We don't give birth to thugs; we give birth to children: The Emotional Journeys of African-American Mothers Raising Sons under American Racism

by

Robyn Brown-Manning

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Social Welfare in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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APPROVAL

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
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ABSTRACT

We don't give birth to thugs; we give birth to children:
The Emotional Journeys of African-American Mothers
Raising Sons under American Racism

by

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The emotions of African-American mothers of sons are an understudied area in social work research. Given the disproportionate representation of Black male youth on social service caseloads, a more in-depth understanding of their mothers' experiences while raising them is very important. Using group storytelling formats, this qualitative study examines the emotional content of a small cohort of African-American mothers in New York City and Westchester County, New York, with sons ranging in age from infancy through 30.

Viewed through the theoretical frames of Africana womanism and nonfinite loss, the study finds that African-American mothers of sons are emotionally fatigued. They fear for their sons' safety in the presence of police. They worry about a variety of factors that affect their sons' well-being. The mothers feel guilty about choices they have made in life, particularly regarding husbands. They often feel abandoned, and long for stronger connections with other African-American mothers of sons. Throughout everything, they love their sons and are very proud of them.

Practice implications include reframing challenging emotional expressions and behaviors as indicators of emotional fatigue; forming alliances with African-American mothers of sons to address oppressive practices in law enforcement and schools; and co-creating culturally grounded support groups with African-American mothers of sons.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the three most important people in my life.

To my son, Corey:

You are truly my joy, my love and my inspiration. Thank you for the original artwork included in this dissertation!

It’s been nice growing you!

To my mother, Rosemary:

You have been my biggest fan since the day I was born. You have loved me, even when I have not loved myself. Thank you for being the most wonderful mother a daughter could ask for. I love you in ways you may never know.

and

To my life partner, Larry:

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I love you.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study explores the range of feelings that African-American[1] mothers experience while raising sons under what they perceive to be the systemic oppression of racism within the metro New York area. The research asks five primary questions:

1. What are the range and prevalence of emotions that African-American mothers feel while raising their sons from infancy to age 30?
2. What are the ways in which mothers and sons' experiences with racism shape this emotional content?
3. What are the ways in which African-American mothers' expression of emotions affect the mother-son relationship?
4. What are the ways in which African-American mothers take care of themselves during their son-rearing experiences?
5. In what ways does this tacit knowledge contribute to improved social work practice with African-American mothers of sons?

The research explores both the internal and external resources that African-American mothers embrace from their sons' infancy to age 30, and how the resources or lack thereof affect the quality of their roles as mothers of Black boys. The emphasis is on the emotional

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[1] The terms Black and African-American are used interchangeably, reflecting the dual way in which those of this race and ethnicity identify themselves.

well-being of Black women and how this well-being influences their ability to guide their sons' growth in a society that is deeply oppressive toward Black males.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, it is important to define several key terms: African-American mothers; African-American sons; emotion, and racism (interchangeably referred to as systemic oppression of racism and structural racism).

African-American mothers are conceptualized as Black women of African ancestry who were born and raised in the United States and who are primary or secondary caregivers for one or more African-American boys. In African-American families female relatives, fictive kin and "othermothers" share the mothering process (Butler, 2007a; Collins, 2000; Conaway, 2007; Stack, 1997). This study, therefore, includes African-American women who fall within this broader understanding of motherhood, and who have actively engaged in raising a boy-regardless of biological connectedness. Furthermore, **African-American mothers** are conceptualized as Black women who trace their heritage to those of African ancestry who migrated here from the Caribbean, South America, Africa and other parts of the African Diaspora[2]. Of import is that the participants in this study self-identify as Black or African-American who were born and raised within the 50 states of the United States. In addition, their **sons** must also identify as Black or African-American and have been born and raised within the United States. This study relates to racism in the

[2] African Diaspora refers to the dispersion throughout the world of those people formerly concentrated on the continent of Africa. This dispersion occurred through the Atlantic slave trade of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, when over four million Africans were transported to North America, South America and the Caribbean islands. Africans also migrated here during those periods as voluntary expeditionaries. The modern Diaspora is shaped by Africans migrating to and from the aforementioned countries, as well as Europe and other lands throughout the world.

United States, therefore mothers and sons who were born and raised in other parts of the African Diaspora but who are presently living in the states have not been included in this research. The assumption is that their early socialization process may be different from that of USA-born mothers and sons (Poitier, 2007). While they too actively experience racism in this country, its impact may be mediated by the norms, values and ideologies of their native countries. Understanding this phenomenon is important; however, it is beyond the scope of the study at hand.

Racism is defined as “a system of social structures that produces cumulative, durable, race-based inequalities. It is also a method of analysis that is used to examine how historical legacies, individuals, structures, and institutions work interactively to distribute material and symbolic advantages and disadvantages along racial lines” (Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, 2010). The proposed research examines how mothers understand and define the daily forces of structural racism that impact their sons’ realities, and how in turn, these perceptions shape the quality of their son-rearing processes-emotionally, physically, spiritually and psychologically.

Emotions consist of subjective feelings, expressive behaviors and physical reactions (Izard, 2009; Study of emotions, n.d.). They cause individuals to take action and control behaviors. Emotions also provide cues regarding social interactions with others. Citing one of seven principles pertaining to emotional theory, Izard (2009) writes:

> Basic emotion feelings help organize and motivate rapid (and often more-or-less automatic though malleable) actions that are critical for adaptive responses to immediate challenges to survival or wellbeing… the neural systems and mental processes involved in emotion feelings, Perception and cognition interact continually and dynamically in generating and monitoring thought and action. These dynamic

> interactions…can generate innumerable emotion-specific experiences (e.g., anger schemas) that have the same core feeling state but different perceptual tendencies (biases), thoughts, and action plans (p.4).

Izard (2009) continues to describe feeling as the dynamic component of emotion, whose function, particularly in challenging situations can transform impulses into thought processes and adaptive behaviors, which over time become distinct personality traits. He argues, though, that feelings cannot necessarily be labeled, articulated or sensed in one's consciousness.

This understanding of emotional theory helps to recognize all of the ways in which the women in this study communicate their feelings.

Rationale

The motivation to conduct this research emanates from several arenas:

1. The death rate for non-Hispanic Black males between the ages of 12-19 is higher than all other teens in this age group. Homicide is the leading cause of death (39.2 per 100,000 population) more than twice that of Hispanic males (17.1 per 100,000 population) and about 15 times that of non-Hispanic White males (2.6 per 100,000 population). (Fox & Swatt, 2008; Minino, 2010).

2. When compared to other race and gender groups, Black men are overrepresented in systems of criminalization[3]. "More than 60% of the people in prison are now racial

[3] The term 'systems of criminalization' is used throughout this study in lieu of "criminal justice system". The researcher's stance is that the term "justice" is not an accurate depiction of the

and ethnic minorities. For Black males in their twenties, 1 in every 8 is in prison or jail on any given day" (The Sentencing Project, n.d.). According to the most recent available data (2006), they are also overrepresented in the juvenile criminalization system consisting of 32,541 of 78,911 total male youth in residence (Sickmund, Sladky, & Kang, 2008).

3. Findings of the Schott Report (2008; 2010) and Smith (2002) show similar outcomes in the public education system. While making up only 8.6 percent of public-school enrollments, Black boys represent 22 percent of student expulsions and 23 percent of suspensions. Nationally, the high school graduation rate for Black boys in 2009-10 was only 52% (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012). In New York City, which is the geographic location for this study, the rate is 28%, ranking the city second out of the ten lowest performing large districts in the nation (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012).Trice (2009; 2005) posits that such expulsions transcend socioeconomic and achievement levels. Over 50 percent of Black male students in many U.S. cities do not graduate. Many, who do, receive their GED while incarcerated. Regarding special education African-American males are twice as likely as White males to be diagnosed as mentally retarded (Schott Report, 2010) and 1.9 times as likely to be described as having an emotional problem. They are 1.3 times as likely to have a learning disability. In some metropolitan districts, this results in 30 percent of Black males being placed in special education classes (Schott Report, 2008).

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experience of Black people, males in particular, when interfacing with police, courts, prisons and other aspects of law enforcement. Given the racial disparities within these institutions, and the prevalence of false accusations, arrests and incarcerations of African-Americans and other people of color, the researcher chooses not to collude with the misnomer of "justice", using instead a term that is more reflective of their reality.

4. African-American boys are underserved in the mental health system, as they are too often misdiagnosed with anger disorders and behavior problems (Xanthos, n.d.). They are also "over served" with psychotropic drugs for these and other diagnoses (Lipford, 2012).

5. Public health and medical research document the common theme of African-American mothers' fears for their sons' safety as early as infancy (Phelps, Davies, McCart, Klein-Tasman, Melzer-Lange, & Heuermann, 2006; Reynolds, 1999; Schuster, Halfon, & Wood, 1998)

6. There is an emphasis in the sociological and psychological research on what African-American mothers *do* with their sons, rather than how they *feel* about the lived experience of raising them (Berry, 2005; Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 2000; Bush, 2004; Grief, Hrabowski, & Maton, 2000; Telesford & Murray, n.d.) under the oppressive forces of racism. The literature does highlight the emotional content in Black mother-daughter relationships. They include apprehension about girls' health problems, worries regarding their abilities to develop a positive sense of self, and trepidation about their skills at "armoring" against the dual oppressions of sexism and racism (Bell-Scott & Guy-Sheftall, 1991; Collins, 1987; Collins, 2000; Davis & Rhodes, 1992; Dixon, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Edmondson Bell & Nkomo, 1998; Penington, 2004); there is little comparable information pertaining to Black mothers and their sons (O'Reilly, 2001).

7. Across all socioeconomic classes, Black mothers are portrayed as strong women who are invulnerable, always taking care of, and protecting others (White, 1999; hooks; 1981; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Ladner, 1971; Madhubuti, 1990; Mullings, 2000; Roberts, 1997). There are discrepancies in this mythologized ideal of strength and the reality of vulnerability for Black women, which affect their gender-related childrearing expectations and goals. Sharp and Ispa (2009) found that inner city Black mothers articulated a sense of fatalism regarding their sons. They therefore raise their daughters to be strong Black women in preparation for dealing with a host of responsibilities that men will not assume. They believe that "boys will be boys" and that they are destined to replicate the patterns of their fathers.

8. The discourse on strong Black women can ultimately lead to depression and other harmful outcomes for Black women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Williams, 2008). Conversely, there are benefits to fulfilling such roles as nurturer, mother, partner and activist (West, 2008). There is an inherent tension in these two realities.

Setting the Context

Systemic Challenges Confronting African-American Males from Infancy through 30

The statistics regarding the negative toll of myriad macro level arrangements on the life experiences of African-American males are staggering. Black men lead all other race and gender groups in incarceration rates, HIV infection, homicide rates, poverty levels and diagnosed learning disorders (Noguera, 2003; Tucker & Dixon, 2009). The data from the

first decade of this millenium are disheartening and the troubling trajectory begins at a very young age. Studies from a variety of disciplines consistently suggest that racism is a key contributing factor and a common denominator in explaining the disproportionate manner in which Black males are impacted by these systems (Bent-Goodley, 2003; Gabbidon & Peterson, 2006; Leary, 2005; Tucker & Dixon, 2009). While structural racism impacts both African American males and females, its manifestation is nuanced; racial and gender socialization patterns also contribute to differentiated coping patterns (Edmondson Bell & Nkomo, 1998; McHale, et al., 2006).

One of the most prolific writers on the challenges facing Black boys is Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu (1983; 2005; 2007), who has authored over 30 books on the topic. He has developed a culturally relevant school curriculum, Self-Esteem through Culture Academic Excellence (SETCLAE), that has helped to improve African-American test scores by 40% in the charter schools that have adopted it. In spite of this success, his books cite limited empirically tested data. His positions are widely accepted within African-American communities, constituting his standpoints as subjected knowledge (Foucault, 2003). There are other recognized scholars who hold similar viewpoints, thereby creating a dialectic regarding the legitimacy of his positions.

One of his theories warrants consideration within the context of this study. Kunjufu (1983) offers a rationale for the overrepresentation of Black males in many of the systems mentioned earlier in this chapter. He contends that there is a very complex and interwoven conspiracy to destroy Black boys, which involves three sets of actors: (a) those that adhere to White racism, White imperialism and White male supremacy; (b) those that promote drugs and gang violence; and (c) those who act as passive perpetuators of institutional

racism, including parents, educators, and silent White liberals. hooks (2004) agrees that the White male capitalist patriarchy continues to symbolically lynch masses of Black males today:

> …choking off their very life, by making it all but impossible for them to learn basic reading and writing skills in childhood; by the promotion of addiction as the free enterprise system that works to provide unprecedented wealth to a few and short-term solace from collective pain for the many; by widespread unemployment; and the continued psychological lure of life-threatening patriarchal masculine behaviors (p. xi).

Affirming this, Hacker (1992) singles out young Black men, describing their "self-inflicted genocide" as not being of their own making, but rather a manifestation of the despair brought on by systemic racism.

Drawing on the work of Cress-Welsing, Kunjufu further states that because it is a global minority, the White race has evolved a system of power relationships in which it controls all of the political, social, economic, educational and sexual activities of people of color (Cress-Welsing, as cited in Kunjufu, 1983). Sometimes this is done directly by members of the White race; frequently it occurs through agents who are people of color, themselves. Either way, according to Kunjufu's theory, it is a survival mechanism for the minority White group. He continues that since men impregnate women and regenerate the gene pool, part of the survival tactic is to focus attention on the *men* who pose the greatest threat of annihilating the minority (White) group. In Kunjufu's argument, this offending group is African-American men, and the institutions of the society are complicit in insuring that their perceived threat to the power structure is neutralized. In his theory, rendering African-American men helpless through as many avenues as possible insures the destruction of the race, alleviates the threat, and maintains the status quo. In this scenario, Black

women are viewed as less dangerous, while simultaneously stereotypically promoted as being stronger. Thus, the focus is on systematically and methodically destroying Black men from infancy on.

Arguably, the most legitimate validations of Kunjufu's premise come from Black male scholars who have both lived and studied the phenomenon. Psychologist, Akbar (1991) contends that when Black men declare their manhood, it immediately puts them at odds or at war with Euro-American men. He argues that White men base their power, their superiority and their competency on the fact that Black men are inferior. Gary and Leashore (as cited in Schiele, 2000) posit that "African-American males receive the brunt of violence and aggression from slavery and institutionalized racism" (p. 91). This is attributed to the fear that oppressed Black men will eventually assume power and avenge themselves. Every effort must be made to keep this from occurring. The roots of Kunjufu's theory can also be found in the works of such theorists and educators as Freire (1972); Woodson, (1990) and DuBois (1961).

This pervasiveness of what Leary (2005) has called the "injury" to Black boys, and the implications of the injury within the larger contexts of family and community, underscores the importance of examining the impact on Black boys'mothers; specifically how it informs and shapes their motherhood identities, as well as their emotional landscapes.

Life Expectancy

The life expectancy of Black males in the United States is one of the earliest indicators of something being "different" for this population. The National Center for

Health Statistics reported that the highest incidence of infant mortality among all race and gender groups in 2008 (the most recent data available) was among Black boys, with 1,293 deaths per 100,000 infants in the general population. Black females, while highest among female infants of other races, fared just slightly better than their Black male counterparts with 1,084 infant deaths among 100,000 in the general population (U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, 2012). However, a much larger gap appears between these two groups when looking at overall life expectancy. For a Black man in the United States it is 70 years; 6.8 years less than Black females who are expected to live on average until 76.8 years of age (Arias, 2011). Black men also live 5.9 years less than White men (U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, 2012). Almost three per cent of Black males born in 2003 are expected to die before the age of 20 (Child Trends Databank, n.d.).

Causes of Death

Violent deaths are another phenomenon that is disproportionately present in the lives of young Black men. The potential for such outcomes is so great that in the conclusion of their study on gender differences in grief and violent death, Stillion and Noviello (2001) state:

> …given the statistical evidence, more attention should be given to preparing women of all ages for their inevitable role as grievers of violent deaths of sons, husbands, and brothers. Such roles become even more probable in African American and other minority communities (p. 256).

Homicide, often gun-related, is the primary cause of death for Black males between the ages of 15-24. It ranks second for Black boys between the ages of 1-4; second for those between 10-14; and third for those between 5-9 (NCIPC, n.d.; Heron, 2007). During the

period between 2002 and 2007, the homicide rate for Black male youth under the age of eighteen rose by 31% (Fox & Swatt, 2008).[4] Unintentional injuries (accidents) appear as one of the top three causes of deaths for Black males in each of these age groups. A newer phenomenon is suicide, which emerges as a factor in Black males who are between 10-24. In this age cohort it appears as the third highest cause of death (NCIPC, n.d.). Of significance, African-American females have the lowest suicide rate among all racial and ethnic groups (NCIPC, n.d.; Utsey, Hook, & Stanard, 2007).

While homicides account for 49.6% of deaths of Black males ages 15-24, homicides of Black females in the same age category occur at a rate of 17.2% (NCIPC, n.d.). Of significance is that although homicide continues to rank as the leading cause of death for Black men between ages 25-34 at a rate of 32.8%, for Black women there is a significant drop to a rate of only 9.6%. It is within such a context that Boyd-Frankin and Franklin (2000) describe the greatest fear for Black sons is keeping them alive past age twenty-five. Boyd-Franklin (2003) contends that this concern transcends class and socioeconomic levels.

Criminalization of Black Males

For those who do survive, the predictions for their quality of life are just as dire, with Black boys born in 2001 having a one in three chance of going to prison, compared to Black girls whose chances of a similar fate are one in 17 (Children's Defense Fund, 2009). This projection mirrors the current reality: one in three Black males between the ages of 20 -29 is under some form of correctional supervision or control (Children's Defense Fund, 2009).

[4] The authors suggest that one reason for this sharp increase is the profound shift in police priorities after September 11, 2001. Police departments have taken on homeland security responsibilities at the expense of community policing. Another reason may be communities' overall complacency based on the national decrease in crime, resulting in a reduced number of police officers.

African-American males have a 28 percent chance of imprisonment over the course of their lifetimes, when compared with a four percent chance for their White counterparts (Bent-Goodley, 2003). By the end of 2007, there were 3,138 Black males incarcerated per 100,000 Black males in the United States, 1,259 Hispanic males per 100,000 Hispanic males, and 481 White males per 100,000 White males in the country (Bureau of Justice Statistics Prison Statistics, 2009). According to Bent-Goodley (2003), 82% of youth of color are charged in adult courts; it can be safely assumed that African-American boys constitute some part of these adult imprisonment numbers. However, even when looking at the juvenile criminalization statistics, 1,317 Black males per 100,000 in the general population are confined (Custody Data (1997-Present), n.d.). Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund refers to this phenomenon as a "national tragedy" (Children's Defense Fund, 2009).

Mental Health

Mental illness is yet another issue that affects Black boys in a distinct manner. Bradley (as cited in Xanthos, n.d.) states, "In addition to dealing with the physical, mental and emotional issues typically experienced during adolescence, adolescent African-American males are confronted with unique social and environmental stressors; they must frequently cope with racism and its associated stressors, including family stressors, educational stressors, and urban stressors." (p. 3). Coker et al. (2009), cited 138 studies on perceived racism and health in which the association between the two variables was strongest for negative mental health outcomes, namely psychological distress, depression, stress and anxiety. Nyborg and Curry (2003), in their study of Black male adolescents found that perceived racial discrimination was associated with low self-esteem, hopelessness and

both internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Xanthos (n.d.) states further that racism affects one's mental health status causing adverse psychological reactions, and imposing stereotypes that contribute to negative self-evaluations. She concludes, "[I]t is not unusual for adolescent African-American males to develop a mistrust of their environment and uncertainty about their place in society" (p. 2).

Symptom expression in Black boys such as anger and violence (Leary, 2005; Williams, 2008), and somatic complaints (Xanthos, n.d.) are misdiagnosed as conduct disorders (Xanthos, n.d.); Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Tucker & Dixon, 2009); and issues related to neurological functioning (McNeil, Capage, & Bennett, 2002).These misdiagnoses are disproportionately applied to African-American boys, possibly contributing to the previously mentioned increasing suicide rate among this population. In a society where masculinity is highly associated with power, aggressiveness and achievement, depression is an unacceptable state of being for many of these young men, and is exacerbated by the overall denial that clinical depression even exists within the Black community (Williams, 2008), especially among males. Unfortunately, the mental health system frequently colludes with this denial and misses the indicators of serious concerns. Rather than receiving the necessary and appropriate attention and treatment, Black boys exhibiting angry, depressive or somatic behaviors are instead disproportionately incarcerated, placed in the child welfare system or put into special education. Lindsey and Thomas argue that adolescent African-American males may be among the most underserved populations with respect to mental health services (as cited in Xanthos, n.d.).

Education

The educational system is yet another institution in which the well-being of Black boys is adversely affected. Public schools disproportionately suspend or expel more Black than White males, place more Black males in special education programs, and substantively prevent them from graduating within a four year time period (The Schott Foundation, 2012; Strayhorn, 2008). The national high school graduation rate is lowest for African-American boys, at 52% (The Schott Foundation, 2012). It is argued that African-American boys show up in disproportionate numbers in almost every area of academic failure. They are overrepresented in categories that all African-American children are one and a half to three times more likely to appear than White students: mental retardation, educational disturbance and learning disabled (Jordan, 2005; Smith, 2002).

Studies indicate a correlation between perceived negative racial treatment by teachers and poor academic achievement (Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008); and lowered teacher expectations and poor academic outcomes (Strayhorn, 2008). African-American girls do not report the same challenges with teachers, nor are their outcomes as poor as those of their Black male peers (Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008). In one study, even mothers of sons who are considered high academic achievers discussed their sons being held back or placed in lower classes as a result of racism (Grief et al., 2000).

