empathy in others (Hill Collins, 1991). Together, these three elements of care speak to a connected way of knowing.

Lastly, the fourth dimension, ethic of personal accountability, requires that one's position on issues are informed by personal experience and full responsibility is assumed for the arguments presented (Hill Collins, 2000). One must be responsible for their knowledge claims. Hill Collins (1991) explains that one's perspectives and behaviors are grounded in the personal values and beliefs. Research in educational leadership employing Black Feminist Theory amplifies the ways that Black women leaders in educational settings (K-12, higher education, community-based organizations, etc.) draw on these four dimensions to reframe problems of practice and pursue equity and social justice.

EDD RESEARCH METHODS COURSES AS LABORATORIES OF PRACTICE: SITUATING BLACK FEMINIST THEORY IN INQUIRY

Within EdD research methods courses, traditional paradigms such as constructivism, interpretivist, positivism, and post-positivism are often introduced as standards to impact EdD students' development of their positionalities and researchers' stance that will guide their dissertation in practice. More recently, critical theories have been included to address issues related to diversity, equity, and social justice, however, Black Feminist Theory is often left out of consideration. In this section, examples of how Black Feminist Theory can be incorporated into EdD research methods courses in an effort to increase attention to students' development of equity-centered praxis and raised-consciousness in their quests to solve problems of practice related to educational inequity and injustice are provided. To that end, an exploration of different aspects of the research design process to demonstrate Black Feminist Theory's potential contribution to EdD students' conceptualization and implementation of research, as it relates to framing a problem of practice, building conceptual and/or theoretical frameworks, and connecting research designs and approaches are shared.

Framing a Problem of Practice

The crux of the research design process is to frame a problem of practice (Ma et al., 2018), one that is relevant to the EdD student's professional setting as well as one that has the potential to impact and influence change for the greater good. By drawing on the dimensions of Black Feminist Theory, EdD students begin with their lived professional experiences as educational leaders to inform their understanding of the problems that they hope to explore for their dissertation research. EdD students' lived wisdom related to the problem can also shape their conceptualization of the problem. In addition to drawing on their lived experiences, leaning on Black Feminist Theory can provide a signification in representing the context in which the problem of practice derives.

Black Feminist Theory also requires that EdD students engage in dialogue with members of the community to generate knowledge. This has the effect of contextualizing the students'

knowledge and linking their experiences to the collective experiences of other members in the community. Noted author bell hooks (1989) suggests that “dialogue implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of a subject and object” (p. 131). She sees dialogue as “humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination” (p. 131). Conceptualizing the problem of practice in dialogue with members of the community can generate new ways of seeing, interrogating problems of practice which has the potential to open the door to new approaches and solutions.

Black Feminist Theory enables students to frame their problems of practice in ways that are distinctly different from those framed by positivist paradigms. While the tenets of positivist paradigms are aligned with scientific and mathematical proof as a way of confirming research findings, Black Feminist Theory relies on the validation of silenced experiences, storytelling, and engagement in discourse to understand new information and make meaning of what is there. While Black Feminist Theory has close ties with both feminist and constructivist paradigms, it goes beyond both with a focus on nuanced dual oppressive experiences based on race and gender that cannot be ignored as scholar-practitioners begin to conduct research. By drawing on Black Feminist Theory to frame the problem of practice, EdD students are well-positioned to then conceptualize and frame their larger research studies.

Building Conceptual and/or Theoretical Frameworks

Conceptual frameworks, particularly in EdD dissertations, provide a blueprint that builds context for understanding the problems of practice to be explored (Kumar et al., 2022). Similarly, theoretical frameworks provide a theory-based basis for the study. When EdD students draw on Black Feminist Theory to serve as the framework for their research, they are adopting a distinct worldview and abiding by a different set of knowledge validation claims. In contrast to the dominant paradigm of positivism, Black Feminist Theory is rooted in the lived experiences of EdD students. Students’ knowledge of a research problem is required in order to establish their standing to explore a research problem. Insider knowledge is valued as this enables students to understand the problem - its contours and nuances. Moreover, their personal and professional experiences speak to their personal accountability as it relates to the research. Black Feminist Theory places importance on the identity of the researcher and requires researchers to own their ideas, which can be immensely useful as EdD students develop their positionalities.

