Chapter 1
Silenced, Shamed, and Scatted:
Black Feminist Perspective on Sexual Trauma and Treatment With African American Female Survivors

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ABSTRACT

The African American experience is grounded in a strong religious tradition that does not adequately address sexual violence against women. This chapter offers perspective on how religiously-motivated heterocentric-patriarchy marginalizes Black female sexual trauma survivors. Recommendations are informed by Black feminisms in order to support culturally congruent practice. These interventions emphasize Black women's lived experience, raise awareness of multilevel oppression, and foster the empowerment of Black women. Basic treatment considerations for African American female trauma survivors and their support systems are provided.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence impacts approximately one in three women and one in six men; roughly 1.2 per 1,000 persons are raped or sexually assaulted (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2016; Morgan & Kena, 2017). Scholarship on sexual violence against African American women remains scarce relative to the considerable research on sexual trauma experienced by European American women. However, there are noteworthy studies that have contributed to understanding Black women's experiences with sexual abuse (e.g., Basile, Smith, Fowler, Walters, & Hamburger, 2016; Bryant-Davis et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2015; Kruger, 2013; Perry-Burney, Thomas, & McDonald, 2014; Wadsworth & Records, 2013). According to Bryant-Davis et al. (2015), between 18% and 36% of African American women report sexual assault, but survivors may not disclose the abuse or seek services due to personal, societal, and cultural barriers.

Religion is a cultural factor impacting disclosure of abuse. African Americans traditionally rely on religion for meaning and support in facing trauma, and religious institutions are credited for providing effective coping spaces (Bryant-Davis et al., 2015). However, these institutions can also conceal Black pain and sexual trauma and function as a cultural barrier to reporting sex crimes. Additional religion-related barriers include the power of religion/religious leaders; use of religion to justify abuse; belief that religious leaders will not act in the best interest of participants; fear of harm from abuser, particularly when the perpetrator is a religious leader; and fear of backlash from the religious community following disclosure (Perry-Burney et al., 2014). Patriarchal ideology has significant implications in the suppression or censure of sexual violence because patriarchy is embedded in religious texts that sanction social patterns and subjugate women (Ruether, 1982). Patriarchy is a sociopolitical structure that justifies and promotes male domination of women's bodies. Patriarchy silences women, including those who have survived sexual traumas. Silencing sexual trauma also fuels victim-blaming ideology including myths about harassment and violence that favor the perpetrator and foster poor coping among survivors. Black female trauma survivors, in particular, are routinely shamed and disempowered from sharing their trauma narratives.

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