Complicating matters is the fact that African-American norms, culture and values are often seen as being at odds with those of the school system, and Black mothers, in particular, are viewed as more of a deficit than an asset to their children's education

(Cooper, 2007). Their 'motherwork' in schools includes being their children's voices, following their children where they go, having a visible presence in the schools and keeping close tabs on teachers. Exercising such agency with principals and administrators is counter to school systems' norms. It results in Black mothers being viewed as oppositional, hostile and angry.

While there are many issues that young Black men face that can be attributed to individual personality, individual choice and family circumstances, collectively the disproportionate rates of infant mortality, homicide deaths, incarceration, mental health misdiagnoses and missed diagnoses and academic failure cannot be similarly explained. The statistics cited in each of these areas are national and cut across all socioenomic levels, although some argue that these outcomes are more common in low income environments (Kirk, 2008; Mincy, 1994; Tucker & Dixon, 2009).[5] Numerous researchers, however, point to the systemic racism that exists within each of these structures. Leary (2005) describes these outcomes as some of the vestiges of the institution of slavery. Kunjufu (1983; 2005; 2007) has written extensively about the educational system's "conspiracy to destroy Black boys." Tucker and Dixon (2009) and Xanthos (n.d.) focus on the policies and practices of the mental health industry as problematic for this population. Wald and Losen (as cited in Rashid, 2009) weave these structural conditions together, framing the entire trajectory as the "school to prison pipeline." Rashid (2009) extends the concept, calling it the "preschool to prison pipeline" as Black boys are expelled from pre-school at a rate higher than their K-12 expulsion rate.

[5] This may be related to the fact that very little topical information exists pertaining to middle and high income Black families.

The irony of this bleak picture is articulated by Swanson, Cunningham and Spencer (2008):

> Instances of resilience, success and competence displayed by minority youth in spite of adverse living conditions often go unnoticed and unrecognized, thus denying individuals a sense of success and accomplishment (p. 610).

The literature describes the innate curiosity, motivation and psychomotor precociousness that African-American boys exhibit as early as nine hours old (Rashid, 2009; Wilson, 1978). Wright (2009) identifies intrinsic motivation, highly stylized use of words and gestures and strong interactional processes as the unique strengths and skills of African-American males. He contextualizes these often misunderstood proficiencies as indicators of social competence, leadership, mastery of social control and creative coping mechanisms for countering social inequalities. It is the dissonance between these inherent abilities and the problematic life outcomes for so many Black boys that warrants further examination and explanation. If, as the research suggests, much of the downward spiral begins at the point of interfacing with external systems, how does a mother cope and raise a Black boy when the odds of doing so successfully seem so stacked against her? How does she reconcile the fact that much of what impedes her son's progress is systemic in nature, and by definition, beyond her immediate control? How does she manage emotionally when, as Rashid (2009) poses in the title of his article, her son transforms from a brilliant baby to a child placed at risk? This study explores whether or not this is the lived experience for African-American mothers, and what emotions result from this reality.

Mothering African-American children of any gender in a race conscious society can be a challenging process. In their groundbreaking book on Black childcare, Comer and Poussaint (1975) posit that to effectively parent, mothers and fathers must feel a sense of belonging in or oneness with the larger society. African-American mothers (and fathers) are often still dealing with their own experiences of racism, both past and present, making it difficult for them to feel this sense of belonging (Comer & Poussaint, 1975). Pierce (as cited in Pinderhughes, 1989) highlights microaggressions as the small acts that exploit, put down and degrade people of color on almost a daily basis. Pinderhughes (1989) argues that those who are on the receiving end of these microaggressions are constantly monitoring their helplessness and rage, which has an impact on their stress levels and overall health. Brody et al. (2008) in their study of rural African American mothers found that over time, perceived discrimination contributed to stress-related health problems and depressive symptoms, which in turn were linked to decreases in competence-promoting parenting practices. McAdoo (1982) found that Black parents' stress levels are associated with their sense of powerlessness and frustration, as well as the feeling that they are giving their children conflicting messages about the American dream.

Why Focus on Mothers?

With the American dream seemingly compromised by the previously mentioned statistical projections for longevity, education, criminalization and mental health, raising healthy and happy Black boys presents a unique set of trials and obstacles. Given the impact of racial discrimination on both mothers and fathers, an argument could be made for

examining the range of feelings that African-American women *and* men experience while raising sons under the systemic oppression of racism. An argument for doing so is further underscored by the well-documented role flexibility (Bartz & Levine, as cited in Fagan, 2000; Hill, 1999) that exists within African-American families, where fathering and mothering practices are not necessarily aligned with traditional gender expectations. One could hypothesize that if mothers and fathers are playing similar roles in raising their sons, the emotional impact for each could also be similar. The question then becomes why limit this study to African-American mothers?

A pragmatic response to this question includes the facts that 65 percent of Black children live in single parent homes (Data across states, 2009) and that 49.8 percent of those homes are mother-only homes (ChildStats, 2010). Purely from a family structure standpoint, examining African-American mothers' emotional responses to raising sons alone within a racist and a patriarchal social environment is an important endeavor. Bush (2004), however, offers another compelling justification for mothers being the focal point of this study: the intersectionality of racism and sexism "works to de-center, devalue and disempower Black mothers and womanhood" (p. 389). Black mothers, at a minimum, are situated in the lived experiences of racism and sexism, in which the microaggressions are multiplied. They are women in a society that speaks to and values men, and they are Black in an environment that elevates Whiteness.

While their racial background is the same as their sons' and the microagressions, while nuanced, are similar, the gender experience is different. Black mothers are called upon to help navigate their sons through racial oppression, while simultaneously understanding that these same sons have membership in a male system that is the source of

much of her own oppression. Bush (2004) suggests how this reality further complicates the Black mother-son relationship. “As racism…may cause self-hate, sexism may cause the hate of women which may cause Black males to unconsciously resent their mothers, because they are women and are Black” (p.389). The premise of this study is that this experience is uniquely female; that Black fathers do not share the *lived* experience of being dually impacted by racism and sexism; that if they are conflicted about raising sons within a patriarchal society, it is as a result of consciousness raising on the fathers’ parts and not as a result of being female victims of this type of oppression.

Why Focus on Emotions?

Emotions define the way humans respond to their environments and make meaning in their worlds (Letherby, 2010). There are also culturally based beliefs regarding what is appropriate emotional content and expression for one’s gender. Given the fact that motherhood is a key identity for women, Letherby (2010) argues that the maternal experience is emotionally charged. She writes that mothers report a range of feelings—pleasure, delight, anxiety, distress and guilt, --and that many of these feelings are externally dictated. Women’s emotional responses correlate with the expectations their environments place on them pertaining to motherhood.

African-American motherhood, in general, has been studied extensively. Research has examined the Black mother’s childrearing style from many vantage points including her marital status (Malone-Colon & Roberts, 2006; Omolade, 1987; Page & Washington, 1986; Thomas, Farrell, & Barnes, 1996); socioeconomic status (Jackson, 1998; Jackson, Gyamfi,

Brooks-Gunn, & Blake, 1998; Kelley, Power, & Wimbush, 1992); neighborhood (Cricco-Lizza, 2008; Jones, Forehand, O'Connell, Armistead, & Brody, 2005); age (Davis & Rhodes, 1992); and family structure (Cain & Combs-Orme, 2005; Chase-Landsdale, Brooks-Gunn, & Zamsky, 1994). The methods used to discipline her children have been explored (McLoyd, Kaplan, Hardaway, & Wood, 2007), as well as how she racially socializes them (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 2000; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; McHale, et al., 2006; Stevenson, McNeil, Herrero-Taylor, & Davis, 2005); and how she supports their academic achievement (Greif, Hrabowski, & Maton, 2000; Cooper, 2007).

Given this apparent level of interest in Black mothers and the comparable interest in Black males as an “endangered species”; given the primary role Black mothers (single, partnered, and married) play in the development of their sons’ masculinity (Bush, 2004); given the myriad ways in which mothers are held accountable and responsible for their sons’ failures in particular, there is a significant gap in information pertaining to the interior world of African-American mothers of sons. The trajectory for Black boys, discussed earlier, speaks to the persistence and prevalence of loss. In some way, form, Black mothers are at constant risk of losing their sons; it is difficult to locate any discourse in academic texts, in peer-reviewed journals, among Black women, themselves, that is giving meaningful voice to such an aberration of life.

The punctuated cries of the mothers of Emmett Till, Sean Bell, Clifford Glover, and most recently Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis capture momentary worldwide attention; over time, they are relegated to the annals of “tragic” Black history. The pain and rage of mothers whose boys do not die a physical death, but rather emotional, psychological, academic and spiritual deaths rarely receive a forum of any type. Holloway (2002) wrote

that loss and death are so commonplace in Black life that “we worked this experience into the culture’s iconography and included it as an aspect of black cultural sensibility” (p.6). Accordingly, this may be an unspoken and unacknowledged burden that Black mothers of sons carry on a daily basis.

There are efforts to understand Black mothers emotional responses regarding their daughters (Dixon, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Edmondson Bell & Nkomo, 1998; Penington, 2004). Comparable endeavors pertaining to their feelings about raising sons are largely found in fictional literary works (King & Mitchell, 1990; Young, 2001), collections of poetry and personal testimonies (Brown, 2002; Madhubuti, 1990), or popular African-American magazines, newspapers or blogs (Parlant, 2008; Reynolds, 1999). The sparse academic literature on Black mothers and boys focuses more on the *behaviors* involved in raising Black sons, rather than the range of feelings that surface during this process (Greif et al., 2000; Hill, 1999; King & Mitchell, 1990; Kunjufu, 1983).

Izard (2009) contends that being able to symbolize and effectively communicate one’s emotions are key to being able to utilize those emotions in social interactions. Given the limited opportunities afforded African-American mothers of sons to examine and express these feelings, this study seeks to discover if naming the range of sentiments lends itself to more healthy and helpful interventions with Black mothers in various fields of social work practice. Acknowledging and legitimizing this experience; moving it from the margins to a more central location in the lives of Black mothers is critical to transforming professional social work practices with the women and their sons—in systems of criminalization; the child welfare system; schools; mental health settings, and other venues that interface with them.

Parallels of Grief

While an additional question that this study seeks to explore is whether joy and happiness are part of the lived experience when raising Black sons, the senses of anxiety, fear and loss permeate the limited written work on African-American mothers of sons (Golden, 1995; Millner, 2009; Phelps, Davies, McCart, Klein-Tasman, Melzer-Lange, & Heuermann, 2006; Schuster, Halfon, & Wood, 1998). Black women's concerns for their daughters are also prevalent, but the nature of the concerns are different. As previously mentioned, they include apprehension about girls' health problems, worries regarding their abilities to develop a positive sense of self, and trepidation about their skills at "armoring" against the dual oppressions of sexism and racism (Edmondson Bell & Nkomo, 1998; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Schuster et al., 1998). Fear of death, gangs and violence is more highly associated with raising sons. Lee and Williams (2001) posit that even when an African-American mother takes very good care of her son and provides him with all of the necessary tools for survival, she still worries and prays about those things she cannot control. Regardless of socioeconomic backgrounds or geographic locations, this worry for her son often begins at his birth (Phelps, Davies, McCart, Klein-Tasman, Melzer-Lange, & Heuermann, 2006; Reynolds, 1999; Schuster et al., 1998) and continues through age twenty-five or beyond (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 2000).

Upon further examination of the literature, issues of guilt (King & Mitchell, 1990); anger (Reynolds, 1999) and helplessness (Sharp & Ispa, 2009) emerge as repeated themes for mothers of sons. The parallels between all of these emotions—anxiety, fear, loss, guilt, anger and helplessness--and those associated with grief, death and dying are striking. If

these are the prevalent emotions for African-American women raising sons, they may be experiencing a phenomenon known as nonfinite loss (Bruce & Schultz, 2001).

Nonfinite loss is an enduring loss associated with a negative event that remains with the individual either psychologically or physically. It differs from losses due to death because it is (a) continuous; (b) prevents some aspect of normal developmental expectations from occurring and; (c) may include intangible losses such as lost hopes and dreams. In addition, there is ongoing uncertainty about what lies ahead and the sense of not experiencing situations in a normal manner. Nonfinite losses are not recognized by others; there is a profound sense of helplessness and powerlessness. Does the anticipation of what could occur to their boys temper African-American mothers' feelings of joy, happiness and pride associated with raising sons? Alternatively, does it serve as a protective factor by better preparing her for the most dire outcome? Stillion and Noviello (2001) alluded to this idea, when they suggested that work should be done within the African-American community to better prepare women for the increased likelihood that they will eventually mourn the violent death of a son, brother or husband. Citing Viorst, Ford (2004), however, underscored that death is only one type of loss that African-American women have historically experienced throughout their lifetimes: "we lose not only through death, but also by leaving and being left, by changing and letting go and moving on" (p. 61). Nonfinite loss is a potentially interesting phenomenon that is examined in this study.

Silenced Voices

The universal discourse on motherhood suggests that mothers are all-powerful in their abilities to shape the development of their children, however it is conceded that this

dialogue has occurred largely among politicians, academics and media personalities (Horwitz & Long, 2005). Motherhood within the Black community is a different experience than its more traditional definition suggests.The conversations rarely factor in the realities of racism, violence, peers and trauma—areas in which African-American mothers, especially, often feel overwhelmed and helpless (Jones, Forehand, O'Connell, Armistead, & Brody, 2005; Cricco-Lizza, 2008; Schuster, Halfon, & Wood, 1998). Black motherhood encompasses equal, if not sole, headship of families; economic responsibilities and the constant need to address community discrimination (Hill, 1999; Mullings, 2000). It involves "the experience of being silenced; and the loss of children" (Mullings, 2000, p.25). Her attempts to give voice to the myriad emotions she feels are often ignored, dismissed or minimized (Garrison, 2006; Reynolds, 1999). An African-American mother in a case study analysis conducted by Litt (1999) illustrates the extent of her concerns for her son and the manner in which her expression of them is minimized:

> You get frustrated. Your hair turns grey. You dye it. Like my husband told me yesterday, 'Stop crying. Stop getting yourself upset. There's only so much you can do.' Alright. All those words are true…Just put it in the Lord's hand. Once you say, 'I've done the best I could, I can't do anymore.' I just feel it has to be something else. I just feel like, if I don't get him straight, he's gonna be lost. And I don't want him to be lost (p. 90).

The literature describes this voicelessness as the phenomenon of *silence* (Collins, 2000; Duncan, 2001; Eckard, 2002; Hines & Boyd-Frankin, 2005; Lee, 2001; Parks, 2010; Shaw, 1994). Williams (2008) attributes silence within the African-American community to a learned behavior whose roots can be found in the institution of slavery, and that helps African-Americans avoid painful emotions. Fear, anger, helplessness and guilt are painful emotions. From a gender standpoint, Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) suggest that Black

women learn to stifle expression of these feelings, especially when sexism is at the root; the cultural norm is to only acknowledge racism. However, the dearth of scholarly research and literature on Black mothers and sons intimates that this learned silence also manifests when the emotions are associated with the challenges and experiences of their sons; and their impact on her. According to Williams, rather than lend voice to these emotions, Black mothers express them indirectly as evidenced through the musical genre of "the blues"; through books such as Toni Morrison's Beloved and through movies such as A Raisin in the Sun; Drylongso; and the more contemporary true story, American Violet. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1997) provide similar arguments, stating that marginalized women often turn to music, art, books and literature to express themselves.

Williams'(2008) theory about the vehicles through which African-American mothers' emotional content is heard is further underscored by the ways in which Toni Morrison's writings serve as the catalyst for a significant amount of scholarly discussion on Black motherhood in general (Davey, 2001; Demetrakopoulos, 1992; Duncan, 2001; Eckard, 2002; Hirsch, 1996; O'Reilly, 2004; Rody, 2001). Buchi Emecheta, Paule Marshall and Alice Walker are also frequently cited (Alexander, 2001; Christian, 1994). Still, the themes of all of their work, tend to focus on mother-daughter relationships. Mother-son connections appear in fictional works written by men, most notably Richard Wright. The seminal study on African-American mothers and sons by King and Mitchell (1990) draws extensively on the fictionalized works of male authors, because of a lack of relevant scholarly or empirical material. The primary non-fictionalized account of a mother's emotional journey while raising a Black boy is Marita Golden's autobiography, Saving our

Sons (1995). O'Reilly (2001) also cites King and Mitchell, and Golden as the exceptions to the limited works on African-American mother-son relationships.

One of the key research questions for this study is how African-American mothers' expression of their emotions affects the mother-son relationship. Are these feelings communicated with sons; if so, to what end? If not, why not? Is the silence contained to one arena, or are there circles in which these feelings are communicated? What toll does being silent have on the women themselves? How does this toll show up in their relationships with their sons? A deeper understanding of the phenomenon of silence as a means for expressing or not expressing feelings is examined through this inquiry.

Self Care

In a book chapter titled Loving Ourselves, Villarosa (1994) wrote of Black women, "…But somehow, most of us make it; we wrestle the demons and come out on top…move buoyantly through life with 'pep in our step and glide in our stride'…" (p. 412). The last area this qualitative study explores the issue of self-care for Black mothers of sons. As with the topics of mother-son relationships and maternal emotional expression, little substantive information is available regarding Black women and self-care. Black, McBride Murry, Cutrona, and Chen (2009) argue that there are large gaps in information regarding the impact of "everyday life experiences of African-American women, including those associated with parenting and community involvement, on their psychological and physical health" (p. 145).

A compelling observation throughout the literature is rather than a language of personal or self-care, there is taxonomy of coping and coping mechanisms. Jones and

Shorter-Gooden (2003) describe Black women as using shifting strategies to cope with bigotry: altering their behaviors to disprove misconceptions; constantly scanning their environments to monitor any perceptions of them that others may have; downplaying, ignoring or denying the role of sexism; retreating to Black communities and abiding by "home codes"[6]; fighting back to overturn racism and sexism and; seeking spiritual and emotional support through churches, religious communities, friends and family members. This last strategy is reiterated in almost all of the sources on Black mothers. Brodsky (2000) states that religious beliefs play a major role in Black women's resilience and abilities to navigate stressful life circumstances. Similarly, Odom and Vernon-Feagans, (2010) cite optimism and a supportive church community as buffers against depression due to racial discrimination. Polzer Casarez and Shandor Miles, (2008) found that spirituality is critical in the lives of low income African-American mothers when coping with oppression and stress. Their study of African-American mothers with HIV identified that seeing oneself as a partner with God, who has ultimate control, decreased the mothers' stress, the worry about their health, and the worry about the health of their infant children.

In their work with rural African-American mothers Black, McBride Murry, Cutrona, and Chen (2009) demonstrated a positive correlation between Black mothers' fulfillment of simultaneous responsibilities to their children, community and religious organizations, and their physical and mental well-being. According to the authors, these findings suggest that assuming multiple roles, while possibly exhausting, serves as a protective factor against the stressors experienced by Black mothers. Of interest, is the emphasis on care or over-

[6] The authors define "home codes" as rules of comportment within Black culture that are defined by race, gender and class. As Black women move between multiple systems within the society, effective coping strategies in one structure may create challenges in another. Sometimes this results in African-American women feeling like they cannot be themselves among other African-Americans. They find themselves needing to shift or "code switch", enabling them to meet the norms that exist within their own community.

involvement with caring for everyone else, rather than on care of self, which suggests a possible reframing of what is meant or assumed by the term "self-care."

Further investigation into Black mothers' self-care resulted in countless discussions on clinical depression and the denial by Black women of its existence in their lives (hooks, 1993; hooks, 1994; Villarosa, 1994; Williams, 2008). The need to be constantly in control; to appear as a strong Black woman; and to consistently camouflage any indicators of vulnerability or fragility are recurring themes. Jeffers (as cited in hooks, 1993) poses a simple, yet profound question: "Where are the spaces in our lives where we are able to acknowledge our pain, and express grief?"(p. 104).

Multiple roles that involve caring for others; strategies for coping with racism, sexism and other forms of oppression; and denial of any emotional content that connotes need are repeatedly presented as the ways in which Black women care for themselves. These processes, with the possible exception of hair and nail care veer away from the practices that are usually associated with self-care -- more self-indulgent activities like meditation, exercise, even therapy. Instead, self-care for Black women seems to involve either giving, responding or reacting to others. This version of self-care also appears to require unceasing vigilance, with one exception. Black women will seek help from God.

This study, therefore, reaches for a deeper understanding of the ways in which this relationship with God has sustained and uplifted Black mothers as they have guided their sons through rather dire circumstances. It questions whether or not they see themselves as participants with God (Polzer Casarez & Shandor Miles, 2008), and what that looks like behaviorally. It examines how prayer and religious or spiritual practices are incorporated in

their lives. It also explores other forms of self-care in which African-American mothers of sons engage.

Summary

The parenting practices of African-American mothers have been studied for decades. However, little attention has focused on the unique relationship that exists between Black mothers and their sons. Mothers must help navigate their boys through the seemingly endless obstacles they encounter on their journey to adulthood. Black men lead all other race and gender groups in incarceration rates, HIV infection, homicide rates, poverty levels and diagnosed learning disorders. Mothers must carry out this task while simultaneously contending with their own challenges with multiple oppressions of racism, sexism and classism, to name a few. Although, Black mothers throughout the ages have managed to carry out this responsibility with relative success, there is little research exploring what the emotional toll has been on them.

This qualitative study examines this issue and offers some truths about African-American mothers feelings as they raise their sons. These truths are critical for social workers who work with African-American mothers in child welfare, systems of criminalization, educational and mental health systems, as well as other settings. The findings of this research add meaning and perspective to the larger discourse on African-American motherhood.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

> W.E.B. Dubois stresses the importance of recognizing the historical relationships of African heritage and the tradition of the Black family. When studying African American women it is important to contextualize the framework of their perspectives by comprehensively analyzing the historical components which help identifies (sic) their thoughts, feelings and experiences (Gregory as cited in Ford, 2004, p.51).

> Storytelling defies the dictates of scholars, the assaults of historical methodology. The power of memory, which has handed down stories through generations, outlasts its rivals through centuries of struggle. (Clinton, 1994, p.211).