Black Feminist Theory as a lens to conceptualize a study can guide the researcher’s decision-making about a host of methodological issues. For example, Black Feminist Theory will inform the selection of the research design and approach. With an emphasis on dialogue, many studies employing Black Feminist Theory are qualitative in nature. Black Feminist Theory sees dialogue as central to assessing knowledge claims, and calls for a level of care and connectedness between the researcher and the participants. Knowledge is conceived as a generative experience resulting from conversations with participants about their lived experiences and the meaning that they create from those experiences. Black Feminist Theory also informs decisions about the selection of participants as well as how the participants will be engaged in the study. EdD students employing a Black Feminist framework will identify and invite participants with direct personal

experiences with the research problem and vested interests in the findings of the research study.

Conceptualizing a research study using Black Feminist Theory calls for the researcher to demonstrate a sophisticated level of care about the participants, the research design, and the data collection and analysis. Where positivism and other traditional paradigms require a level of objectivity and distance from the study participants, Black Feminist Theory requires a care, emotion, and personal accountability to the study. By applying a different standard of research ethics, EdD students who employ a Black Feminist Theory in the conceptualization of the research need to defend their research and their knowledge claims when compared with dominant paradigms.

Connecting to Research Designs and Approaches

Given the centrality of concepts such as lived experiences and dialogue to Black Feminist Theory, qualitative research designs and methods are best paired with this framework. The majority of empirical research studies on Black girls and women in educational spaces employ qualitative approaches. Like Black Feminist Theory, qualitative research is preoccupied with the human experience, how investigating lived experiences sheds light on humanity and how the exploration of our stories provides insight on how we make meaning of our lives and make sense of our worlds. By conducting individual interviews with Black women, qualitative researchers, often Black women scholars themselves, can examine their lives, interpret their stories, and amplify their voices in the intellectual spaces that often talk about Black women but not to Black women. Hill Collins (2000) argues that Black women scholars and researchers are in a unique position to tell the stories of Black women, as their lived experiences as Black women grant them significant insiders’ knowledge that is valued by Black Feminist Theory. Recognizing that Black women are not monolithic, scholars who conduct research with Black women should listen to their stories, empathize with their experiences, and hold themselves accountable to accurately retell their stories with the same level of wisdom, passion, and urgency in which it is conveyed. Black women’s stories are not only theirs, but belong to humanity. Standing at the intersections of race and gender, Black women’s experiences offer a kaleidoscopic lens to understand the larger human narrative of oppression and liberation. Within the qualitative designs, there are several approaches that align with Black Feminist Theory, highlighted below.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a vehicle to gather experiences and stories from participants to inform knowledge and practice. As narrative inquiry positions the researcher alongside the participants in the telling and retelling of their stories, Black feminist scholars who employ narrative designs draw on the dimensions of the concrete experience as criterion of meaning and dialogue in the application of narrative research. Counter-narratives, also called counter-storytelling, are a specific type of narrative inquiry that center the experiences of and challenge dominant narratives about people in marginalized populations. Counternarratives amplify silenced voices and situate racialized experiences as a catalyst for understanding the stories that are told by marginalized participants, including Black women.

An example of the application of Black Feminist Theory in a narrative study can be found in Cook’s (2022) dissertation titled