The Foundation of Ancestral Memory

Coleman (2002) posits that ancestral memory is a form of consciousness rooted in a sacred cosmos and psychology that is holistic and multidimensional. The driving forces of ancestry, ancestral memory or knowledge and spirituality often frame emotional content and expression, as well as any actions taken on behalf of our sons and daughters. Paris (1995) theorizes that enslaved Africans in the Americas retained their cosmic understanding of family life by incorporating references to relatives and other loved ones into sacred songs and rituals, thereby maintaining ancestral linkage and devotion. Davis (2008) and Gordon (1995) contend that ancestral memory – an historical and spiritual reserve -- have enabled Black women to “transform oppression into expressive strategies for healing and for care”

(Davis, 2008, p.177). Badejo writes that Black women's strengths lie in our collective ancestral knowledge (1998).

A review of slave narratives, literary fiction, film and scholarly writings consistently alludes to the presence of such ancestral memory throughout the centuries. However, a critique of the literature also suggests that as African Americans become further removed from their roots, such collective memory has become increasingly subliminal and inaccessible. While Gordon (1995) argues that skills, rituals and habits have been transmitted to succeeding generations, Coleman (2002) believes that present-day African-Americans must find ways to consciously continue these legacies for their progeny.

A discussion of contemporary African-American mothering of sons would be lacking without a full comprehension of the ways in which such recall, whether conscious or unconscious, shapes Black mothers' interpretations of their sons' experiences; their own reactions and behaviors; and their reliance on faith and spirituality throughout the son-rearing process. It is, therefore, as suggested by the opening quote, important to contextualize the worlds of mothers of sons within the 500 year sojourn from West Africa to the current day. Placing ancestral memory or knowledge at the center of Black mothers of sons' lived experiences may provide invaluable insight regarding effective interfacing between the social work profession and this population.

Historical

In recent years there has been a growing body of work surrounding the unique experiences of African-American mothers. A disproportionate amount of sociological, psychological and social work research has focused on single, low-income, urban Black

mothers (Bush, 2000; Chase-Landsdale, Brooks-Gunn, & Zamsky, 1994; Cricco-Lizza, 2008; Jackson, 1998; Jackson, Gyamfi, Brooks-Gunn, & Blake, 1998; Kelley, Power, & Wimbush, 1992; Thomas, Farrell, & Barnes, 1996). However, the assumption of this study is that concerns about sons cuts across socioeconomic, marital status and geographic differences. It is also believed that the fundamental identities as Black women and mothers; the emotions of fear and loss; and the strong reliance on a Higher Source are rooted in a common West African cosmology; similar experiences of slavery throughout the African diaspora (Shahadah, 2005); and the collective interfacing with forms of racism, sexism and classism found in the United States.

Conceptualizations of African-American Womanhood/Motherhood

Pre-Colonial Africa

Viewed within the context of West African cosmology and philosophy, there is an everpresent intersectionality between being a woman and being a mother (Badejo, 1998). Although the matrilineal nature of family structure afforded women wide recognition as members of the society and high status in their families (Hill, 1999; Ngunjiri, 2007; Omolade, 1987; Vivante, 1999), prominence was also achieved through women's roles as political and religious rulers, healers, military personnel, wives, sisters, daughters and friends (Badejo, 1998). The queen mother of the Akan people of West Africa further illustrates the symmetry between African womanhood and African motherhood. She was a highly respected, high ranking person in the royal court with significant decision-making

responsibilities. The term "mother" was bestowed upon her, regardless of her parenting status, as she was viewed as the embodiment of ideal motherhood. She was also the emotional link to the ancestors (Badejo, 1998; Muller & Ritz-Muller, 1999).

West African mothers functioned as "child bearer[s] and perpetuator[s] of ancestral heritage" (Ladner, 1981, p.274). They were often considered more powerful than their husbands, given their roles in procreation and child rearing (Billingsley, 1992). High value was placed on children, with the attachment between mothers and children often stronger than that between fathers and children (Hill, 1999; Smith, 1973). The literature highlights some discrepency in gender preferences for offspring. Sudarkasa (2006) argues that mothers' most enduring relationships were with their daughters. Others contend that boys were preferred to daughters (Vivante, 1999), and that marital relationships grew stronger with each birth, especially if the woman gave birth to many sons (Muller & Ritz-Muller, 1999). Regardless, every child that was born was believed to be the full or partial reincarnation of an ancestor (Vivante, 1999), thus reinforcing mothers' roles in insuring the continuance of a family's lineage and legacy.

The Institution of Slavery

The African slave trade had a profound effect on the ways of living for those who were held captive throughout the Americas and Europe (Shahadah, 2005). Under this "peculiar institution", the enslaved African woman quickly lost her status and societal recognition, with her gender only seen as critical within the contexts of procreation and motherhood (Hill, 2001; Omolade, 1987; Wyatt, 1997). She had little say or control of her

own body and was frequently subjected to physical abuse and rape by slave owners, or forced breeding with bonded Black men (Littlefield, 2007; Owens, 1977; Roberts, 1997; Shaw, 1994). Her fecundity or ability to reproduce property, as her offspring were now considered, was essential to maintaining the slave economy. Her status as a woman, as a mother and as the perpetuator of ancestral heritage was severely compromised during slavery, but it was not completely lost. Instead, motherhood and family norms shifted to adapt to this new reality, while the fundamental African values remained the same (Hill, 2001; Littlefield, 2007; Rich, 2001; Roberts, 1997; White, 1999).

Enslaved women understood how valuable their children were to slaveowners. Possibly drawing on ancestral memory, they recalled motherhood as a symbol of status and power. This knowledge was used to defy and protest in efforts to protect their children from the harsh realities of slavery (Landry, as cited in Littlefield, 2007; Omolade, 1987). Their methods, however, were adaptive; responding to the environmental context, it was not uncommon for Black mothers to threaten to, or actually murder their children, if the slaveowner attempted to separate them from each other (Bowden, 2011; Miller & Smith, 2011; Various, 2003). Nonetheless, slave narratives are replete with sons' and daughters' recollections of being parted from their mothers, some as early as age one (American Anti-Slavery Society, 2004; Douglass, 2011; James, 2011). Similarly, narratives and other scholarly works document unexplained infertility, miscarriages, and extremely high levels of infant and child mortality from disease (Dusinberre, 1996; Roberts, 1997). Two schools of thought exist regarding the mothers' emotional responses to such persistent demise of children. Dusinberre (1996) suggests that repeated loss of children resulted in a level of expectancy and numbness in the emotional reactions of enslaved Black women. Owens,

however (1977), argues that the emotional outbursts of enslaved females when their children died or when they were sold was illustrative of the strong connections they had to their offspring. Likewise, Rodgers-Rose (as cited in Perkins, 2005) maintains that the institution of slavery did not damage the intimate mother-child bond.

The mother-child relationship was as central under slavery as it was in Africa, albeit under very different circumstances. Slave families were often defined solely as the mothers and their children (Crowder, 2002; Hill, 2001; Perkins, 2005; White, 1999; Wyatt, 1997), insuring that sons and daughters were born into the same slave status as their mother. Children continued to be highly valued and the bond with their mothers was very srong. Sons, however, and husbands were frequently separated from their mothers and wives, respectively (Miller & Smith, 2011; Wilson, 2002), establishing a particular type of loss that Black mothers experienced regarding males, especially their offspring. Interestingly, Staples (1985) suggests that despite this fact, enslaved women preferred having sons to daughters, possibly due to their concerns about girls being sexually victimized; possibly as a residual custom or norm from their West African heritage.

With the loss of men and boys as commonplace, women relied on their own mothers and female relatives for support. Patterson (1998) coined the phrase “uterine society” to emphasize the prevalence of this bond among mothers, daughters and other enslaved women. Also, due to mothers’ work schedules in the field, children were frequently left in the care of older enslaved women for long periods during the day (Campbell, 2010; Owens, 1977). Other women also assumed the roles of surrogate or “fictive” mothers and “aunties” when biological mothers were separated from their children through auctions, sales or death (Campbell, 2010; Owens, 1977; White, 1999). Such “othermothering”, community

mothering or "allomothering"[7] (Collins, 2000; Conaway, 2007; Denby, 1996; Omolade, 1987; Johnson, 2011; Polatnick, 1996; Vivante, 1999; Woyshner, 2002), with its roots in Africa, became a defining feature of Black womanhood.

Reconstruction

The Reconstruction Era (1863[8]-1877) followed the end of slavery. It was a brief period in American history where the goal was to integrate recently freed slaves into the society. Under the thirteenth amendment, freed Blacks were guaranteed all of the rights of full citizenship, including, the right to vote, to marry and to attend school. Frazier (1939) and later Gutman (1977) wrote that nothing demonstrated the resiliency of Black families more than the efforts to reunite and to legitimize their relationships and their offspring through marriage. Formerly bonded people searched for husbands, wives, mothers and children from whom they had been separated during slavery. "Every mother's son seemed to be in search of his mother; every mother in search of her children" (Cott, 2000, p. 293). Numerous adult narratives highlight mothers' struggles to reclaim their children from former masters (E, 2003; Rhyne, 2008).

White backlash to Black strivings and accomplishments was overwhelming. As the plantation system transitioned into a sharecropping system, freedmen and freedwomen rented land from White planters to plant and harvest crops. The "hidden costs" of renting kept ex-slaves financially beholden to planters; whipping and corporal punishment

[7] Allomothers are defined as Black women who helped mother younger Black women by developing their characters, providing them with emotional support, or mentoring them into leadership roles and positions.

[8] Although slavery officially ended in 1865, President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 declared all enslaved people legally free. The beginning of Reconstruction Era is most often placed at this point.

continued to be used to keep sharecroppers from challenging discrepancies in costs, and to maintain general compliance (Cott, 2000). In addition to the abuse inflicted by individual White planters, more large-scale intimidation and brutality came from organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, and through the lynching of both Black men and Black women (Mitchell, 2004; Schechter, 2001).

Within this very disheartening and brutal context, Black women found some solace in the fact that for the first time since slavery, they had some autonomy in managing their homes and families (Cott, 2000). They continued to try to protect their children and families as best they could (Cott, 2000). At times they resorted to harsh disciplinary methods to accomplish this, but they "would not let her [W]hite employer lay a hand on them" (Cott, 2000, p.296). Similar to their experiences in slavery, African-American women's definition of care and protection reached beyond their immediate families to include kin and the larger community. Within this larger context, African-American women were shown deference and respect. Using ancestral knowledge of African traditions and religious practices, they served the community as herb doctors and fortunetellers (Cott, 2000). "Othermothering" evolved into the formation of mutual aid societies, and clubs designed to "uplift" the race (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

Black women also played critical roles in establishing the Black church as a site of spiritual, material and political support (Franklin & Mossa, 1994). A position that could only be held by a woman in the church was that of "mother of the church." Akin to the queen mother in ancient Africa, as the wife of the founder of the church, or the oldest or most respected woman, the title had little to do with her parenting status. Rather, it reflected the kinship nature of the church and the community. The pastor often consulted the church

mother before making any important decisions (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Church organizations, that were both relational and biblical in name (e.g. Daughters of Ham; Sisters of Zion) provided care for the sick and poor (Cott, 2000). They used the women's biblical stories of Ruth, Hagar and Mary, the mother of Jesus (Logan, 1999) to espouse messages of caring for the family and raising industrious and respectful children (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

In addition to such self-help initiatives, the federally funded Freedmen's Bureau was also established to assist in protecting the newfound freedoms and interests of Black individuals and families (Dickerson, 2003; Perman, 2003). However, its ability to do so was thwarted by both political ideology and limited resources. White backlash to Black strivings and accomplishments was overwhelming. An illustration of this is the Black Codes, government enforced laws that established separate and differential statuses for African-Americans. Among their many mandates, was removing Black children from their homes and placing them into apprenticeship without their mothers' consent (Dickerson, 2003; Perman, 2003). Regardless of being legal families with the rights to care for their own children; regardless of church teachings that enabled mothers to raise "respectful and industrious children"; regardless of the thirteenth amendment; too often through codes, violence and other means, African-American mothers found themselves still unable to fully protect their children; still unable to shield themselves from yet another loss.

Jim Crow and the Great Migration

The end of Reconstruction ushered in the Jim Crow era in the southern states, and lasted through the mid 1960s. For Black Americans this long period in history was marked

by laws which denied them basic civil, economic and social rights. Black voters were disenfranchised; discrimination in public facilities was the law throughout the southern states. The Supreme Court case of Plessy vs. Ferguson ruled that the federal government had no right to stop these locally established acts (Lake, 2003).

The violence and brutality that plagued the eras of slavery and Reconstruction continued, and by many accounts worsened during this period (Ferrell, 2003). Mob violence in the form of lynching was commonplace (Mitchell, 2004). Although teenagers, elderly women and pregnant mothers often met the same fate, some argue that adult males were the primary targets of these heinous acts (Shapiro, 1988). The most frequent (and often erroneous) charge brought against these men pertained to a purported offense against a White woman. Most often the accusation was rape (Ferrell, 2003), but it could also be an allegation of an inappropriate glance in her direction or failure to use language that was customary in Black-White dialogue (Seay Jr. & Boyd, 2008). Seventy-five per cent of the 5,000 victims of lynching between 1850 -1950 were African-American (Ferrell, 2003); the justification for many of these killings were what Richard Wright coined "the white death"[9] (as cited in Ritterhouse, 2006, p.194).

An alternate perspective, however, is proffered by Logan (1999). She contends that less than 25 percent of lynchings between 1882 and 1946 involved Black men accused of rape. She argues that not only were Black women frequently lynched, but that particularly during Reconstruction, they were the "invisible victims of rape" (p.70). Such offenses against Black women served as a significant catalyst for them leaving the South in such

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[9] The term "white death" according to Wright referred to the idea that White women were "poison" to Black men. It was a threat that hung over the heads of all Black men in the south.

great numbers (Barkan, 1999; Grim, 2002). In addition, better political, economic and educational opportunities contributed to their mass departure from the South to the North and to the Midwest (Barkan, 1999; Tolnay, 1997; Wilkerson, 2010). Men often ventured north first to find employment and homes for their families, setting the stage for the oft repeated historical process of separation between Black husbands, wives, mothers, fathers and children. Some argue that this "Great Migration" of six million southern African-American men, women and children caused significant disruption, dysfunction and pathology within the Black family (Wilkerson, 2010). Others refute this belief, contending instead that the urbanization of Black families, from the turn of the century through the mid 1960s, highlighted another iteration of the adaptive nature of African-American families (Billingsley, 1992; Tolnay, 1997). What cannot be disputed is that for the first time families left freely, of their own accord (Wilkerson, 2010).

During the two waves of the migration (1900-1940; 1940-1970) (Holt, n.d; Marks, n.d; Parker, 2004; Sides, 2003), the salient features of African-American womanhood continued to be collective work and responsibility with other Black women (Collins, 2000); service to the larger community (Butler, 2007b); caring for children and family (Stack, 1997); and involvement with the church community (Edwards, 2000). The transition from a southern rural environment brought many challenges, including substandard housing, child care needs for working mothers, health care issues, and increased exposure to criminal activities. Black women of all classes were at the forefront of developing organizations that addressed these needs (Barkan, 1999).

Yet the move to northern and midwestern industrial municipalites unearthed new challenges that were unprecedented, or at a minimum unspoken. African-Americans who

had either lived in the non-Southern states prior to Emancipation, or who had assimilated in these locales during the earlier stages of migration were not especially receptive to newcomers from the South. They experienced them as “country” and of a lower status, with behaviors that were not deemed proper and respectable (Holli & Jones, 1994). This resulted in culture clashes along the lines of class and color, as many of the more affluent and influential African-Americans were lighter-skinned than their poorer counterparts. Upon closer examination, many club women who appeared altruistic in their service to recently arrived migrants, may have been more self-serving; transmitting skills in proper etiquette and behavior ostensibly preventing lower class Blacks from embarrassing the entire race.

This practice is strikingly similar to enslaved Black women’s efforts to protect their children. The lessons they provided their children were intended to keep them out of harm’s way, while simultaneously protecting themselves and other family members from slaveowners’ wrath and vengeance. In essence, club women’s endeavors with the larger community were driven by the same underlying forces—providing lessons to protect new migrants from the sublteties and nuances of Northern racism, while concurrently safeguarding themselves from any harm from the dominant White populace.

Civil Rights to Present Day

The inability to protect a child—a boy, in particular—is argued by many to have triggered the end of Jim Crow and the birth of the Civil Rights era (Carson & Conyers, 2005; Thornton, 2010; Young, 2008). Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African-American boy from Chicago, Illinois was brutally murdered on August 28, 1955 while he vacationed in Money, Mississippi. His crime was either whistling at a White woman, or placing money for

a purchase into her hand rather than on the store counter, which was the custom under Jim Crow laws; the account of what actually happened varies with each narrator. The emotional response of his mother, Mamie Till Bradley, to seeing her son's horrendously mutilated body and her subsequent actions underscore the intersectionality of loss, mourning, defiance and politicization (Collins, 2000; Moten, 2003) that characterizes Black motherhood throughout the decades. Ms. Bradley insisted, despite being ordered to do otherwise, that her son's coffin remain open to let "the world see what they did to my boy" (Feldstein as cited in Collins, 2000, p.194).

Forty-four years later, in 1999, another Black mother echoed eerily similar words. Police notified Donna Dymally five days after shooting her son, Marc, but refused to let her see his body. Three months later she was informed that he had been cremated. Ms. Dymally is certain that he was cremated by the police to cover up the evidence of their crime. She refused the ashes they offered her, uncertain that they belonged to Marc (Reynolds, 1999). [10] Thirteen years after this, yet another Black mother, Sabrina Fulton, was notified of her son, Trayvon Martin's murder only after a missing persons report was filed. Like Emmett Till's mother, Ms. Fulton made her grief public, galvinizing millions of mothers, fathers and youth of all racial backgrounds to challenge commonplace practices of racial profiling, "stops and frisks" and stand your ground laws. While this story is still unfolding, just as Emmett Till's murder sparked the Civil Rights movement, it may be the death of another Black boy, and the tears of another Black mother that usher in the next chapter in African-Americans' struggle for equality and justice in the United States.

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[10] Marc's step-grandfather is Mervyn Dymally, former state senator and lieutenant governor of California, an indicator that the risk of Black males having violent altercations with law enforcement cuts across class and economic status.

The civil rights activism of the 1960s resulted in the de-legalization of Jim Crow laws, the integration of public schools and the enactment of the Voting Rights Act, to name a few achievements. With integration (and urbanization), also came an increase in the number of public welfare services available to African-Americans that were previously denied them. This included child welfare programs (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Herman, 2007) and Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) (Lyon, 2001), both closely associated with Black mothers. Accompanying this increased—not dominant, but increased—involvement in public welfare was a concerted effort by government, welfare officials, media, think-tanks and social scientists to portray Black women as welfare cheats, promiscuous breeders, emasculating matriarchs and destroyers of stable Black family life (Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001). This representation was best depicted in the oft-quoted Moynihan Report, authored by Department of Labor official, Daniel Patrick Moynihan (Moynihan, 1965). His report, which maligned Black families as pathological and dysfunctional, attributed many of these perceived problems to African-American mothers (Dickerson, 1995).

However, many scholars and theorists (Bell-Scott & Guy-Sheftall, 1991; Billingsley, 1992; Collins, 1987; Hill, 1999; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Ladner, 1981) rallied to counter the negative imagery of Black women and families during what Logan (2000) calls the Revisionist (1920s - 1980s) and the Contemporary periods (1980s – present day). They reframed previously defined chaotic family structures as arrangements marked by strong, broadly classified kinship bonds, with caregiving roles shared by mothers, fathers and extended family members (Denby, 1996; Polatnick, 1996; Stack, 1997).

Moving into the 1980s and 1990s, class divisions between Black families grew significantly. As some moved into higher institutions of learning, white-collar professions and suburban communities, others were disproportionately impacted by HIV/AIDS, crack-cocaine and drug laws. Black women were affected by these epidemics in unprecedented numbers (Alfred & Chlup, 2009; MacMaster, Rasch, Kinzly, Cooper, & Adams, 2009). Logan (2000) and Hill (2001) both argue that as a result of this rapidly changing environment, African-Americans can no longer be viewed as a monolithic group based on racial status. There is evidence of diversified family forms (Logan, 2000; Robinson, 2010), and different perspectives and attitudes about childrearing (Hill, 2001).

Yet even with the changing dynamics for African-American women, certain self-definitions and expressions of womanhood and motherhood have transcended the generations, with their roots firmly established in West African cosmology. Community mothering or caring for children beyond one's biological offspring continues to be a mainstay in their lives (Lawson, 2000; Polatnick, 1996). As in all previous historical periods, motherhood is viewed as a site of power, privilege, status and resistance (Collins, 2000; King as cited in Hill, 2001; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Lawson, 2000; Polatnick, 1996). Likewise, fear for the safety of their children and the recognition that they are too frequently at a loss to protect them is also a persistent theme (Reynolds, 1999).

The historical examination of the roots and definitions of Black womanhood, and more specifically Black motherhood is important to understanding the ideological and contextual frames brought to the raising of sons. Lawson (2000) offers further analysis, stating that "…mothering is a form of spiritual expression in societies that marginalize Black women" (p.21). The dissonance between mothers' expectations of their roles with

their boys, and their abilities to execute those roles under institutionalized racism may be the source of a broad range of emotional responses, the focus of this study. The following section offers a brief contextual overview of the history of Black boys in the United States.

"HIStory": African-American Males in the Contemporary United States.

Parallel historical narratives for African-American boys are limited, and are often told through the voices of adult males recalling their childhoods (Blassingame, 1977; Booker, 2000; Child, 1842; Douglass, 2011; Dusinberre, 1996; Equiano, 2008). Although the boys themselves are not the focus of this study, some understanding of their lived experiences in the United States is essential to comprehending Black mothers' emotions regarding their sons.

Until the late 1960s, most of the research on Black boys was "deficit oriented", depicting them as inherently deviant (Millson as cited in Billson, 1996, p. xiv). However, during the last ten years (1970-1980) of Logan's (2000) Revisionist Period, the literature presents a more contextualized portrait that either explains or dismisses observed behaviors. Beginning in pre-colonial West Africa, young boys grew up knowing exactly what to expect; they had adult models to emulate and rituals that prepared them for manhood (Muller & Ritz-Muller, 1999; Perkins, 2005). This very organized family and social structure was no longer available to boys during the institution of slavery, thereby requiring a different process to survive and thrive. Perkins (2005) identifies ten impacts that slavery had on Black children. The one impact that specifically refers to boys is "deny[ing] their traditional manhood and encourag[ing] them to become sexual gluttons" (p. 16). Other

impacts include grooming youth for manual labor; rarely disciplining youth for violent acts against members of their own group; inhibiting expression of true emotions; and forcing youth to develop their own coping skills, due to the fragmentation of the family unit.

The literature provides ample evidence of the ongoing resistance to these imposed obstacles to maturing. For Black males, demonstrating resistance to authority was a pathway to gaining respect within the enslaved community; it provided them with a fleeting sense of manhood. Conversely, males lost respect in the community if they failed to challenge slaveowners' authority (Booker, 2000). Yet parents taught their sons the best methods to use to survive the emotional dilemmas they would inevitably face, virtually grilling into them ***not*** to retaliate in any form (Booker, 2000; Mintz, 2004). Using such strategies as storytelling, warnings and helping sons to witness incidents, parents taught them to keep silent in the face of racist acts, because they would not be able to protect them. Particularly in the South, youth were given a detailed set of rules about what to do and not do in order to survive (Shakoor, 1999). The combination of these factors—resisting authority to gain respect and taste manhood; not resisting and keeping silent in order to survive, and; losing respect as a result of not fighting back— sent and continues to send strong conflicting messages to Black males. Manhood is not a state that boys mature into; it is something they must fight to achieve and to maintain. Yet in fighting for their basic mental, physical, spiritual and cultural needs, Black males consistently risk criminalization of their efforts (Booker, 2000), or outright loss of life. If, instead, Black boys opt to deal with the ravages of racism through such adaptive behaviors as retreating or conforming (Majors as cited in Billson, 1996), the risk shifts to internalizing feelings of rage and shame, which may result in violence (Garbarino, 1999). Holmes and Morin (2007) acknowledge that this quandary

continues beyond boyhood, contending that even successful Black men harbor a "deep fear that their hold on the good life is fragile, partially because of the discrimination they continue to experience" (p.17).

Contemporary African-American males, like their predecessors throughout the decades face a daunting challenge, which at times seems insurmountable. Negative stereotypes continue to be prevalent: Black males are physically dominant, but they are also harmless and infantile; they are academically inferior; they are perpetual children, but they are also sexual predators with huge sex drives. There is constant tension between asserting one's manhood and choosing to survive. Present-day young Black men often refer to this phenomenon as "breathing while Black."

This ongoing strain to achieve manhood places Black women in the precarious position of feeling they need to protect their sons *and* the adult males in their lives, both of whom are grappling to survive. The racial and gender demographics of the prison system, juvenile criminalization centers, special education classes and mental health clinics serve as sobering reminders of how daunting a task it is to help their sons navigate such unwelcoming terrain. Do mothers respect the need for their boys to fight for their manhood, regardless of the form it takes? Or do they either consciously or unwittingly stifle their sons' thoughts and actions in an effort to keep them safe and alive? Is there a happy medium? What happens for mothers when whatever their choice, it feels like a no-win situation? For African-American women, who carry the pride and power of motherhood in their DNA, what happens to their psyches, their spirits, their bodies--their very *souls*—when the absurdities of racism usurp such an important role?

EMOTIONAL RESPONSES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN MOTHERS OF SONS

In general, the scholarly literature depicts a scarcity of the mother's voice, regardless of race or ethnicity. While mothers attempt to name their experiences, their voices are often crowded out by professional theories and ideologies of motherhood (Davey, 2001; Ruddick, 2001). The few voices that are heard tend to be those of White women who express feelings about their roles as mothers that include anger, resentment, guilt, despair and rage (Rich, 2001); anxiety regarding their own performance, and anger at society and experts that gets projected onto themselves or other mothers (Warner, 2005); and ambivalence and helplessness (Ruddick, 2001). Many of these feelings, informed by first-wave feminist theory are related to the manners in which motherhood is experienced as interfering with a woman's ability to actualize her humanity in all of its dimensions.

There is no parallel body of work that reflects African-American mothers' maternal expressions regarding their sons. The void may be related to a lack of academic interest in the topic, but given the plentiful work on Black mothers and daughters, single Black mothers, Black teen mothers, etc., it remains a curiosity why studies on Black mothers and sons are virtually non-existent. The impetus for this research study is partially influenced by this dearth of material. A review of the literature highlights a pattern of examining the emotional content in Black mother-daughter relationships (Bell-Scott & Guy-Sheftall, 1991; Collins, 1987; Collins, 2000; Davis & Rhodes, 1992; Dixon, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Edmondson Bell & Nkomo, 1998; Penington, 2004; Trotman, 2002), and to a lesser degree Black father-son relationships (Coles, 2001; Hunter, Friend, Murphy, Rollins, Williams-Wheeler, & Laughinghouse, 2006; Ochberg, 2005; Rodney & Mupier, 1999). Cross-gender

relationships (mother-son; father-daughter) are rarely studied (Eadie, 1997). There is very little information pertaining to Black mothers and their sons (O'Reilly, 2001).

The emphases in the literature that does exist are on what mothers *do* with their boys, rather than on what mothers *feel* about the son-rearing experience (Berry, 2005; Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 2000; Bush, 2004; Grief, Hrabowski, & Maton, 2000; Telesford & Murray, n.d.). Most of the information on Black mothers' feelings is found in personal testimonies and blogs, news coverage, and culturally focused magazines (Kim, 2001; Millner, 2009; Muhammad, 2008). At first glance, the information that is available pertaining to emotional responses appears to be very disheartening as it highlights mothers' guilt and disappointment regarding sons' unrealized expectations (Bush, 2004; King & Mitchell, 1990); hopelessness, a sense of loss, and the belief that one will die young (Temple, as cited in Jenkins, 2002); and fear. Fear is the prevailing emotion throughout the literature. Schuster, Halfon and Wood (1998) highlight mothers' fears for their newborn sons' futures with fear for their physical harm or death being most dominant in their thoughts. With the growing incidence of school shootings, Kim fears for her son's safety as he pursues an education. Millner (2009) and Muhammad (2008) worry about the potential for their sons being shot by the police, while Reynolds (1999) describes the seeming epidemic of young adult sons who have been murdered by police officers. Phelps, et al. (2006) describe mothers' fears after youth are assaulted and land in hospital emergency rooms. Feijo (2007), a mother and an academic wrote of her reactions after her son was assaulted:

> …I awake in a sweat, not the kind of too hot summer nights
> or long rich love making, the kind of stomach wrenching bowel
> pain and fear gripping me from within. I awake and glance around

> the white hospital room, focus on his breathing, the boy so quickly becoming a man, who is healing, is safe, is nowhere close to death. (p.222)

Jenkins (2002) contends that losses for Black mothers are both real and symbolic. There is the real loss of a child through death, and there is symbolic loss that may occur as other children seek to retaliate for the violent deaths of a sibling. For mothers this loss occurs to the institutional structures of prisons and juvenile facilities, and are not so different from the losses mothers experienced during the periods of slavery and Jim Crow. Even when there is no direct loss, the threat of such injury or harm profoundly shapes psychological functioning. Regardless of the nature of the loss, Jenkins indicates that Black women display more post-traumatic stress symptoms than those who have experienced other forms of trauma.

Yet Williams, Te. (2008) suggests that grief, of which many of these reactions are symptomatic, is one of the few positive emotions that Black women are encouraged to show. She argues that such grief enables Black women to " work through feelings of loss that leave us sad, but whole" (p. 61). Given this possibility and Black mothers' fears for their sons beginning as early as birth, a deeper exploration of nonfinite loss and chronic *sorrow* reframed as protective factors for these women is warranted. A more extensive discussion of these frames are presented in the Theoretical Section of this research study.

Coping Strategies of African-American Women

Lykes (1983) describes coping as "an individual's effort to master conditions of threat, harm or challenge that she or he perceives and that result from a problem she or he has identified" (p. 84). As there is a scarcity of information on African-American mothers and sons, little is known about the specific ways in which they cope with feelings of fear, hopelessness, guilt, disappointment and loss. However, there is a significant body of work pertaining to the ways in which Black women, in general, cope with stress. Given the ever-present intersectionality between African-American womanhood and motherhood (Badejo, 1998), it is fairly safe to assume that many of these coping practices are employed when facing the challenges of raising boys within perceived racist structures.

Belle (as cited in Everett, Hall, & Hamilton-Mason, 2010) posits that chronic stressors for Black women include dealing with myriad negative personal life events for themselves, and being exposed to similar events in the lives of their loved ones. While experiencing or witnessing some of these events is exacerbated by environmental contexts and geographic neighborhoods**,** Everett, Hall and Hamilton-Mason (2010) found that coping strategies for Black women cut across class lines. Women with higher educational backgrounds had the ability to analyze the causes of stress more effectively, but their ways of handling difficult situations paralleled those of women with lower levels of income and academic attainment (Everett, Hall, & Hamilton-Mason, 2010)**.** Shorter-Gooden (2004) delineates what she refers to as "multiple resistance strategies" used by African-American women to combat racism and sexism. They include the internal coping strategies of faith, drawing on ancestors, and sustaining a positive self-image; the external coping strategy of

relying on social support; and the specific strategies of altering outward behaviors, diminishing contact with others, and directly confronting the issue.

Spirituality and Religion

The most prevalent and well-documented internal coping strategy for Black women is that of faith. Shorter-Gooden (2004) calls it "resting on faith" and defines it as the reliance on prayer, spiritual beliefs and a relationship with God. Also categorized as an approach-coping method, Bacchus and Holley (2004) define spiritual practices such as prayer, attending church and reading the Bible as being both transgressive and transformative spaces for Black women. Shaw (as cited in Harris-Robinson, 2006) references the fact that Black spirituality is rooted in African heritage and biblical faith. It was key in the survival of slavery and segregation, and has transcended the generations enabling African-American women to face life's challenges with a sense of calm, peace and courage. Spirituality is such a prominent factor in their experiences that Harris-Robinson (2006) added spiritual-focused coping approaches as a third prong to Folkman and Lazarus' (1985) traditionally accepted two-pronged grouping of stress relievers: emotion-focused and cognitive-focused. She conceptualizes it as "us[ing] faith and belief in a Higher Power as a source of personal strength during times of stress" (p.79).

Brodsky's (2000) research on the role of religion in the lives of urban, single Black mothers found that it provided feelings of protection and blessings from God. The women in her study indicated that prayer seemed like the only thing they could do to protect their children. Odom and Vernon-Feagans (2010) learned that church-based social supports

served as buffers against racism in southern, rural African-American mothers suffering from depression. In interviews with African-American mothers raising young children, Thomas (2000) learned that surrendering or leaning on God was a constant. Interviewees in her study also described their spiritual needs, both as mothers and women; areas that religious and other institutions could do better at focusing on. Several researchers argue that it is an imperative for social workers to incorporate aspects of spirituality in their work with Black women (Everett, Hall, & Hamilton-Mason, 2010; Manning, Cornelius, & Okundaye, 2004).

Calling on Ancestors

Continuing to draw on Shorter-Gooden's (2004) taxonomy, another internal coping strategy for Black women is that of "standing on shoulders" or calling on the wisdom and strength of the ancestors, both known and unknown. Again, this strategy traverses the spectrum of Black womanhood. Davis (2008), and Dillard and Dixson (2006) articulate the ways in which calling on the ancestors empowers them as Black women in academia, while Leslie (1998) describes how low-income Black mothers utilize Brer Rabbit stories to socialize and protect their children. Page and Washington (1986) studied how single Black mothers transmitted values to their children through family proverbs passed down through the generations. As many of the mothers placed high value on proverbs that communicated independence, the researchers hypothesized that the women's emphasis on this quality was an effort to reject the traditional notions of womanhood as fair and fragile. Rather, the normalizing of independence as a primary value may be a subtle way of placing one

attribute of Black womanhood at the center, for both their own self-images, as well as for the well-being of their families and children.

Social Support from Other Black Women

Closely aligned with the internal coping strategy of "standing on shoulders" is the practice of "leaning on shoulders." When reviewing the literature on ancestral supports for Black women, the frequent reference is to ancestral mothers (Davis O. I., 2008; Dillard & Dixson, 2006; Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Trotman, 2010). Recalling "uterine societies" discussed in an earlier section of this study, the shoulders that Black women tend to lean on are those of other Black women. Everett, Hall and Hamilton-Mason (2010) contend that Black women rely on other Black women during stressful and challenging times. Many highlight women-centered networks, othermothers and community mothers as maintaining an intricately woven set of roles and strategies that enable Black women to cope with their unique challenges (Butler, 2007b; Edelman, 2004; Johnson, 2011; King & Ferguson, 2011; Patterson, 2004; Reagon, 1986; Stack, 1997).

Shifting, Role-flexing and Altering

Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) describe the phenomenon of shifting, role-flexing or altering behavior as another coping strategy commonly used by African-American women. They write:

> Black women are relentlessly pushed to serve and satisfy others
> and made to hide their true selves to placate … segments of the

> community. They shift to accommodate differences in class… gender and ethnicity. From one moment to the next, they change their outward behavior, attitude, or tone… shifting has become such an integral part of Black women's behavior that some adopt an alternate pose or voice as easily as they blink their eyes or draw a breath—without thinking, and without realizing that the emptiness they feel and the roles they must play may be directly related. (p. 7)

Wolfer (as cited in Jenkins, 2002) conceptualizes altering as "getting away, getting along or getting through" (pp. 38-39). This study examined coping strategies of Black mothers living in a housing project. Getting away consisted of remaining indoors or physically relocating away from the problematic environment. Getting along referred to minimizing interactions with difficult people, and getting through found some mothers resorting to drugs or alcohol. Most, however, used such methods as "prayer, listening to gospel music, blocking thoughts about traumatic events, and using spiritual concepts of fate to make sense of the violence." (p. 39). While Wolfer's findings pertained to mothers living within a violent community, similar altering behaviors have been found with Head Start mothers (Mohr et al. as cited in Jenkins, 2002) and professional and middle-class women (Shorter-Gooden, 2004).

Standing Up and Fighting Back

Just as integral to Black women as shifting or altering behavior, is the act of refusing to do just that. Standing up for one's rights and challenging systems of oppression is commonplace in the experience of African-American women confronting racism and sexism (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Aptheker (as cited in Lykes, 1983) notes that literature written by Black women indicates that they do not see themselves as victims; rather the material is filled with a "culture of resistance, with strategies for survival, with tactics for revenge,

with humor and with resilience" (pp. 81-82). In Lykes' study (1983) of successful Black women elders, she found that directly confronting experiences with racism and discrimination was a common tactic. Personal affronts or perceived attacks on loved ones frequently get translated into communal responses or forms of political activism (Collins, 2000; Edelman, 1999; Edwards, 2000; Garrison, 2006; King & Ferguson, 2011; Reagon, 1986).

Each of these strategies – spirituality and religion, calling on ancestors, social support from other Black women, shifting, and fighting back—suggests a positive and an empowered way of responding to a perceived or real threat, harm or challenge. Viewed in conjunction with each other, the time-honored threads of collectivity (Collins, 2000) and connectivity are quite apparent.

Yet the literature also highlights the alternative tactics of smoking and drinking alcohol (Jenkins, 2002); emotional eating, and sleep deprivation (Everett, Hall, & Hamilton-Mason, 2010), which are more solo activities. The lower income Black women who rely on these practices describe them as isolating, alienating and leaving them feeling less in control of stressful situations. All historical markers indicate that such estranged behaviors are atypical for African-American women. When this anomaly seemingly corresponds with poor health conditions that exist for African-American mothers who frequently witness community violence -- increased levels of diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, clinical disorders, traumatic stress reactions and aggressive behaviors (Jenkins, 2002),– it underscores the importance of the fourth research question of this study: How do African-American mothers take care of themselves during their son-rearing experiences? If, as the data show, young Black males are disproportionately affected by violence, do their mothers

deviate from connectional coping strategies, retreating to the more detached behaviors described above? Is there a hybrid of strategies—some connectional, others not—that are unique to African-American mothers of sons, and how does this manifest? Are there specific practices for these mothers based on their socioeconomic status, marital status or neighborhood? The literature on strategies for Black women does not make distinctions about coping methods based on parenting sons. This study provides more in-depth understanding of these issues and, thus, contributes to the profession across several fields of practice.

Motherhood has historically situated the Black woman in a role of power. In ancient Africa, it afforded her high esteem and status, especially if she gave birth to a son. Her ability to procreate and reproduce slave labor made her invaluable to the plantation economy. However, in spite of her best efforts, even those that were unconventional, she often found herself unable to protect her children from the harsh realities of being forcibly removed from her care; from being victims of whippings, rapes, lynchings and other atrocities. Her boys, in particular, who were viewed as physical threats, sexual predators, unskilled and uneducable remained at constant risk of harm. Should she let them find their own ways under such daunting circumstances or should she do her utmost to shelter them, increasing their chances for survival?

This question, first posed during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade continues to this day. It was a question for the mothers of the Scottsboro boys in 1931. Emmett Till's mother grappled with it in 1955, and Trayvon Martin's mother struggles with it in 2012. The research shows that Black mothers begin fearing for their sons' lives shortly after their births. The research also shows that Black mothers do not expect their boys to live past age

25. How do Black mothers hold this solemn expectation *and* the possibility of their sons' attaining a successful, fully lived life in the same space? Quoting Amott and Matthaei, Littlefield (2007) writes that Black women "specialize in the wholly impossible." (p.56). Maybe they do it through prayer. Maybe it is calling on the ancestors or other Black women. Maybe it is through fighting. Theories on Africana womanism disenfranchised grief and nonfinite loss provide some insight regarding how the "wholly impossible" is achieved. The next section on theoretical frames for this study expounds on their tenets and how they apply to African-American mothers of sons.

Theoretical

The research question regarding African-American mothers and sons is framed by the intersectionality of race, gender and role, and therefore requires an examination of multiple frames, sometimes distinct and sometimes overlapping. Feminist standpoint theory, Black feminist theory, Africana womanism, and maternal thinking all provide lenses through which this study can be viewed. The challenges and merits of each are presented here, with Africana womanism emerging as the best fit.

In addition, given the historically recurrent themes of fear, helplessness, powerlessness and loss as they pertain to Black mothers' experiences with sons, theoretical constructs of nonfinite loss, chronic sorrow and disenfranchised grief are also discussed. These models have applicability beyond their traditional arenas and can provide a more in-depth understanding of the emotional content and the concomitant behaviors of African-

American mothers with sons. Particular emphasis is given to nonfinite loss and disenfranchised grief.

Theories on Motherhood

Feminist Standpoint Theory

At its foundation feminism, in all of its forms and iterations, is committed to securing equality between men and women. Feminist standpoint theory calls for accessing women's perspectives as a way of constructing a different way of comprehending social reality (Allen, 1998). Wood (2005) offered five key arguments of feminist standpoint theory: 1) society is structured by power relations in which men are situated in a dominant location and women are oppressed. These positions shape what men and women know, and how they understand their lives; 2) subordinate social positions are more likely to produce accurate knowledge, because those in higher positions have an investment in not "knowing"; 3) an outsider-within stance places one outside of the dominant group, but allows intimate knowledge of that group's reality—a double consciousness; 4) standpoints are not given, but earned through oppositional stances to a recognized, dominant worldview; and 5) individuals can have multiple standpoints based on their membership in multiple groups. Pertaining to research, standpoint theory mandates that the purpose of the study is to advance the causes of its subjects (Cook & Fonow as cited in Swigonski, 1993). The

researcher must carefully consider how research findings will be used and insure that they will benefit the marginalized, not the overprivileged (Swigonski, 1993).

While many of these tenets resonate for Black women, a major assumption in the theory is that the primary (if not the sole) source of women's oppression is men. There is no allowance in the theory for other places or persons from which such subjugation might emanate. For African-American women, White women are as much a dominating force as White men, who receive many advantages from the systems that place Black women's sons, adult male loved ones, and themselves at constant risk. The omission of race as a variable in understanding the myriad ways the society dominates women renders this theory questionable when discussing the lived experiences of Black women.

Furthermore, feminist standpoint theory suggests that under a patriarchal system "motherhood oppresses mothers, circumvents the mother-son relationship, and causes sons to be raised sexist and masculine" (O'Reilly, 2001, p. 3). It is therefore logical in feminist thinking that a critical component of mothering sons is to take away or minimize their boys' power in an effort to eliminate the perpetuation of oppression of women. To the contrary, for Black mothers, the goal is to bring their sons ***to*** power.

Fear for their sons' safety is the emotion that is most often expressed by African-American mothers. Aligning with Wood's (2005) five criteria for standpoint theory, the investment in "not knowing" about the angst African-American mothers feel trying to navigate their sons safely to and through adulthood is not just the practice of a White male system, but also the stance of White women. This is evidenced through the lack of inclusion of Black mothers' voices in the literature that defines, then generalizes the motherhood

experience (O'Reilly, 2001). African-American mothers are acutely aware of the harsh realities of the world in which their sons reside, but are also fully cognizant of the limited or non-existent avenues available to them to protect their boys. Black mothers' oppression comes from a White male system that controls the police, the courts and the educational system that place their sons at risk. It comes from a structurally racist society that instills and reinforces the self-hatred that causes other Black males to be threats to their sons, as well. It comes from White mothers, whose own sons, as part of the dominant White male group have a level of invisible protection, making Black mothers' experiences implausible to their White female counterparts. To fully acknowledge this reality brings into question the validity of what has been promulgated as the American mothering experience throughout recent decades.