Shifting Early Childhood Philanthropic Leaders' Mindsets and Approaches to Funding Strategies by Centering Counternarratives of Black Women, Home-based Early Childhood Educators in the District of Columbia. In this dissertation, Cook (2022) employed a Black Feminist methodology to conduct semi-structured interviews with 12 Black women home-based early childhood educators. From these Black women's experiences, Cook (2002) developed counternarratives that challenged dominant ways of thinking about early childhood education and resulted in a reported shift in philanthropic leaders' approaches to funding.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is another qualitative design that is uniquely positioned to explore the lived experiences of Black girls and women. Phenomenology concentrates on understanding the essence of aspects of the human experience and relies on participants' consciousness to derive meaning. Within phenomenology, there are certain approaches that lend themselves well when using a Black Feminist epistemological stance to carry out dissertations in practice. For example, a hermeneutic phenomenological study "is based on the analysis of the most complex aspects of human life, of what is beyond the quantifiable" (Gullien, 2019, p. 217), focusing on a participant's cultural experiences, values, and beliefs. Hermeneutic phenomenology requires a careful and iterative interpretation of the text of a participant's lived experience. Drawing on interviews, diaries, and journaling, this form of phenomenology incorporates myriad ways that dialogue can initiate, evolve, and sustain in order to generate a deep understanding of a collective experience of a human phenomenon. Recognizing the influence of the researcher's own lived experience, phenomenologists can apply an ethic of care into the research process where empathy is exerted, allowing space for the participant to share their experiences within their cultural and sociopolitical context instead of in a more general way (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

An example of the application of Black Feminist Theory phenomenological research can be found in Hatcher's (2021) dissertation titled *Gendered Racial Experiences of Black Women Students at Hispanic Serving Institutions*. In this hermeneutic phenomenological study, Hatcher (2021) drew on Black Feminist Theory to help interpret the lived experiences of Black female undergraduate students attending predominantly Hispanic college. She conducted a close reading of the interview transcripts with five Black women undergraduates to explore their stress related to microaggressions, as well as their approaches to supporting one another through their college experiences.

Autoethnography

As a critical methodology, autoethnography is a qualitative approach that allows for exploration of the intersectionalities present in the lives of Black women. In addition to telling the often silenced stories of Black women, autoethnography centers the lived experience of the researcher in her own research. Aligned with the ethic of personal accountability in Black Feminist epistemology, Black women researchers are personally responsible for using their privileged standpoints to tell the larger story of Black women's lived experiences by beginning with their own experiences. Autoethnography enables Black women scholars to employ research as a vehicle for activism and social justice within and beyond the academy (Gale & Wyatt, 2018).

An example of the application of Black Feminist Theory in an autoethnographic study can be found in Lawrence's (2019) dissertation titled *Changing the World One Black Girl at a Time: An Autoethnography of a Black Woman[x]n Teacher's Journey to Become an Agent of Change*. Lawrence (2019) recounted that she analyzed 20 years of her journals, correspondences, and other artifacts to explore her experiences in predominantly White educational settings - as a K-12 student, undergraduate student, teacher, and administrator. Lawrence (2019) endeavored to use her lived experiences to challenge dominant narratives about Black girls and school discipline practices contributing to their suspension and expulsion.

These are three examples of qualitative approaches to use with Black Feminist Theory. Other approaches include grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. Black Feminist Theory can also be employed in mixed methods designs.

FURTHER POSSIBILITIES AND CONCLUSION

Regarding the CPED Framework (Carnegie Project of the Education Doctorate, 2022), the use of Black Feminist Theory with EdD research methods courses has the potential to expand the epistemologies that are used to address problems of practice, serve as a mechanism for mentoring and advising diverse students, and support the development of well-rounded equity-minded scholarly practitioners. What makes EdD candidates' research special is the focus on complex, yet current, problems of practice situated in a real-world context. As the current socio-political context is consumed with civil unrest and trauma, it is likely that the problems of practice that EdD candidates tackle will connect with these socially conscious themes of inquiry. By exposing students to Black Feminist Theory as they develop their positionalities, the framing of their problems of practice through the epistemological lens of Black Feminist Theory including: 1) the inclusion of concrete experiences as a criterion of meaning, 2) use of dialogue in assessment knowledge claims, 3) ethic of caring, and 4) ethic of personal accountability (Hill Collins (1991, 2000), is possible.

According to the American Association of University Women (2022), Black women are more likely than Black men to earn degrees, and 65% of Black students earning doctoral, medical, and dental degrees are Black women. Moreover, Black students are overrepresented in majors that are associated with lower earnings including education and human services (American Association of University Women, 2022). Thus, Black women students are very much present in many EdD programs. As stated by CPED, "mentoring and advising should be guided by equity and justice, mutual respect, dynamic learning, flexibility, intellectual space, supportive learning environments, cohort and individualized attention, rigorous practices, and integration". Adding to this, while we know that Black students thrive when they have professors who share the same ancestral heritages, this may not always be possible given the current racial makeup of education faculty. However, part of mentoring and advising includes exposing students to critical theories and epistemologies that speak to their lived experiences. These frameworks influence the lens that shapes how students see the construction of knowledge which in turn they can use in their inquiry pursuits. In addition, as we mentor and advise students who do not identify as Black, we can help them leverage Black Feminist Theory and use the concepts to advance their pursuits of justice through their scholarly inquiry within practice settings.