Maternal Thinking

The unique mothering experiences that are based on race or ethnicity do not appear in Ruddick's theory on maternal thinking, either. However, her description of what mothers do to shield their children from oppression better approximates the historical and contemporary narratives of Black women raising sons. A philosopher, Ruddick coined the phrase *maternal thinking*, defining it as the reflection on and critique of mothering strategies and their outcomes (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2001). The framework considers how mothers assume responsibility for the care of their child(ren) in daily life, within the realities of oppressive environments.

The primary concerns of maternal thinking are: (a) the mother must do all that she can to protect the child, even when her actions appear harsh and extreme to others; (b) she

must foster the child's growth by changing and adapting as warranted; and (c) she must assist the child in transcending oppression and adapting in a manner that allows the child's acceptance by the dominant social group (Radosh, 2008). Over the years, Ruddick has expanded her motherhood theory to incorporate the idea that mothering is a work or practice. She argues that it is not necessarily related to the act of giving birth, and that women can control their reproductive processes or, alternatively, relinguish the care of their children to others. She proposes that in this manner, women can apply their mothering work to the larger, more global effort of creating peace (Ruddick, 1982). Ruddick has suggested that maternal thinking is creative, cooperative and peaceful, compared to the individualistic, competitive and aggressive approaches associated with patriarchal socialization processes.

While some have argued that Ruddick's theory of maternal thinking romanticizes motherhood (Benjamin, 1988; Woollett & Phoenix, 1991), aspects of this model are consistent with what the literature describes as Black mothers' experiences caring for their sons (and daughters). Protection of their sons is paramount in the lives of African-American mothers, and as was described in the historical literature, they will pursue drastic measures in striving for their safety. Black mothers' efforts in this vein, have frequently caused them to be labeled as domineering, controlling and evil. Outsiders view Black mothers' use of strong diciplinary methods as harsh and punitive, while from insiders' perspectives they are seen as both protective and preventative.

Radosh (2008) applied maternal thinking to the mothering work of Irish women following the famine of 1845-1852.[11] She explains that as a colonized country, Ireland was

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[11] Worthy of reiterating at this juncture is the emerging pattern of protective and adaptive mothering styles associated with societal-level, catastrophic events. Some might argue that Black boys are not experiencing a

an extremely poor and religiously persecuted land. The combination of the famine and emigration resulted in a devastating loss of population for more than 100 years post-famine. This resulted in several major social changes that the government reported depended on the "Catholic church and Irish mothers" (Inglis, as cited in Radosh, 2008, p.310). The changes included an increase in religiosity, delayed marriage or celibacy as forms of population control, and emigration of some family members. Juxtaposing the theory of maternal thinking, Irish mothers driven by the need for physical survival socialized their children to comply with the changes. This was done through physical punishment beginning at an early age, shaming children who exhibited any type of deviance from norms and expectations, and depriving them of food and affection if necessary. The overall goal of these mothering strategies was to prevent similar devastation in the future. An additional outcome was the socialization of children to be accepted within the newly defined social norms. Mothers fostered peace by calming competitive demands for food, land and family.

The parallels to the experiences of African-American mothers throughout their sojourn in the United States are apparent. The catastrophic event for Irish mothers was the famine; for Black mothers it has been multiple ongoing events -- the institution of slavery, Jim Crow, the systems of criminalization, the educational system, lynching, "stop and frisk" and "stand your ground" policies. The postulates of maternal thinking are consistent with the ways in which African-American mothers have attempted to fulfill their roles and responsibilities with their sons (Boson-Amos, 2012; Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 2000;

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catastrophic event, but the premise of Barbara Reynolds' article Our Sons Under Siege (1999), Fox and Swatt's question Why are so many young Black men being murdered? (2008) and the national outrage surrounding the murder of Trayvon Martin suggest otherwise.

Brown, 2002; Bush, 2000; Cooper, 2007; Fiejo, 2007; Garrison, 2006; Golden, 1995; Kim, 2001; King & Mitchell, 1990; Millner, 2009; Thomas, Cloherty, & Brueggerman, 2012). Like the 19th century Irish mothers, survival is critical. Unlike the Irish mothers' experiences, for Black mothers the dilemma is deciding to what degree they should socialize their sons into an oppressive society.

It is at this point that maternal thinking as a theory, and Black motherhood as a practice travel down divergent paths. Maternal thinking theorizes that mothers' foci, and therefore their interventions are internally or child focused. It does not imagine that protective strategies are also externally focused, as does the political activism of Black mothers. The languaging of Ruddick's expanded theory connotes that to be externally focused requires a relinquishing of one's child to others. This dichotomous arrangement of mothering work -- being either internally or externally oriented -- contradicts the ideology of collectivism that is at the core of African-American womanhood. Understanding that bloodmothers, othermothers, older siblings and fathers share in the responsibility of childrearing challenges the idea that relinquishing a child is a pre-requisite to more global or community level mothering work. One of the defining features of Black motherhood is social activism; it is not viewed as separate and distinct from other aspects of the mothering role. A further limitation of maternal thinking theory as applied to the proposed study, is its emphasis on strategies of mothering, as opposed to feelings associated with mothering.

Black Feminist Theory on Motherhood

Black feminist theory on motherhood criticizes the omission of African-American motherhood from the larger discourse and puts forth critical information heretofore missing. Specifically, five themes of Black motherhood are identified: 1) bloodmothers, othermothers and women-centered networks; 2) mothers, daughters and socialization for survival; 3) community othermothers and political activism; 4) motherhood as a symbol of power; and 5) the personal meaning of motherhood (Collins, 2000; Conaway, 2007; Denby, 1996; Omolade, 1987; Polatnick, 1996; Vivante, 1999; Woyshner, 2002). Yet its overall agenda is quite similar to that of other feminist theories, in that it places women at the center, with men, including Black men as primary sources of their oppression. When discussing motherhood, Collins (2000) acknowledged that challenging Black male patriarchy in the public domain is taboo, and has probably contributed to the community's silence on Black male scholarship which tends to glorify their own mothers while simultaneously ignoring the plights of the mothers of their children.

Critics of Black feminism argue that the mere use of the term feminism connotes an automatic buying into its stated agenda (Hudson-Weems, 2001). If so, issues of mutual racial oppression, and role flexibility within families may become secondary considerations. For the purposes of this study, this is problematic. To fully comprehend the experiences of Black mothers of sons, it is critical that the oppression of Black males within this society be factored into the analysis. There must be room to understand how the complexities of multiple realities—gender oppression by all men, racial oppression of Black women, and racial oppression of Black boys and men—shape the mothers' emotional content while raising sons.

Africana Womanism

Africana womanism is the most recent of the four motherhood theories presented. Its late 1980s origin is attributed to Clenora Hudson-Weems, who positioned it as an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent (Hudson-Weems as cited in Alexander-Floyd & Simien, 2006). This includes African-American women, as well as women throughout the African diaspora, which reflects the conceptualization of the women for this study. Her theory argues that race is of paramount importance in any discussion of or about Africana women. As Eurocentrism, oppression and domination are at the core of any study of Africana people, Hudson-Weems believed that a strong stance about these realities must be assumed at the outset (Ntiri, 2001). Its focus is family-centered, rather than woman-centered, and therefore lends itself more readily to the examination of mothers and sons.

Africana womanism claims 18 descriptors (Hudson-Weems, 2001), which Alexander-Floyd and Simien (2006) categorized into three themes: agency, alliances and attributes. Of major importance for this study is the category of agency which includes the African concept of *nommo*. In African culture nommo means self-naming. Hudson-Weems refuted the labels and definitions of feminism, Black feminism, and womanism because by definition they begin with White middle-class women's agenda, which for Africana women is a flawed premise. In her literary work Beloved, Toni Morrison wrote that during enslavement "Definitions belonged to the definers, not the defined (Morrison, as cited in Hudson-Weems, 2001). Starting with a frame that places the subject at the center of her own experience and allows her to name it is a cornerstone in qualitative research. Africana womanism is well-suited to create such a context in the proposed study.

The category of alliances includes family-centeredness, wholeness and authencity among others. The Africana womanist concept of wholeness requires that she put her family first, but not to the detriment of career or other endeavors. Authenticity speaks to the importance of her claiming an African-based identity (Alexander-Floyd & Simien, 2006; Hudson-Weems, 2001; Ntiri, 2001; Reed, 2001). Claiming an African-based identity can include participating, both formally and informally, in the oral tradition of narrative and storytelling. The theme of alliances also incorporates Black women's political work with Black men against oppressive forces. It also speaks to genuine sisterhood with other Black women based on their unique experiences with multiple oppressions. Africana womanist attributes, among others, include mothering and nurturing. There is a high value placed on motherhood. Black women are mothers to their biological children and to the entire community. Spirituality, or the belief in a higher power is also a key element under Africana womanist attributes.

Africana womanism situates women within the context of their families at the center of research. Supporting qualitative methodology, it calls on Black women to name their own experiences and grounds the understanding of these experiences within an Afrocentric frame. It is broad enough to encompass women from throughout the African diaspora which, again, is consistent with how the mothers of this study have been conceptualized. This theoretical model also recognizes sprirituality, othermothering and politcal activism as critical variables in the lives of Black women, which the historical data affirms, and which this study seeks to learn more about as they pertain to raising sons. When compared with the other theoretical exemplars presented here, Africana womanism is uniquely suited to the study at hand.

THEORIES OF LOSS, SORROW AND GRIEF

Multiple theories of grief and loss exist, many with similar descriptions and definitions. Neimeyer, Prigerson, and Davies (2002) have contended that contemporary Western concepts of grief presume a set of universal symptoms, stages and struggles that are common to all individuals. Foucault (as cited in Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002) argued that within these cultures, there is a tendency to attribute such sorrow to the psychological makeup of the individual in distress, rather than to larger social systems and structures. It has been described both as a disease (Engel, 1961), and as a process with specific stages and expectations (Rando, as cited in Moules, 2008). Moules (2008) and Bennett (2010) highlight the accepted nomenclature associated with grief: letting go, exaggerated, prolonged, unresolved, chronic, morbid. They argue that in addition to pathologizing the experience, such preconceived notions disallow and discount myriad nuances of grief. Furthermore, Moules (2008) suggested that within grief there is hope.

When a death is impending or expected, the grief process becomes more complex. The onset is earlier, and from a societal stance at times may seem premature or unwarranted. The term anticipatory grief has been coined to differentiate this form of bereavement from more "normative" types of sorrow. However, it does not account for the reality of losing someone to sudden, traumatic or catastrophic death. It also does not account for a loss that is not death-related. Nonfinite loss redresses this omission by recognizing losses of hopes and ideals (Bruce & Schultz, 2001). Nonfinite loss refers to the "in-between" time—the period when the grieved person is still very much present, but the presumption or expectation is that she or he will inevitably vanish in some way. Contrary to the time-

limited orientation of other grief theories, it also assumes that both loss and grief are continuous. Chronic sorrow is closely associated with nonfinite loss and speaks to recurring grief in response to a significant loss (Harris & Gorman, 2011). Disenfranchised grief focuses on stigmatized losses, or those that the society has deemed unworthy of acknowledgment (Doka, as cited in Kalich & Brabant, 2006), such as losses due to incarceration; or that result from one's involvement in criminal activities.

Each of these theories, has applicability to this study. Each is closely aligned with the others. As such, rather than utilize a sole theory to frame this study, a synthesis of concepts will be employed to provide the foundation. Specifically, this inquiry seeks to discover if the expression or management of fear, helplessness and guilt identified by Black mothers of sons fits with the processes described in nonfinite loss, and disenfranchised grief theories. The greater curiosity is whether or not these concepts, which do not appear to have ever been considered through a racial lens, have any meaning with regards to losing a son to systemic racist forces—physically, emotionally, psychologically or spiritually.

Nonfinite Loss

Bruce and Schultz (2002) defined nonfinite loss as an enduring one associated with a negative event that remains with the individual either psychologically or physically. It differs from losses due to death because it is (a) continuous; (b) prevents some aspect of normal developmental expectations from occurring and; (c) it can include intangible losses such as lost hopes and dreams. The researchers continue their definition, identifying additional characteristics of nonfinite loss: there is ongoing uncertainty about what lies

ahead; there is a sense of not experiencing situations in a normal manner; the loss is not recognized by others; and there is a profound sense of helplessness and powerlessness, as a result of the loss. Jones and Beck (as cited in Harris & Gorman, 2011) enhanced this definition by adding the characteristic of feeling deep "despair and a sense of ongoing dread" (p. 88). In effect it shifts the person's reality, with the world now being shaped through the specific incident, as well as through the resultant future that is now anticipated.

Jenkins (2002) discussed the grief that results from a loss of a child. Speaking about Black mothers in communities where violence is prevalent, she stated that the loss is both real and symbolic. A child could be lost to a real death or to the culture of violence. The sense of grief persists because of the real possibility of losing multiple children in such environmental contexts. Ms. Rowe-Adams, a member of Harlem Mothers Stop Another Violent End, had two of her five sons murdered in unrelated incidents, 18 years apart. She stated "I think it's in my aura to lose all my sons to murder" (Williams Ti. , 2007, para 27). She continued that for one year after her first son's murder, she did not smile. Royster-Hills, a member of the same group, where the criterion for membership is to have had a child murdered, illustrates the lost dreams that are indicative of nonfinite loss, as well as the lack of acknowledgment by others that the loss is legitimate. People questioned the way she had raised her son, who was shot to death at age 27. "That was my only child, my only pregnancy. I put everything I had into him…I'm at the end of my line. I will never have grandchildren to play with. I have been ostracized by my family" (Williams Ti. , 2007, para 16-17).

In a society that consistently minimizes or denies the impact of systemic racism on the life trajectories of young Black men, the silent losses, the daily injuries, the subtle

microaggressions are innumerable. The homicide, mass incarceration, and elevated high school drop-out rates for Black boys underscore the sense of dread and ongoing fear with which many of their mothers live. Author Marita Golden, in her memoir, Saving our Sons relayed a conversation she and a female friend were having:

> …Whether we were talking about the schools, a drive-by shooting, the economy, rap music, or the Knicks versus the Bullets, we were really talking about our sons. We talked about them because if we had not yet lost them, we feared we would. And looking into each other's eyes, hearing the confusion in our own voices, we wondered who could tell us how to get them back (Golden, 1995, p. 4).

As a theoretical frame, nonfinite loss holds significant promise for examining and understanding the lived experiences of African-American mothers of sons.

Chronic Sorrow

Closely related to nonfinite loss is the concept of chronic sorrow. The literature attributes its origins to multiple researchers at different times (Eakes, Burke, & Hainsworth, 2011; Olshansky, 1962). It is defined as:

> …profound…and recurring grief responses resulting from a significant loss or absence of crucial aspects of oneself (self-loss) or another living person (other-loss) to whom there is a deep attachment. The way in which the loss is perceived determines the existence of the sorrow. The essence of chronic sorrow is a painful discrepancy between what is perceived as reality and what continues to be dreamed of. The loss is ongoing since the source of the loss continues to be present. The loss is experienced as *a living loss* (Roos as cited in Harris & Gorman, 2011, p.94).

Harris and Gorman (2011) conceptualized chronic sorrow as the response to ongoing, nonfinite losses. Defining features of chronic sorrow include peaks and valleys, resurgence

of feelings or periods of high and low intensity (Lindgren, Burke, Hainsworth, & Eakes, 1992). Lindgren et al. also observed that a flooding of emotions and emotional numbness mark the two ends of the continuum, with most people who experience chronic sorrow, residing somewhere in-between. The ongoing presence of the person or the loss precludes a full immersion into "normalcy", as would eventually be expected after someone dies. Peterson and Bredow (as cited in Harris & Gorman, 2011) suggest that triggers or milestones are enough to move the sorrow from one place on the continuum to another. These reminders can restimulate deep feelings of sadness.

The recent demonstration of outrage at the death of Trayvon Martin in Sandford, Florida is an example of how fragile and palpable the hurts are for many Black mothers, as well as others in the African-American community. Trayvon was murdered because he looked suspicious to the individual who shot him. Accusations of racial profiling, and biases built into "stand your ground" policies and policing practices abound. Of significance, however, to this study are the number of mothers who have testified on television, internet blogs, newspaper articles and more about similar occurrences with their own sons, or the fear that it is just a matter of time before their boys become victims, as well. A quick internet search using key words "Trayvon Martin and Black mothers" yielded almost 18 million results. "Fear", "Emmett Till", "my worst nightmare" "he's a walking target" were consistently repeated throughout these testimonies (Boson-Amos, 2012; Hilliard, 2012; Jones-DeWeever, 2012; Martin, 2012; Reid, 2012; Thomas, Cloherty, & Brueggerman, 2012;). The women spoke of living with these fears since their sons' births, and having their sense of dread triggered again and again, with each incident similar to Trayvon's.

As a theoretical frame, chronic sorrow almost appears to be customized for African-American mothers of sons. Yet, it has been tested largely with populations dealing with chronic illnesses, disabilities and other groups within the health care arena. The current study seeks to analyze mothers' emotional expressions and content through the lens of chronic sorrow, as it may have significant implications for social work interventions with Black women.

Disenfranchised Grief

Unlike other forms of grief, disenfranchised grief broadens the lens to make space for losses other than death. It legitimizes the grief experience for those whose reasons to lament are called into question. Introduced by Doka in (1989), disenfranchised grief is what "persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publically mourned, or socially supported" (p. 4). They are denied the right to grieve by the larger society. Referencing Doka, Kanter (2002) argued that disenfranchised grief can be determined through the identity of the mourner, the identity of the lost loved one, the nature of the relationship mourned, or the cause of death.

A review of the literature documents the application of disenfranchised grief in such diverse circumstances as family members of death row inmates (Jones & Beck, 2006-2007); women who have relinquished infants for adoption (Aloi, 2009); the loss of romantic relationships in young adults (Robak & Weitzman, 1994-1995); home foreclosures (Herrmann, 2011); and pet loss (Duffey, 2005). There has been some examination of disenfranchised grief through cultural lenses, and with groups who have suffered historical

trauma, such as the aboriginal peoples of Canada, and Holocaust survivors (Baskin, 2007; Livingston, 2010). Yet the literature yielded only one article that recognized disenfranchised grief with African-Americans (Martin, 2005). The subjects were White and Black parents of murdered children, and the findings showed differential outcomes based on race. White parents' grief was legitimized, compared to the disenfranchisement of Black parents' sorrow. Given the limited examination of this phenomenon as it pertains to African-Americans, studying its utility with African-American mothers of sons holds broader promise for this theoretical frame.

Each of these theories on loss has some applicability to the experiences of African-American mothers of sons. Nonfinite loss and disenfranchised grief, with their broader definitions of what constitutes loss and grief seem the most suitable lenses through which to give meaning to the mothers' narratives. Africana womanism allows for the possibility that Black women's agency, alliance and attributes shape the manifestation of this type of loss and grief in ways that have not yet been recognized or understood. Given the limited research on Black mothers and sons in general, and on the relevance of this type of loss and grief within this population, these theoretical frames lend themselves nicely to qualitative study.

Empirical

A review of the empirical literature further illuminates the fact that very little research has been conducted regarding Black mother-son relationships. More importantly, no studies were identified where the research question pertained to mothers exhaustive

feelings about the experience, although one study asked about mothers' fears for their children (sons and daughters).

BLACK MOTHERS TO SONS: JUXTAPOSING AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE WITH SOCIAL PRACTICE (KING & MITCHELL, 1990)

The seminal study on Black mother-son relationships was conducted by King and Mitchell (1990). Their focus was on what Black mothers do to protect their sons in a hostile society. Due to an absence of empirical data, King and Mitchell used Black mother-son relationships found in fictional literature and combined it with data gathered from group interviews with seven informants. The accessed literature had suggested that to protect their sons, Black mothers either treated them brutally for their own good, or overindulged them to destruction.

The qualitative research design used semi-structured interviews and posed questions regarding (a) protection; (b) what mothers had taught their sons about honesty, loyalty, compassion, faith and responsibility; (c) what they had taught their sons about reciprocity, difference, mutuality and spirit; and (d) what they had taught their sons about family background, secrets and family lore. The findings highlighted that Black mothers feel that they are in a Catch-22, wanting to both protect their sons from racism and have them function within a racist society. King and Mitchell gained some insight into mothers' feelings, including guilt and disappointment, but there was not a deeper examination of this or other emotional content. As the research sample only included seven mothers, the generalizability of the data is also questionable.

SOLVE FOR X: BLACK MOTHERS + BLACK BOYS = X (BUSH, 1999)

Building on the King and Mitchell study, Lawson Bush (1999) conducted a qualitative study, expanding the research question to explore the ways in which Black mothers participate in raising their sons to become men. Mothers in the King and Mitchell study had indicated that they provided their sons with stories about male kin as examples of how they had maintained dignity, pride and strength under difficult circumstances. Bush questioned whether or not mothers viewed gender, lack of experience, or other obstacles as contributors to their perceived incapability in raising boys. Additional research questions examined the mothers' knowledge about issues that are unique or important to Black men; how mothers defined Black manhood and masculinity; and whether or not their sons had an extended family network in their lives.

Bush conducted face-to-face tape recorded interviews with 23 mothers throughout various Southern California locations. The mothers each had at least one son between the ages of 6-19 and 24 and above. An additional four mothers, with infant sons participated in a group interview. A son of one participant was also interviewed by telephone. Bush found that Black mothers expect their sons to have a self-identity that incorporates both a masculine and feminine self. He also found that mothers utilize a variety of methods to teach their sons, especially the use of timely words joined with ongoing dialogue. They used media to instruct sons about positive and negative manhood, and they used themselves to teach concepts of respect, responsibility, compassion and strength. Bush was struck by the fact that inspite of these methods, the mothers he interviewed held on to the popular belief that as women they were incapable of teaching Black boys to become men. He concluded

that if there are some things only a man can teach a boy, then one must accept there are some things that only a woman can teach a boy. He suggests that those things are intangible and unnamable.

Like the King and Mitchell study, the qualitative structure of the Bush study is critical to the knowledge building on this subject matter. With very little material to draw from, it is important to begin with an inquiry focused on discovery. The challenge with Bush' research is that although it built on the former study, it continued on a path of learning *what* Black_mothers do with and for their sons, rather than what mothers *feel* in the process. This is significant because of the unsolicited feelings that emerged as part of the first study. The mothers' responses suggest a strong need to give voice to their emotions.

African American Mothers in South Central Los Angeles: Their Fears for their Newborn's Future (Schuster, Halfon, & Wood, 1998)

One study (Schuster, Halfon, & Wood, 1998) from the medical field highlights an interest in the emotional expressions of low-income African-American mothers. While it did not specifically focus on sons, the research generated interesting findings along gender lines. It sought to determine what African-American mothers in South Central Los Angeles feared for their newborns' futures. Using an interview survey and a random sample, 419 mothers were interviewed. The number of mothers with sons was 213. The survey question asked mothers what their greatest fear for their newborn was. Responses were organized into 16 categories. Thirty-nine percent reported a fear of gangs, violence or both. Fifty percent of mothers of boys gave this response, as compared to 28% of the mothers of girls.

Other fears included disease, illness and health problems (17%); drugs and alcohol (15%); growing up in the local environment (10%); and society and the world in general (8%).

African American Mothers of Academically Successful Sons: Familial Influences and Implications for Social Work (Greif, Hrabowski, & Maton, 2000)

Greif, Hrabowski, and Maton (2000) approached their work differently by orienting the research around academically successful sons. Their subjects were Black mothers with sons who were enrolled in a university program designed to educate African-American men to enter the fields of science and math at the highest levels. The boys had a high school grade point average of 3.5 (on a 4.0 scale). Thirty-eight mothers participated in either a group or telephone interview. They also completed written questionnaires. The inquiry focused on mothers' early family experiences to determine what influenced them to help raise their sons. The mothers were asked about beliefs they had received from their families, along with messages about education and gender roles. They identified hierarchical family structures, emphasis on work and responsibility, supportive parents, and church attendance as critical factors in their own upbringing. Regarding education, the mothers described having parents with limited education, but who nonetheless created learning home environments and stressed the importance of education. The responses to the gender question could not easily be categorized, but the researchers found that neither a traditional, nor an egalitarian upbringing impacted the parenting behaviors of the mothers.

Although the title of the article related to this study speaks to successful sons, the thrust of the research is really about successful African-American mothers. It is an

unexpected departure from the problematic paradigms that are too frequently associated with Black mothers. It is a welcome contrast to the mothers in the other cited studies because the respondents share what does work, rather than what does not work. However, again the emphasis in the research is on strategies (albeit strategies from the mothers' families of origin), not on emotional content.

The fact that only four empirical examples[12] related to the research question could be identified underscores the need for further study. Only one of the studies was designed to address emotional content, and it specified fear as its sole realm of focus. The glimpses of other feelings in King and Mitchell's study were not actively pursued as a line of inquiry in any of the other research. Furthermore, with the exception of the medical study, the samples in all of the studies were very small.

Another limitation of all of the studies is the fact that the most recent one occurrred in 2000. Given the rapid rate of change in the society, it would be important to explore whether Black mothers feelings, perceptions and concerns have shifted in the past 12 years. It may be difficult to assess any change, because there is not much data with which to compare such findings. It would be interesting, though, to include this as a research question. For instance, the recent election of Barack Obama as the first African-American President of the United States, and the recent killing of Trayvon Martin may add further depth and complexity to what African American mothers think about the possibility for their sons, and the feelings that accompany these considerations.

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[12] Three other studies were identified but 1) did not meet the "state of the art" criterion; 2) Black participants were statistically underrepresented; 3) race-ethnicity could not be determined. The studies are discussed in the following academic writings: Mothers of sons: Toward an understanding of responsibility (Forcey, 1987); Mothers and sons: Feminism, masculinity, and the struggle to raise our sons (Lee & Williams, 2001); The motherhood report: How women feel about being mothers (Genevie & Margolies, 1987).

Synthesis of the Literature

The historical, theoretical and empirical literature confirm that the emotional experiences of African-American mothers raising sons in the United States is a sorely undertapped area for scholarly work. The examination of mother-son relationships, in general, is still in its embryonic stage (Association for Research on Mothering, n.d.). However with feminist theory still framing much of the motherhood discourse, early research on mothers and sons is either based on a White middle-class woman's perspective or is grounded in a gender-based ideology (e.g. Black feminism).

The overall motherhood experience for African-American women has been profoundly shaped by a combination of their African heritage, the legacies of the American slave system and the dual oppressions of race and gender. The interactions with their sons are complex and multilayered. There is a need to protect them from the harsh realities of racism, while simultaneously enabling them to thrive within its confines. Knowing that their abilities to protect them from police, gangs and other acts of violence are limited, mothers are consumed with fear, sometimes as early as at their sons' births. There is a sense that their boys are under seige, and Black mothers are powerless to bring it to an end. In spite of this, Black mothers' self-definitions include recognizing motherhood as a site of power and high value. There is an acknowledgment that mothering does not take place within the narrow sphere of the nuclear family, but is a shared communal experience with blood mothers, othermothers, other Black women and fathers.

Missing from the analysis of Black motherhood, however, is the emotional component related to sons. The literature offers significant emotional content around Black

mother-daughter relationships. Studies of White mothers provide similar emotional content about their motherwork. With the exception of the findings from two small studies, some magazine articles and a blog, the mother-son dynamic is a glaring omission in the construction of Black motherhood. It is not clear whether the silence on the issue is due to lack of scholarly interest, Black mothers opting not to speak about it, or a combination of the two. The literature suggests that the silence about male children may be connected to Black women's learned silence regarding public, controversial conversations about Black men. Of significance, however, is the manner in which literary fiction and other artistic media serve as vehicles through which the interior worlds of Black mothers of sons (and daughters) emerge.

This qualitative study begins where the King And Mitchell research ended. Drawing on the hypothesis that their subjects' responses suggested a desire to give voice to their feelings about raising boys, this study explores the nature of those feelings in more depth, with particular emphasis on the recurring themes of fear, guilt and worry. Although all of the research indicates that fear is the most prevalent of these emotions, the research is an open-ended examination of the range of felt sentiments, including those not addressed in previous inquiries. The research at hand asks five major questions:

1. What are the range and prevalence of emotions that African-American mothers feel while raising their sons from infancy to age 30?
2. What are the ways in which mothers and sons' experiences with racism shape this emotional content?
3. What are the ways in which African-American mothers' expression of emotions affect the mother-son relationship?

4. What are the ways in which African-American mothers take care of themselves during their son-rearing experiences?

5. In what ways does this tacit knowledge contribute to improved social work practice with African-American mothers of sons?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This section discusses the design and methods that were used to conduct this study. The rationale for qualitative research is provided, with emphasis on using a "retooled" phenomenological approach that is conducive to inquiries with African-American women. In addition sampling techniques, data collection and data analysis strategies are delineated. A brief review of insider-outsider challenges, as well as limitations to the qualitative approach is also included.

Qualitative Inquiry

Qualitative inquiry focuses on understanding the setting or experience of a defined population (Janesick, 1994). Informed by a relativist constructivist paradigm (Patton, 2002), the form and content of reality are derived from those who live the experience. Unlike quantitative research, which identifies reality as an absolute truth, as inductive inquiry, qualitative research focuses more on *informed* truth. Qualitative ontology assumes that change is constant and that reality alters depending on shifts in time and context. As reality is considered a human construct, it constantly changes as respondents gain new knowledge and understanding of the issue under study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Inquiry is concerned with understanding and reconstructing people's paradigms based on their most current interpretations of their lived experiences.

Mintzberg (1983) describes qualitative research as exploratory in nature, looking for useful theories, as opposed to sorting between true and false theories. This methodological approach offers no hypotheses, but may take a *creative leap* (p.109) or suggest points to consider, which go beyond any pre-determined expectations. Mintzberg also speaks of the detective work that is part of the inductive process. Such work allows the respondents to shape and define the phenomenon under study, potentially moving the researcher onto a different path than originally anticipated. Experimental trials that are employed in quantitative research do not allow for such emergence or flexibility of design. While this study expounds upon what it feels like to live and parent with the ever-present concern for Black mothers' sons' safety, it also learns about other emotional content.

This study, therefore lends itself to the inductive approach of qualitative inquiry. It does not confirm or disconfirm the existence of other emotions, as would be the goal of quantitative research. It merely offers an understanding about how such feelings inform the lived experience of Black mothers. The mothers best described both the internal and external triggers for these emotions. They were able to illustrate how these emotions shape what they do and do not do with their sons. The respondents also provided an insider's view of what it feels like to guide their sons toward independence and manhood, while simultaneously protecting them from a society in which they are at constant risk of state or community-imposed harm.

Another assumption for this study was that the emotional content of African-American mothers raising sons under racism cuts across issues of geography and social and economic class. Emotions, however, may shift in prevalence or depth as sons move throughout their various developmental stages. Qualitative inquiry, with its attention to both

time and context permits the explication of when, where and how the studied phenomenon occurs. A deeper understanding of this process shed light on mothers' types and levels of feelings at different points in the life cycle. It also expounded on how the complex interplay of emotions and parenting behaviors influences the African-American mother-son relationship. Unlike quantitative inquiry, this study was not concerned with determining how an emotion causes a parenting behavior. Rather it focused on the range and types of emotions for Black mothers of sons; the sources or "triggers" for these emotions; their coping strategies; and the affect of Black mothers' emotions on the relationships with their sons.

This research study on African-American mothers departed from the traditonal scholarly focus on pathology, deviance, parenting strategies and marital status, to name a few. Rather, it attempted to elevate Black mothers' voices regarding a particular aspect of their lived experience. The literature shows what high value Black women place on motherhood, and what challenges they face in their efforts to bring their sons safely and successfully into adulthood. Yet there is little empirical examination of mothers interior worlds as they chart this course with their boys. There is ample critique of *how* they parent and whether or not those strategies are deemed effective. There is much interpretation of Black women's emotional expression as anger. However, no one has asked the question, "How do you feel?" Ignoring the idea that African-American women are also *feeling* people is a throwback to the days when as enslaved women they was expected to sacrifice themselves and their emotional responses for the sake of White men, White women, all children, and to a lesser extent enslaved Black men.

Social work practice, with its commitment to social justice and maintaining a focus on the realities of oppressed people is uniquely situated to effect change in this experience for Black mothers of sons. The rationale for this study lies in the fact that the field interfaces with Black mothers all of the time. Services are provided in school settings, systems of criminalization, child welfare programs and mental health clinics. Each of these environments has a caseload that disproportionately consists of Black males; their mothers are frequently engaged at either the micro or the mezzo level. Having a better understanding of Black mothers' journeys in the process of rearing and caring for their sons has the potential to inform innovative programming and strategies of intervention. Structuring the research as a qualitative inquiry starts the process of innovative interventions, by inviting the participants to name the experience for themselves, rather than for the researcher to make assumptions about it.

Limitations

The demographics of the study participants provided opportunity to compare and contrast emotional content based on socioeconomic status, developmental stages of the sons, mothers' marital statuses and mothers' neighborhoods. Although these variables are referenced throughout the study, they are not examined in depth, as would be the case in quantitative research. These are important areas for consideration, but they were not the focus of this inquiry.

Research Design

“Retooled” Phenomenology

The research sought to answer five questions:

1. What are the range and prevalence of emotions that African-American mothers feel while raising their sons from infancy to age 30?
2. What are the ways in which mothers and sons’ experiences with racism shape this emotional content?
3. What are the ways in which African-American mothers’ expression of emotions affect the mother-son relationship?
4. What are the ways in which African-American mothers take care of themselves during their son-rearing experiences?
5. In what ways does this tacit knowledge contribute to improved social work practice with African-American mothers of sons?

To create the best environment within which the identified research questions could be explored, a phenomenological approach was utilized. Phenomenology, a qualitiative research strategy, is the study of human experience from the perspectives of those who are living it. It assumes that true meaning can only come from the participants’ voices. As a research methodology, it answers the question “What is it like to live a particular experience?” (Patton, 2002; Wilson & Washington, 2007). The current study sought to learn what feelings exist for African-American mothers who are raising sons, and how these feelings affect their lives and those of their sons. Wilson and Washington (2007) proposed “retooling phenomenological methods to include approaches affirming the experiences of African-American women” (p. 63). They described dialogue, storytelling and participatory

witnessing as practices that could render research designs with Black women more culturally grounded. In addition, these processes are consistent with Africana womanism, a key theoretical frame for this research.

Sampling

Phenomenological sampling strategies insure that informants are those who are either living or have lived the experience in question (Wilson & Washington, 2007). Criterion and snowball sampling were used, with a goal of reaching between 25-30 mothers. It is important to note here, that for this study African-American motherhood is conceptualized as both biological and othermothers (grandmothers, aunts, fictive female kin, godmothers, etc.). The size of the sample was based on time and geographic constraints. In addition the targeted number of respondents was small enough to be feasible, yet large enough to achieve data saturation.

There were four criteria for participation in the study. First, the participant had to self-identify as an African-American mother, as conceptualized for the study. This meant that she traces her heritage to those of African ancestry who migrated here from the Caribbean, South America, Africa and other parts of the African Diaspora. The second and third criteria were that she and her son were both born and raised in the United States. These criteria insured that participants had been socialized within the larger American culture, as well as within this specific racial group. As such, the likelihood that they have experienced an event or act associated with American racism was increased.

The fourth criterion is that mothers have at least one living son between the ages of infancy and 30. The literature states that Black mothers begin fearing for their sons at birth (Schuster, Halfon, & Wood, 1998) and do not expect them to live past age 25 (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 2000). Including such a broad age range enabled some exploration of mothers' emotional content prior to their sons becoming engaged in any macro-level systems (e.g. education, criminalization), as well as mothers' emotional energies once their sons had passed the 25 year-old milestone. This age span also provided insight into the onset, type and level of maternal emotions during different stages of their sons' development.

Mothers were recruited from a variety of venues to insure diversity in socioeconomic levels, neighborhood, marital status and age. They were recruited from the five boroughs within New York City, as well as the "first-tier" suburbs of Westchester County; Yonkers, New Rochelle, and Mount Vernon. First tier suburbs are characterized as having similar demographics and issues to the five boroughs of New York City. New York City residents with more financial resources frequently relocate to these surrounding suburbs seeking better schools, more green space and increased safety for their children. Including these smaller jurisdictions in the study may offer information about mothers' experiences based on locale, schools, housing, etc.

Snowball sampling was initiated through contacts that I had in each of these geographic vicinities, and who had professional or personal contact with women who met the criteria. These primary contacts were based in child welfare organizations, social service settings, churches, colleges, rites of passage programs and public housing projects.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

The phenomenological approach requires that the methods of investigation allow for the deepest understanding of the participants' experiences. For the purposes of this study, it was therefore very important that data collection activities be congruent with African-American culture and nuanced based on gender-specific ways of knowing. Dialogue in a storytelling format is a common way of communicating and building knowledge among Black women. To conduct this research, group interviews were utilized, but the interviewing process was retooled to incorporate storytelling as a way of facilitating more authentic conversation (Wilson & Washington, 2007).

The high value placed on the collective and sisterhood suggested that group interviews, inclusive of shared storytelling, would be an effective way to gather important data. Not only could the group process provide an increased level of comfort and familiarity, it might also enable the women to feel validated and affirmed by others who share the same experience; it could potentially lead to the formation of ongoing support groups or networks. As the literature consistently speaks of Black mothers' fears, anxieties and helplessness, there was some concern that these emotions, when expressed in groups might raise previously unconsidered issues for first-time mothers of infant sons. Respecting their new motherhood status, and not wanting to project any of these feelings onto them, the plan was to conduct only individual interviews or homogeneous groups with this subset of the population. However, no mothers of infant sons participated in the study.

The storytelling process involved limited use of the semi-structured guide for interview purposes. The initial questions in the guide were used to start the discussions.

Through dialogue, questioning, challenging and affirming each other, the mothers developed both an individual and a collective narrative about their experiences raising sons. The interview guide served as a means for organizing story details during the data analysis process. Allowing the women to talk with limited direction or interruption from me, as the researcher, was in keeping with the storytelling approach. The narratives were tape recorded, and handwritten notes were kept to capture nonverbal cues such as hand gestures, facial expressions and eye movements.

Retooling phenomenological research with Black women invites the researcher to serve as a participant witness (Wilson & Washington, 2007). Rather than assuming a complete outsider stance, the researcher comments on what she is hearing, sharing perpectives that value the participants' realities. Wilson and Washington (2007) liken Black women's storytelling styles to "bearing witness" (p. 65). In the tradition of the Black church, it has elements of call and response, where the expectation is that those present will actively participate in the exchange in a manner that is validating and affirming. In addition to enabling a more in-depth conversation among the respondents, serving as a participant witness for this study allowed me to communicate support and empathy. It will minimize the historical distrust that many African-Americans have regarding any study of their communities and experiences (e.g. Tuskegee Experiment).

In anticipation of deep levels of sharing, a brief healing circle was facilitated at the end of each group interview, to allow individual and collective closure to the conversation. While gathered in a standing circle, the women held hands and shared brief messages to their sons. They spoke of hopes, dreams, disappointments and prayers. The healing circles also symbolically represented a "birthing" of their shared voices. With its Zen type energy,

the circles allowed the women to hear their collectively named experience or *nommo* (Hudson-Weems, 2001), and feel their collective emotions as mothers of Black sons. Such ritual closures are also consistent with Africana ways of knowing.

SETTING

Creating a safe physical space in which participants felt comfortable sharing their narratives was a very important component to this study. An atmosphere of nurturing, caring and support is an imperative if there is to be trust between the researcher and the participants (Wilson & Washington, 2007), and amongst the participants, themselves. A space that was conducive to optimal levels of informality and honest expression of feelings was needed.

As such, a centrally located home office space was identified as the venue for the New York City group interviews. This space was chosen because of its home-like atmosphere, its Afrocentric décor and most importantly its large kitchen table. Kitchen table conversations over shared meals are mainstays in Black women's dialogue and storytelling activities. Discussing the origins of the women of color publishing company, *Kitchen Table Press*, Gumbs (2008) wrote, "it referred to the alternative modes of invalidated production that women of color had depended on for their self expression and survival" (para 20). The group interviews were, therefore conducted at or near the table with a meal, which was served at each session.

A similar setting, albeit in a church, was selected for the Westchester County session. The session was conducted in the nicely appointed living room that consisted of a

large dining table adjacent to the kitchen. As a thank-you for their time and information sharing, each participant received a custom designed canvas tote bag, depicting African-American mothers.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is an ongoing and nonlinear process. As such, it requires procedures that enable the researcher to repeatedly capture and analyze emerging data. The process is fluid. There is constant revisiting of information as new material arises from each individual or group interview.

Africana womanism situates women and their families at the center of Black women's knowing. It considers the intersectionality of oppressions faced by Black women and creates equal space for all of their realities to contribute to appropriate knowledge development. It was anticipated that the multilayered complexities of being a woman, of being an African-American, of raising a Black son within a White male patriarchal society would manifest in myriad ways during this inquiry. I needed to be mindful of the fact that I, too, wear all of these hats, and not allow my biases, experiences and pre-conceived notions to unduly shape what I heard during the interviews. The qualitative research strategies of memoing, reflexive journaling, and bracketing were employed to keep those perspectives in the forefront and separate from the analysis.

The data gathered from the interviews were transcribed and later inductively coded with ATLASti, a computer software program designed for this purpose. Diagramming was also used as a visual way of corroborating the computer generated information. Although it

was reviewed on an ongoing basis, full analysis and interpretation of the data did not occur until completion of the last group interview. This was important to allow meaning to emerge, without attempting to interpret the responses (Wilson D. W., 2007). Consistent with the Africana womanism tenet of *agency*, a vehicle through which participants can provide feedback and verification of the researcher's findings was incorporated. Interested participants were provided a summary of the preliminary findings, to which they could respond. Beyond validity purposes, doing so again maintained the commitment to the Africana womanism concept of *nommo*—naming their own experiences.

Feasibility

The proposed study posed minimal limitations in implementation. Financial expenditures were moderate and covered the costs of meals, transcribing services and thank you gifts.. Both the New York City and the Westchester County venues were in-kind donations. The social workers who served as additional support during the interviews also donated their time. As an independent consultant, I do not have the time constraints of a prescribed work schedule. I was, therefore, able to schedule group interviews that were responsive to the respondents' available times.

Human Subjects

The study posed minimal harm to the subjects. All participants were advised of the purpose of the study and of how the findings would be used. Signed consent forms were obtained from each interviewee. Anonymity was insured through the removal of all identifying information from the final document. Transcribed data were password protected and removed from the transcriber's files once they were submitted to me.

The research topic is sensitive and to date has not been explored at any depth. Based on the tangential responses during the King and Mitchell (1990) study, and the enthusiasm with which many Black mothers greeted the idea of such research, it was envisioned that participation in such an endeavor might feel like an answer to prayer. However, from the perspective of potential harm to human subjects, I also considered that the study might evoke a deep visceral response to long-held, previously unexpressed feelings. To address this, in addition to the healing circle that was incorporated into each session, I provided culturally appropriate resource materials and referral information to all study participants in case they needed further support beyond the group. For immediate needs during the group, a female African-American therapist was present in an adjoining area to provide safe haven, emotional support and crisis counseling for anyone who needed those services. Employing yet another tenet of African-American womanism, I viewed this work not as an academic exercise, but as an opportunity to "give back" and to be supportive of other Black mothers of sons. As such, their confidences, their stories and their shared emotions were held in highest regard, throughout all aspects of the study.