Finally, according to CPED, scholarly practitioners leverage applied theories and practice-based research methods to contribute to change in their professional settings (Carnegie Project of the Education Doctorate, 2022). Without the inclusion of Black Feminist Theories as a viable epistemological complement to EdD research, we are doing our students a disservice, depriving them of critical theories needed to “inform educational leaders of all races and genders in leading to eliminate inequities (Capper, 2020, p. 198). All EdD students, many of whose research and practice are about and/or with Black people, need to understand critical frameworks that are relevant to the communities that they serve. Furthermore, Black EdD students need access to critical epistemologies that speak to their lived experiences, and a critical epistemology such as Black Feminist Theory can shape how scholar-practitioners pursue inquiry and draw on this knowledge in practice to bring about equity and social justice.

REFERENCES

- American Association of University Women. (2022). *Fast facts: Women of color in higher ed*. <https://www.aauw.org/resources/article/fast-facts-woc-higher-ed/>
- Boylorn, R. (2016). On being at home with myself. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 9(1), 44–58.
- Capper, C. (2019). *Organizational theory for equity and diversity: Leading integrated, socially just education*. Routledge.
- Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate. (2022). *The CPED framework*. <https://www.cpedinitiative.org/the-framework>.
- Cook, S. N. (2022). *Shifting early childhood philanthropic leaders' mindsets and approaches to funding strategies by centering counternarratives of Black women, home-based early childhood educators in the District of Columbia* (Order No. 29162900) [Doctoral dissertation, American University]. Proquest Dissertation Publishing.
- Crenshaw, K. W. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
- Gale, K., & Wyatt, J. (2018). Autoethnography and activism: Movement, intensity, and potential. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 25(6), 566–568. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800418800754>
- Gullien, F. (2019). Qualitative research: Hermeneutical phenomenological method. *Journal of Educational Psychology - Propositos y Representaciones*, 7(1), 217–229. <https://doi.org/10.20511/pyr2019.v7n1.267>
- Hatcher, D. M. (2021). *Gendered racial experiences of black women students at Hispanic serving institutions* (Order No. 28499394) [Doctoral dissertation, California State University, Fresno. ProQuest Dissertation Publishing.
- Hill Collins, P. (1991). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.
- Hill Collins, P. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- hooks, b. (2000). *Feminist theory: From margin to center* (2nd ed.). South End Press.
- hooks, b. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*. South End Press.
- Hopson, & Cram, F. (2018). Tackling wicked problems in complex evaluation ecologies. In Hopson & Cram (Eds.) *Tackling Wicked Problems in Complex Ecologies: The Role of Evaluation* (pp. 3–24). Stanford University Press.
- Kumar, S., Dawson, K., Pollard, R., & Jeter, G. (2022). Analyzing theories, conceptual frameworks, and research methods in EdD dissertations. *TechTrends*, 66, 721–728.
- Lawrence, T. A. (2019). *Changing the world one black girl at a time: An autoethnography of a black wom[x]n teacher's journey to become an agent of change* (Order No. 22615648). Available from ProQuest One Academic. (2375978589).
- Ma, V. W., Dana, N. F., Adams, A., & Kennedy, B. L. (2018). Understanding the problem of practice: An analysis of professional practice EdD dissertations. *Impacting Education: Journal on Transforming Professional Practice*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.5195/ie.2018.50>
- Patterson, A., Kinloch, V., Burkhard, T., Randall, R., & Howard, A. (2016). Black feminist thought as methodology: Examining intergenerational lived experiences of Black women. *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, 5(3), 55–76.
- Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2003). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (pp. 51-80). Sage Publications, Inc.