Reliability and Validity

In qualitative research, “terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability replace the usual positivist criteria of internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 35), respectively. The first three concepts are discussed here, with the undertsanding that the fourth concept, objectivity, is achieved through use of the same methods described within credibility.

Credibility

The credibility of qualitative inquiry depends on rigorous methods, the credibility of the researcher and the fundamental belief in the value of qualtitative study (Patton, 2002). Rigor requires that the researcher actively engages in a process that looks for alternative themes or explanations, and different patterns in the data. If no strong supportive evidence for these alternative themes is found, it adds credibility to the the original explanations that were offered. Two methods for ensuring rigor include negative cases and triangulation (Patton, 2002). A rationale for expanding the geographic boundaries of New York City was to increase the possibility of locating negative cases. Although an assumption was that Black mothers emotional responses to raising boys is similar across socieconomic and geographic boundaries, this was an area for discovery. Sampling mothers from diverse backgrounds enhanced the opportunity to challenge that assumption with alternative information. Another form of triangulation, analyst, was used as well. Here, the participants in the study had the opportunity to review the researcher’s findings to either confirm accuracy or offer alternative explanations. Both of these strategies further enhanced the credibility of the study results.

Transferability

Transferability refers to whether or not the phenomenon fit with a similar population situated within a similar context (Patton, 2002). Context is critical in qualitiative inquiry.Neither the phenomenon nor the findings of the study at hand may fit, for instance, with a population of rural Black mothers in the midwestern United States. The representative sampling for this study, however, showed some transferability between mothers within the five boroughs of New York City and mothers within first-tier suburbs. The phenomenon may be deemed applicable to other Northeastern urban populations in future studies looking at similar issues. There is, however, no assumption or expectation that the findings from this limited research are relevant to every Black woman in the United States who is a raising a boy.

Dependability

In quantitative research reliability is the concept used to reflect consistency in findings. The findings are considered reliable if the same results emerge each time the information is tested. Within qualitative research, the emphasis is on multiple truths and realities; the expectation is that there should be some variance in the findings. Dependability refers to the ability to explain or track the variance (Guba,1981). This was done through factoring in new and emerging data; discovering new ideas through memoing, reflective journaling, and bracketing; examining changing contexts; and being attentive to errors in coding, etc. Triangulation with multiple analysts (the study participants) also increased dependability in this inquiry.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to share findings based on the narratives of the women who participated in the group interviews conducted for this study. The sections within this chapter reiterate the research questions; present the demographic data; highlight the context within which these stories are shared; and delineate the four themes that emerged throughout the study. Learning how to conduct research as a participant-witness was an important part of this inquiry. Therefore, reflections on my personal preparation and process as I engaged in the interviews are presented.

Research Questions

Through a qualitative form of inquiry, this research study explores the range of emotions that African-American mothers experience while raising sons under what they perceive to be the systemic oppression of racism within the greater New York area. The research questions include:

1. What are the range and prevalence of emotions that African-American mothers feel while raising their sons from infancy to age 30?
2. What are the ways in which mothers and sons' experiences with racism shape this emotional content?
3. What are the ways in which African-American mothers' expression of emotions affect the mother-son relationship?
4. What are the ways in which African-American mothers take care of themselves during their son-rearing experiences?

5. In what ways does this tacit knowledge contribute to improved social work practice with African-American mothers of sons?

These questions evolved from an extensive literature review, a pilot study that was conducted as a doctoral level class assignment and personal conversations I had been involved in throughout the years of raising my son.

Demographics

Using a snowball sample, 27 African-American mothers of sons from New York City and lower Westchester volunteered to participate in the study. They represented recipients of child welfare service, social workers, church members, college students, ministers, therapists, several nurses and a probation officer, to name a few. Of this total, 80% (n=22) identified as married, divorced or widowed. Two-thirds of the women (n=18) have earned a Bachelor's degree or higher. Tables 1 and 2 depict these data.

Table 1: Mothers' Marital Status n=27

Marital Status	Number of Mothers	Percentage of Sample
Single	5	19%
Married	13	48%
Divorced	8	29%
Widowed	1	3%
Total	27	

Table 2: Mothers' Educational Level n=27

Educational Level	Number of Mothers	Percentage of Sample
HS Diploma or GED	5	19%
Bachelors	4	15%
Masters	12	44%
Doctorate	2	7%
Undisclosed	4	15%
Total	27	

Five groups were conducted, consisting of three to nine participants each As shown in Table 3, eighty-one per cent of the mothers (n=22) are employed, many in professional positions. The table also organizes this information by group interview.

Table 3: Respondents' Employment by Category and Group

Group	Corporate	Health Care	Social Work/Therapy	Education	Minist	Admin	Retired	Unempl	Total
1	1	1	1						**3**
2	1		5		1	2			**9**
3		3		1	1		1		**6**
4	1	2							**3**
5						2		4	**6**
Total	**3**	**6**	**6**	**1**	**2**	**4**	**1**	**4**	**27**

The respondents each reported having at least one son with ages ranging from birth to thirty. In total, the respondents had forty-one sons (n=41). Table 4 presents a visual summary of this data.

Table 4: Sons' Age Ranges n=41

Age Range	#of Sons	% of Sample
Birth to Five	2	5%
Six to Ten	2	5%
Eleven to Fifteen	4	10%
Sixteen to Twenty	13	32%
Twenty-one to Twenty-five	10	24%
Twenty-six to Thirty	10	24%
Total	41	

Sixteen (16) of the 41 sons referenced in the study are enrolled in preschool through college. Four (4) boys are college graduates and living independently. Eighteen young men between the ages of 18-30 are living at home with their mothers, and two (2) are presently incarcerated. Table 5 shows the sons' current school and living statuses, as reported by their mothers. The data is shown within and across the five interview groups.

Table 5: Sons' Current Status as Reported by Mother x Group n=41

Group (#sons)	Pre-school	Pvt. Primary	Pvt. High	Pub. Primary	Pub High	In College	College Grad	Adult (18-30)	In Prison	Living on Own*	Total
Group1 (3)	1							2			3
Group2 (14)	1			2	2	5	1	2	1	(1)	14
Group3 (10)				1	1		3	4	1	(3)	10
Group4 (3)			1	1				1			3
Group5 (11)					1			9		1	11
Total	2		1	4	4	5	4	18	2	1	41

***Numbers in parentheses have also been counted under College Grad**

The participants in this study also reported a range of household incomes. Seventy-five per cent of the women (n=20) indicated incomes between $50,001-100,001, as depicted in Table 6.

Table 6: Household Income n=27

Household Income	Number of Mothers	Percentage of Sample
0-25,000	3	12%
25,001-50,000	3	12%
50,001-75,000	8	30%
75,001-100,000	8	30%
100,001+	4	15%
Undisclosed	1	3%
Total	27	

A more detailed profile, inclusive of all demographic data is included in Appendix A.

Overview of Emerging Themes

Four themes emerged during this study, listed here in order of emphasis during the conversations:

1. African-American mothers of sons are tired

2. African American mothers of sons are proud, afraid and worried; they feel abandoned and guilty

3. Prayer, other Black women….and a good manicure: Ingredients for self care among African-American mothers of sons

4. Holding the environment: Mindfulness, strategic use of silence and co-creation are helpful when working with African-American mothers of sons

Tiredness seems to be the backdrop for everything else the women discussed throughout the research project. The respondents, through both words and actions demonstrated this feeling. It is not so much a physical exhaustion, as it is an emotional one. It seems to color the lenses through which they experience the other aspects of their lives. The mothers are tired of the persistent states of worry and fear regarding their boys. They are also tired of feeling that they have to be responsible in so many arenas—parenting, work, family obligations—without the emotional support from husbands, partners and in some cases other Black women.

The focus of the second theme is on the next set of expressed emotions for the mothers: pride in their sons; fear about possible incidents between sons and police; worry about their sons' overall safety and well-being; guilt about the choices they have made, especially in husbands; and a sense of abandonment by husbands and other women These feelings, generated from a variety of sources, contribute to the quality of the mother-son relationship, as well as to the women's sense of self.

A third theme highlights how the mothers do and do not take care of themselves, with the need for prayer and connections with other African-African women being of utmost importance. Although on one hand the mothers acknowledge hair care, spa days and nail care as examples of self care, they are secondary to the benefits they receive from active spiritual practices and relationships with other Black women. Their relationships with other Black mothers of sons are not as prevalent as they would like them to be; the theme highlights their desire to create opportunities for stronger connections.

The fourth and final theme addresses the ways in which creating a group environment can possibly support the mothers' needs to vent, cry and be affirmed by others, as mentioned many times during this project. Drawing on Winnicott's (as cited in Gamble, 2000) concept of holding environment, this theme discusses the elements needed to foster a sense of emotional cohesiveness within a group. Benjamin (as cited in Castelloe, 2010) suggests, "holding implies the ability to bear one's feelings without losing or fragmenting oneself" (para 6). This study finds that the facilitator's mindfulness and being very deliberate about when and how to speak or intervene is critical to creating this type of space for Black mothers of sons. Furthermore, enabling participants to play active roles in creating both the physical environment and the emotional tone of the group session are important in engaging and affirming Black mothers.

Context

THE CALL

In the nomenclature of the Black church, a call went out for African-American mothers of sons under the age of 30, who live in any of the five boroughs of New York City or lower Westchester County. The call is where the pastor (Principal Investigator) reaches out to the congregation (initial contacts) through the sermon. The congregation is expected to respond in a manner that generates energy, interest and excitement and draws others (study subjects) into the process.

In empirical research, snowball sampling mirrors this process. I distributed flyers and descriptive information to over 50 colleagues, friends, churches and agencies that I believed, based on personal conversations and agencies' client populations, had access to qualified study candidates. Colleagues consisted of social workers in a variety of settings, school principals, guidance counselors and organization directors to whom I have provided consulting services throughout the years. Personal friends who have sons were also asked to identify others who fit the specified criteria. Flyers were also distributed to ministers of several churches, including Presbyterian, Baptist and Methodist churches in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan and Mount Vernon. Materials were distributed by hand, as well as email. Through this process, within two weeks, I received 35 email or phone responses from potential participants. I then spoke with each individual to insure she understood the parameters of the study, as well as to determine if she was a good fit.

Of the 35 who responded, two did not meet the criteria. Of the remaining 33 candidates, six had planned to participate, but withdrew from the process due to scheduling conflicts and personal circumstances. I had proposed to interview between 25-30 women for the study; 27 women signed consent forms and participated in the interviews. Table 7 illustrates group participants according to their referral source.

Table 7: Referral Source x Group n=27

Group	By Church	By Social Serv. Agy. (as a client)	By Social Serv. Agy. (as staff)	By Professional Colleague	Self-Referral (thru friend or another participant)
1 (n=3)			1		2
2 (n=9)			2	2	5
3 (n=6)	3				3
4 (n=3)			2		1
5 (n=6)		3			3

GROUP STRUCTURE

Group interviews were used as the forums for data collection. During the pre-interview phone calls, respondents were asked whether a group session in New York City or Westchester would be more convenient. Based on their answers, four sessions were scheduled in New York and one in lower Westchester. All of the attendees in New York City live in the boroughs. For unknown reasons, the only borough with no representation is Manhattan. The Westchester participants are from Yonkers and Mount Vernon; one Westchester participant lives in the Bronx, on the border of Mount Vernon.

The numbers in attendance at each session varied, ranging from as few as three mothers to as many as nine. The size of the group did not seem to affect *what* the women shared; it did at times present challenges in insuring everyone had ample time to speak. The larger the group, the more this particular challenge surfaced. Each session lasted for approximately three hours. A licensed social worker, other than me, was present at each session to provide crisis counseling to any woman who needed it. This service was never actually utilized. The social worker did not actively participate in the session. Table 8 provides a visual summary of the groups, their location and the number of women in attendance.

Table 8: Group Location and Number of Participants n=27

Group	Location	# of Participants	% of Total Study Participants
#1	NYC	3	11%
#2	NYC	9	33%
#3	Westchester	6	22%
#4	NYC	3	11%
#5	NYC	6	22%
Total		27	

THE SETTING

The New York City site was centrally located in Harlem. This space was chosen because of its home-like atmosphere, its Afrocentric décor and most importantly its large kitchen table. Kitchen table conversations over shared meals are mainstays in Black women's dialogue and storytelling activities (Gumbs, 2008). When we were not seated at the table, comfortable couches and chairs enabled the mothers to relax and engage in casual conversations with other women in the room.

In Westchester, a predominately Black, Presbyterian church in Mount Vernon served as the venue for the session. This group interview was conducted in the church's living room, which is also a comfortable setting with carpeting, a fireplace and Tiffany lamps. The living room is located adjacent to the church's large kitchen, so again, there was a sense of being in a home environment. A meal was served at each session. Some groups ate before the actual discussion began; others ate during the conversation. The women decided for themselves when they preferred to eat.

INTERVIEWER'S PREPARATION AND PROCESS

Tuning In

Prior to each session, I thought extensively about the best way to present myself so that the mothers would feel as comfortable as possible. I worried about whether or not I could keep my own opinions and voice out of the process, so that the data would not be skewed or tainted in any way. My anxiety was driven by my inexperience as a researcher, more than anything else. I found myself praying before each encounter, and then recalling how much prayer was described in the literature as a form of self-care for African-American women (Harris-Robinson, 2006; Jenkins, 2002; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Praying freed me to trust that however I showed up, even as a researcher, I was among other Black women; I found comfort in that knowledge which helped to calm me down.

Welcoming Participants

My natural instinct when I meet other African-American women is to hug them, whether or not I know them. I have been in many situations, where the other woman initiates the greeting in the same manner, accompanied by a kiss to each cheek. This is not an uncommon practice, but I was initially hesitant to do this in my researcher capacity. I was pleasantly surprised (and secretly relieved) when the first woman to arrive at the first session reached out to me with a huge embrace. The second and third women to arrive did likewise. Not sure whether or not this was a fluke, I was again cautious during the second session. When each of the nine women who attended that session also greeted me and the other women with hugs and occasional kisses, it seemed that this was not an aberration. I wondered if this was the way African-American women "show up" for each other, or if

there is something about the nature of this study that was inviting this type of initial engagement.

Less concerned about the appropriateness of my innate way of greeting other Black women and supported by the notion of treating clients as if they were "valued guests in our home" (Hopps & Pinderhughes, 1999, p. 47), it became a ritual way of welcoming the mothers into the room. Combined with our collective work of preparing and serving the meal, we co-created a space in which the participants shared their narratives, which were at once funny, sad, frightening and enlightening.

Managing Tensions

I was strategic in my decision to use group interviews as a research methodology. The literature (Wilson & Washington, 2007) provided strong rationales for using group sessions with Black women. The appeal of Africana womanism as an organizing framework was largely because of its emphasis on *nommo*, or naming one's own experience as well as *narrative* and *storytelling* as valid ways of African-American women making meaning of their lives (Hudson-Weems, 2001). Although very comfortable with group formats, I was surprised at the level of discomfort I felt facilitating a storytelling process.

This tension initially became apparent to me, during the first session. As a novice researcher, I spent the early part of that session having an internal struggle with how much I should or should not say; how much I should stay with the interview guide; how much I should just observe, etc. Most important, I worried that my internal focus would compromise the data, as I was not being as attentive as I could have been to nuanced words,

behaviors and contexts. Reflexive memo writing enabled me to become more comfortable with my inclination to keep my voice out of the process as much as possible; to act as the participant-witness that I had envisioned as my role.

Beginning with the second session, I advised respondents of how I would be "showing up in the room" I shared that I would ask questions to initiate conversations, and that I would periodically ask additional questions for clarity and more in-depth understanding of what was being said. I advised the mothers, however, that these were their narratives, and my relative silence would allow them to construct their stories in ways that made sense for them. This transparency allowed me to be present to all of the dynamics that occurred during the session. By carefully choosing when and where to ask questions or share observations, I was able to see the concept of storytelling come to life. The participants named their own truths, with an intimacy that a series of questions may have stifled. In the unfolding of the various narratives, most of the interview questions were eventually answered. This was a key discovery for me, with implications for future work with Black mothers of sons.

During the third group, where I had again used this strategy, one participant and I had a brief exchange as we were leaving the session:

[Sophia]: You showed up like the Queen Mother.

[Interviewer]: What do you mean? How so?

[Sophia]: You didn't say too much. When you did speak your voice was kinda soothing. Quiet-like.

[Interviewer]: I wasn't aware of that. How did that work for you?

[Sophia]: It was good. I talked a lot, and I got the sense from you that that was okay.

[Interviewer]: Is that what Queen Mothers do…make it okay for you to talk?

[Sophia]: I think so.

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Her choice of the title 'queen mother' was an interesting one. Queen mothers in West African cosmology wield enormous power. Future kings are chosen from the wives of the current kings; the wife whose offspring is chosen is believed to have magical powers that help her son to have a prosperous and successful reign (Ben-Amos & Rubin, 1983; Kaplan, 1997). Queen mothers compete to be chosen for that title; staying out of the way, as Sophia's connotation suggests was probably not a success strategy for them. However, the irony in her choice of terms is that the designation of queen mother is closely aligned with being the mother of a son. She offers a different description of a queen mother, which may advance the social work profession's understanding of how to work with Black mothers of sons.

Mindful use of self, whether in the form of a physical embrace, strategic use of silence, or creating opportunities to co-create interview spaces is emerging as a critical factor in this work.

OBSERVED BEHAVIORS AND INTERACTIONS BETWEEN RESPONDENTS

Greeting Behaviors

The mothers arrived. They appeared to be in their twenties, thirties, forties and fifties. Their physical characteristics included a variety of skin hues, heights and body shapes. The mothers arrived -- with hair styled in locks and perms, extensions and close cuts. They wore bright colors, jeans and African mud cloth coats. Some were soft-spoken, while others had booming, boisterous voices. Yet, for all of their differences, there was an energy that suggested familiarity; there was a rhythm in what they said and did. As suggested in the works of Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) and Pack-Brown, Whittington-Clark, and Parker (1998) there seemed to exist an unspoken way of knowing and being. The latter authors state, “With other African-American women, there is a sense of sisterhood and belonging, as well as an opportunity for personal growth” (p.85).

Without exception, and regardless of which session they attended, the women greeted each other, as well as me, with hugs and warm words; few previously knew each other. As they arrived, the women spontaneously kicked off their shoes at the entranceways and immediately began looking for ways to help set out food and beverages. Even though food preparation and service were already organized and planned, the mothers insisted on finding ways to contribute, prior to the formal start of the sessions. In the groups that chose to eat before the formal discussion, clusters of women talked, as if they had known each other for a while. The snippets of conversations that I overheard focused on the women’s jobs, their children and current television shows, to name a few.

Supporting Behaviors and Interactions

During the formal interviews, the same level of comfort and familiarity continued as the mothers shared stories and experiences; as they asked and answered questions of each other; and as they challenged each other's responses and perspectives. They consistently acknowledged and supported each other, as exemplified by the following comment, made after several women had shared accounts of witnessing their sons or husbands receive long prison sentences:

> [Stephanie]: But can I just say to you, I think the way that you handled that with your son, I think was incredibly beautiful. I mean I really, really honor you for that because that was just such a gift that I think that it's very hard, a lot of times, for sisters who go through such difficult situations with men to be able to see that peace and be able to give that. So I just wanted to acknowledge that.

Laughter frequently peppered the conversations, often after more awkward or painful disclosures. In each group, I also observed women who had such a need to share their stories, that when asked to introduce themselves, they spoke at such length they needed to be interrupted. The need to talk was further underscored by a question that was asked during each group: "Can we come together to talk, again?" They stressed how they needed more forums to discuss the issues pertaining to raising sons with other women having similar experiences. The women knew that I could not be involved in an ongoing group during the research process, but several women in most of the groups exchanged contact information in an effort to remain in touch.

Responses to Healing Circles

In anticipation of deep levels of sharing, I facilitated brief healing circles at the end of each session to allow individual and collective closure to the conversations. The tape-recorded circles consisted of the women standing and holding hands while taking turns sharing words with their sons, even though the young men were not present. In each group these circles served as vehicles through which mothers shifted from verbally sharing their narratives, to more visceral communication modes such as crying, yelling and moaning. There were frequent references to God, Jesus and prayer during these moments. Prompted by the question, “If you could share any thoughts or feelings with your son right now, what would you say?” mothers voiced variations of the following:

[Stephanie]: Gary, you are destined for greatness

[Anita]: Uh, to my son Stefan, all I can say is freedom, freedom, freedom. Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning. And God is not through with you yet, baby. And pray to God that I’ll be here with open arms. In Jesus Name!! *{sobbing}* In Jesus Name!! In Jesus Name!! *{yelling}* My baby. *{sobbing}*

[Rosalind]: I'm so afraid. I have to let him go, and I don’t want to let him go.*{Group, crying—“we letting it go; we letting it go”}*

Emerging Themes

INTRODUCTION

The storytelling format used for the group interventions was a remarkable process that unveiled a great deal of information, much of which *is* within the scope of this inquiry.

Deciding which themes warrant greater exposure and which to hold in abeyance has been challenging. The mothers have so much to share about the experiences of raising African-American boys, and according to many of them, so little opportunity or permission to do so, either from family members, service providers or themselves.

Although pride with sons is an oft-repeated emotion, many of the following themes reveal painful feelings—anger, fear, guilt and a sense of abandonment. The women in the study persistently speak of feeling tired and unappreciated; of having to be too many "things" for too many people, whether it is family, employers, children or sometimes, friends. Yet, it is important to point out, that although these are the prevailing commentaries, the mothers also speak of the deep, deep love they have for their sons. They indicate that the emotion of love is a given; the more painful emotions are by-products of trying to keep their sons embraced in that love, in a society that conveys to Black boys that they are unlovable.

The four themes presented here merely provide a glimpse into what, I believe, is a much greater collective narrative. This is discussed further in the next chapter as an area for additional research.

Group Profiles

Each group assumed its own pattern of storytelling and making meaning of what it was hearing. Styles of communication, topic emphases and emotional expression were nuanced in each group. This may have been shaped by the unique composition of each session. Table 9 organizes each group based on its socioeconomic profile (household

income ranges and dominant educational level). The matrix displays the degree of emphasis that each group placed on Themes I, II, III. Low emphasis indicates that the topic was touched upon, but it was not a primary focus for anyone in the session. A moderate label is given to groups where at least half of the participants shared anecdotes that highlighted this finding. High emphasis is given to groups where almost all of the participants had an experience with the topic at hand. The table captures both intra-group and intergroup patterns.

Theme IV is more observational and speculative in nature; it is therefore not included in this matrix. There is little spoken content to support this finding; rather it is based on my observations of the interplay between me, as the researcher and the study participants. These observations provide some insight regarding the possible role of the facilitator when working with African-American mothers of sons.

Table 9: Prevalence of Thematic Topics Within and Across Groups x Socioeconomic Status

Group	Inc.	Degree	I Tired	II Proud, etc	III Self Care
1	50K-100K	Masters (2) Bachelors (1)	High	High	Low
2	50K-100K	PhD (1) Masters (6) HS (2)	High	High	Moderate
3	50K-75K	PhD (1) Masters (2) Bachelors (1) HS (1) Undisc (1)	High	High	Low
4	50K-75K	Masters (2) Bachelors (1)	High	High	Low
5	0-50K	Bachelors (1) HS (2) Undisc (3)	High	High	High

Theme I: African-American Mothers of Sons are Tired

This theme creates the backdrop for all subsequent findings. Through words, tone of voice and affect, the mothers in all five groups of this inquiry communicated this emotion-state. The exhaustion that mothers describe emanates from their roles as mothers, but also from their roles as wives, daughters and sisters. The women in this study are very accomplished, by both normative and self-proclaimed standards of success. The majority of the respondents are college educated, with a minimum of a bachelor's degree. The majority of the mothers also have household incomes of $50,000 or more. I asked the mothers a question about the sources of their tiredness. The question generated a broad range of responses, highlighted within this theme.

The mothers describe their careers with words of satisfaction and pride. Some also wonder why they do not feel the same sense of gratification in their personal lives:

> [Evelyn]: It's like I use my work and you know, whether it's, "Oh, I'll start another company! Or, "I'll go and get this contract and I'll be superwoman and hire four more people to do a contract. I'm not happy! Like I know I'm dying inside and I'm really dying at the hands of a man that's literally stabbing me day in and day out. Like I don't even know my name.

Stephanie speaks for many of the women in the study when she describes herself as a rescuer. In taking care of others, she often overlooks her own emotional needs:

> So, I'm struggling with deciding whether to step away from my husband right now, if I have a conversation, I have to make some boundaries and stop being… I see that I identify myself or

my life as a rescuer. I rescue people at work, I get in trouble for it. I rescue people at home, I hurt for it. I rescue my mother from not knowing things, for her religious roles so I pay for it. Um, so it's just a lot of stuff coming up for me right now.

The mothers in the study are tired. They are tired of being all things to all people:

[Cookie]: I just feel like I'm not doing enough. I'm always tired. It's work, it's husband, or it's the kids. I don't know if I'm ready to give up my husband yet, though. *{group laughter}*

They are tired of feeling lonely and less than whole:

[Sara]: I hear so much that's coming out of us about um, not just about our sons, but also about our relationships with the men in our lives. And I struggle and like sometimes have to step back. And like I feel your loneliness in the struggle. And what does that do to me when I feel that loneliness in me, what does that do to me as a mother? When- what- how do I convey, then make up for or somehow try to patch and make sure that my sons have an experience of me that's wholesome even when I don't feel whole?

Too often they feel hurt and abandoned by the men in their lives, and guilty about some of the life choices they have made. They question or blame themselves if school choices they have made for their sons do not work out as planned; if husbands are emotionally abusive; or if sons opt not to follow the paths they envisioned for them. The frequent reference to their disappointment in husbands suggests that a previous generation of African-American mothers of sons may have experienced similar emotions to the women participating in the interviews. Evelyn points out how the mother of her ex-husband reflected on her own guilt in a letter she wrote to her:

> She literally penned me a twenty page handwritten letter after I divorced her son and said, 'I'm sorry'. Like it was a twenty page 'I'm sorry' letter saying 'I'm sorry and I see what I did to, you know, get him where he wasn't able to kind of stand on his own two feet. Like I covered for years for that boy, you know'.

Mothers are also tired of having to negotiate and navigate systems that they feel are harmful or pose threats to sons, especially school systems and law enforcement. They are frustrated by adult sons who are still trying to "find themselves", and wondering when the time will come that they can stop actively mothering:

> [Maizie]: I think I started it at 23, cause knowing that he was going to be 25 and in my mind 25 was really gonna be the cut off point. Cause now it's like, you're 25, you decided you wanted to get married. You know, next thing I know, you're gonna be bringing children here and it's like you know, as it is, they live with us and it's like you can't live here forever, you know. Cause I'm thinking about like- you know it's like time for me!

The respondents even discuss being tired of not having spaces in which to connect with other African-American women in ways that feel supportive and affirming:

> [Stephanie]: We don't have a safe space, a therapeutic place on an everyday basis that you could go to a Black woman that you see wherever on the train, in your workspace, whatever, and just have a conversation. It's not a lot of venues for that. We have to come and create very thoughtful and intentional groups where we can feel safe and we actually come out of there supporting and uplifting each other.

The mothers' overall feelings of weariness manifested through more than just spoken words. With the exception of Group 5, the women's affect as they shared their stories did not always match what they were saying. Information about arrests, incarcerations and verbal abuse are so commonplace they have become normalized; the women described these

incidents in matter-of-fact tones. In some scenarios, mothers sounded resigned to the situations with which they were dealing. The relentless intrusion of oppressive and violent forces, whether in the form of police tactics with their sons, or physical and emotional abuse from their husbands seemed to have the net effect of causing numbness in the ways they relayed the information.

While a sense of emotional fatigue permeated the various conversations, there was never a sense of total helplessness. The respondents spoke of a need to keep moving forward because "that's what we do as Black women." While strength and resiliency were apparent amongst the women, the theme of being tired appeared to be a very important one, which helped to frame all other themes.

Theme II: African American Mothers of Sons are Proud, Afraid and Worried; They Feel Abandoned and Guilty

Carrying the emotions of fear, worry and guilt appeared to contribute to the exhaustion that the mothers describe. The sources of these emotions are varied; some are directly related to their relationships with their sons; some pertain to other family members. Others include systems, such as schools and law enforcement, with which their sons must interface. These feelings are not separate from each other; they are overlapping, constant, and draining.

Alongside the more painful feelings is a sense of pride that mothers have in their sons. They are pleased with both their actual accomplishments and efforts to succeed. In

some instances they are proud of their sons' political consciousness; at other times it is their sense of humor or their sensitivity.

As is the nature of emotions, they are "felt" as opposed to "thought". As part of the research, the invitation to name them proved more challenging for some than others. For some respondents, many of whom are highly educated and accomplished, there is the added burden of "maintaining an image." As Evelyn suggests there is a trade-off in being professional and exposing one's personal hurts and pains:

> I have two Masters, one from an Ivy League school. On the surface, I work it out; I appear just fine and it's sickening. He refers to me as a bitch on an on-going basis; every day. He berates me so hardcore, and you know, he said, he says things to me like, "You come from trash. You are trash; I took- I got you from the gutter." From my demeanor, no one would know this is happening to me.

Accordingly, there was a clear distinction in the ways in which middle and upper income women shared their feelings, when contrasted with respondents from lower socioeconomic levels. In general, the former cohort presented in calm, measured tones. They were self-reflective and analytical as they spoke. Conversely, the latter group was quite animated and boisterous during their respective narratives. There was a physicality that accompanied their stories—handclapping, "high-fiving" and foot stomping-- that was not as evident in the other groups. Such animated and highly stylized forms of communication are often associated with African-American speech patterns, especially storytelling.

The marked distinction between the two socioeconomic cohorts suggests, however, that there is another "story" at play. The socialization process that accompanies advanced education, professional employment and higher incomes may not sanction such expressiveness, thus the seeming numbness in light of self-reported horrific situations. With the literature's critique about Black women's silence around painful issues, the seeming dissonance between affect and the issue being described may be indicative of a loss for these women. It may also represent another type of abandonment—where they do not have access to less restrained forms of communication, because of external (and internal) expectations that are placed on them.

Pride

As previously mentioned, mothers did not use the term *love* a lot during the interviews; it could be sensed in the tones of their voices and the looks on their faces as they spoke of their sons. However, the word "proud" is often a descriptor when they are speaking about how they feel toward their sons. Pride (and love) is distinguished from the other emotion-states because the feelings are solely about their sons:

[Anita]: I'm proud of him. Unfortunately, he had to go through his rite of passage and the college and all the stuff in prison.

[Sonia]: What I say to my boys on a regular basis is I am so proud of the men that you have become.

[Kathy]: So my son will be 17 in March and you know I'll be humble about anything that I've accomplished but I can't be about him. He's extraordinary. And I know

that I've done something extraordinary right to get that child. *{Crying}* Actually extraordinary. He's an extraordinary son. He's an extraordinary big brother. He's an extraordinary student. He's an extraordinary athlete. He's just extraordinary.

[Valerie]: My oldest son is my success story. He is an entrepreneur. He is an inventor. He has a product that is getting ready to come out in a big way. He has major endorsements and I'm really proud of him.

The more painful emotions are about systems and situations that the mothers perceive as causing threats to their boys' well-being.

Fear

Fear is a prevalent emotion-state for the mothers involved in this study. The women report being constantly afraid for their sons' safety and well-being. They are afraid of where their sons go when they leave the house, and they are afraid of with whom their boys associate. They are extremely fearful of police and other forms of law enforcement and share numerous stories of their sons' encounters with cops. The women describe becoming fearful for their sons at a very young age; several mention as early as when they learned they were having a boy, or at the child's birth.

[Janyce]: I worried about having a boy during my whole first pregnancy. You hear so many negative things about Black male children from society, from reading, from the movies. I was scared about the police and drugs. I worried about gangs. I had the same thoughts when I gave birth to my second son, and my third.

[Maizie]: From birth, I really feared, like you know, him being a Black man. You know like, is he going to go out and come back? But you know, I'm getting better. I'm getting better.

[Pat]: I have an uncle who did twelve years in jail. My father's side of the family, all the men, my father, my uncles are all drug addicts. There's no successful males on my side of the family. Kind of the same thing on my husband's side of the family. They became you know recovery *(sic)* addicts and they turned around, but I was there for the whole process of it. So I've seen you know the ups and downs and stuff like that. And I felt that it was going to be passed down to him, through the genes….. So when I had a boy, I was like, "Oh my God, what am I gonna do here with him?" So, that was my first fear.

Moving beyond their own sons, many women in the study referenced the societal forces that keep them in fear for their sons. One group engaged in a conversation about the perceived threats to society posed by educated Black men:

[Wendy]: I am very fearful, knowing that the most feared person in America is an educated Black man because America knows what they have stolen from our ancestors and they know that without all this stealing, we couldn't even as a country be the great people that we are. They stole from us. So you educate your males, he's the most wanted man in this country. As we see with our president, okay? And that's my fear. It's a reality that we live with as mothers.

[Interviewer]: So I guess my question to you is, if an educated Black man is the most feared person in America, why would you want your son educated?

[Wendy]: Why? Because an ignorant man is worse. An ignorant man, an ignorant Black man is worse. The ignorant man can be dangerous. Having no knowledge of anything about himself is dangerous too, because it makes him a danger to himself.

Another respondent, after some thought incorporated the concepts of threat and danger into a broader definition of manhood. She posited:

> A strong Black man is someone who takes his place in the world; who has a voice; who knows how to treat women; who has a powerful point of view and who is respected by other men. He has such a powerful sense of self that it makes him dangerous wherever he is.

This exchange was juxtaposed with a preceding dialogue about adult sons who never attended, or who dropped out of college. The participants momentarily reflected on a possible connection between their fears about the potential risks to their sons being viewed as threats, and mothers not pushing them to pursue college studies. Related to this is what a few mothers in the study described as the fear of "enabling their sons to the point of disabling them":

> [Brenda]: My fear is enabling my child. Cause there's some things that he'll want to do and I really want it for him, you know?
>
> [Valerie]: And I guess as a mother that is the challenge for me; that I felt like I protected him so much that I didn't help him. I thought I was protecting him from his fears and from his failures; of what he thinks are his failures. I think I disabled him instead of enabling him, you know in his education and I mean, it's been rough for him.

Fear also appeared to be the one emotion, of which the mothers felt they had no control. As the respondents spoke of other feeling-states, there was always a sense of being able to do something about it, even if they were not sure exactly what. Fear, on the other hand, was often accompanied by a certain amount of resignation. The close association of this emotion with police incidents and other forms of law enforcement may be a factor. Unlike other situations with their boys, mothers rarely reported any direct interactions with police officers, although their sons had frequent encounters through "stop and frisk" tactics,

driving stops, and being picked up during neighborhood sweeps.[13] Instead, mothers arm their sons with an exhaustive list of "protect yourself" behaviors that sound like they are from a manual or handbook. Almost every mother in the study added to or concurred with the following participant-generated list:

> "I told him do not to fight with the police, close your mouth!"
>
> "ID. I always tell my son, make sure you have ID!"
>
> "If the cops ever come to your house, do not step out of the house, because then they can arrest you!"
>
> "Don't poke out your chest!"
>
> "Don't have the attitude!"
>
> "Make sure your empty hands are visible!"
>
> "Show your hands!"
>
> "Be real humble!"
>
> "Come straight home after school!"
>
> "Don't stop in any stores!"
>
> "When you're stopped, try to make sure you are around a lot of people. You may need witnesses!"
>
> "You are going to be stopped and frisked. Don't fight back; just let them search you!"

[13] "Sweeps" refer to NYPD maneuvers that have housing and precinct police officers beefing up patrols and arrests on specific days. While not limited to these specific locations or days of the week, they usually occur in public housing projects on Fridays and Saturdays.

"Don't go outside on sweep days!"

"It's the end of the month. Don't stand on any corners!"

"Answer their questions. We can deal with your feelings afterwards!"

The mothers hope that with the list, their sons will remain safe…and then they pray.

Worry

Another recurring emotion is worry. In listening to the mothers' explanations, fear is often focused on something tangible or measurable, while worry may not be connected to anything specific. Worry is as much associated with the mothers' behaviors and choices, as it is with their sons:

- Did I choose the right school for him?
- Am I making a mistake sending him to a predominately White school?
- Will he come home tonight?
- Will he be accused of raping a White girl?
- Will he end up looking like his father, whom I hate?
- Am I mothering him too much? Is that why he is pulling away from me?
- Will my father and uncles' DNA make him a drug addict?
- Am I making him too feminine?

- Will he be gay?
- Will he ever find himself?

These are just a sampling of the kinds of issues about which the mothers worry. Like fear, its insidiousness is that worry is ever-present for many of these women. Worry, moreso than the other emotion-states, appears to have an impact on the mothers' relationships with their sons. Apparently, the sons do not hold the same concerns as their mothers, and often ignore their advice or trivialize their worries. The mothers describe becoming frustrated and ultimately resigned to the idea that their sons will have to "learn things the hard way":

[Maizie]: I only have one son. One child. He's my first, my middle and my last. And he will be 25 on Thursday. And he's trying to find himself.

[Brenda]: He's trying to find himself because he's trying to be a man. You know, but how do you be a man when you got all these issues you know? You can't find a job. You need to be in school, but you don't want to be in school. Nothing works out, you know. I understand that, but you still gotta make your way through.

Valerie]: My 30 year old is my biggest challenge *{laughs}*. You know, because it's interesting, when he was coming up everybody used to call him the good boy, you know because I had my kids in church a lot and he decided to depart from being a good boy and you know, become a street kid. So he's in the process of I guess, trying to find himself again.

[Susan]: And he's just like caught between a rock and a hard place. And you try to give him a direction to go you know, but it's never the right direction because young people have all the answers.

Although the worrying does not cease, as their sons get older, the mothers pull back a little…and they pray.

Abandoned

When I asked the women in Group 5 to fill in the blank for the statement-"As the mother of a son, I feel…," without a moment's hesitation, several women yelled out "Abandoned!" Although women in the previous four interview groups had not specifically named this emotion, their personal accounts provided examples of husbands, friends and other supports not being there when mothers needed them. Like the women in Group 5, they too, were feeling abandoned:

[Mother-Group 1]: And I'm having a hard time because my father has been sober for so long and he's been absent in my life for so long, now he wants to be a part of my children? But I have a problem with him because he wasn't there for me. I am a little hesitant to have my kids around him a lot because I don't want him to relapse or whatever, and have to explain that to them like my mother and grandmother explained to me why my uncles' not around; why my father's not around. It hurts.

[Mother-Group 2]: I've raised him as a single parent from birth. Difficult decision, not by choice but by circumstance.

[Mother-Group 3]: I can be sick, I can be tired, I can be in the midst of my own stuff and if you need I am there and I will push my stuff aside and be present for you, and I don't feel it's reciprocated.

[Mother-Group 2]: You would think that I had something that was contagious. Nobody wanted to be near me. When my son got sentenced, all by bosom buddies disappeared. It really let me see who my real friends were.

[Mother-Group 4]: Like I had to say to my son now, cause he's 12, I want to talk about feeling like I am in a house and someone else is not even there with me! And I am still going through pain and all the sacrifice of being a single parent, then getting married and putting hope into this man who would be there for you or whatever. He leaves too, and you're angry at me???

[Mother-Group 4]: And um, and I finally broke down and I called his father and you know, I was just like, you really need to help me. And he was so angry with me for leaving, so he kind of went his way. He didn't really step up. To this day he hasn't.

Although the focus of the study was on mothers emotions pertaining to their sons, there was a tremendous amount of discussion about husbands and partners. Many of the women in the study are or have been married at least once. The sense of abandonment is directly related to these relationships, regardless of whether or not the respondent is still living with her husband. According to the mothers, abandonment comes in many forms: separation and divorce; emotional abandonment; incarceration; drug and alcohol use; death; verbal abuse, and physical abuse. The net result of this abandonment is that the women feel left to navigate their sons to and through manhood, which they overwhelmingly agree they cannot do -- because they are not men:

[Karol]: And this is when I was telling y'all okay! I'm a single parent. I didn't ask to be a single parent. He decided to go to jail five years ago to leave me with those damn boys!

[Sara]: I'm looking at that mother in me, that woman who has raised two fabulous sons. I see how much energy I put out for the men in my life on whom I depend, and who don't necessarily provide for me.

[Kelly]: Last year my husband and I separated for a while and in between that time I believe that he was supposed to be getting himself together to be a better model for our boys. But he's more of a man-child type of thing so when he came back, his focus still wasn't on the things that I wanted it to be on.

Some of the women in the study also feel abandoned by other African-American women. While there are tinges of anger and resentment when discussing husbands taking leave, there is an aura of sadness, longing and loss when they refer to other Black women being the source of this sentiment:

> [Stephanie]: This is what we need not to do. This is what Black women do. This is why I don't have any friends. When I'm going through half of the struggles, it's alone cause we- most of the time start judging each other and ripping each other up. We close off. We shut down. We guard because the other people in the outside world do that to us.

The sense of being abandoned by other Black women manifests in their tone of voices when talking about the need for connection. It shows up in the ways some women ask for each other's phone numbers and email addresses. It happens at the end of every session, when several women ask if we can gather again. In some instances, the respondents believe their mothers are the Black women who abandoned them. They speak of their mothers' preferential treatment of their brothers or cutting them off emotionally because they were "daddy's girls." Two women viewed their mothers as dropping their roles as mentors and guides for them; instead they are "doing with my son, the same thing they did with my brothers". Once again, they feel pushed aside, and it complicates their relationships with their sons:

> [Rosalind]: My son can get away with a lot of things with my mother, disrespect, manipulation, anything. Because my mother has this soft thing when it comes to boys. You understand? This goes back from when I was a child. Okay? When it came to my one brother. My brother was the favorite, you understand? So now, here

her daughter comes and I have that one boy, so for her it's like raising that one boy again, so he runs circles around her.

[Joy]: That one-on-one love, we didn't get that. You understand what I'm saying? Your place was to come home, do your homework, do what you got to do. It wasn't that love, love. *Now my brother got that {Joy's emphasis}*

[Jackie]: My mother was so angry with my father and how I look so much like him, she didn't give me my own. You know let me do something wrong. "Look, you look like him, you." Every day hearing that, every day, you know? {*Jackie sucks her teeth and looks down*}I didn't have like my own person. I became invisible. Check that word out, invisible. Do y'all know what that mean? Growing up and acting yourself, making yourself, never-mind nobody else. Making yourself invisible.

[Rosalind]: I was daddy's little girl. I was daddy's little girl, but to a certain extent; because if mommy found out that daddy's doing too much for Rosalind, there was an argument, you understand? So, it was one of those. *{whispering}* "Come here, daddy. Come here daddy." You understand? But when mommy came around it was a different story.

Guilty

The fourth prevalent emotion is guilt. Similar to abandonment, guilt is associated with the men in their lives. The mothers share a great deal of guilt, shame and self-blame for the husbands they chose for themselves and by extension the fathers they chose for their sons:

[Valerie]: I live with the guilt of marrying my first husband. I also feel like I made a huge mistake marrying my second husband. Seems like a really good guy. Loved my sons. It didn't work. He couldn't give them what he didn't have. He couldn't be the kind of father that my sons needed, so now my sons well, two of them anyway, the two younger ones resent my husband.

[Anita]: That's- it just comes out of guilt cause I was the same way. I was raised with both parents and it's like I feel bad cause of the father I gave my children.

Women who are in second marriages lament that they made the same mistake twice. One respondent could not figure out what *she* is doing wrong, as the two partners she has had within a 30-year span have both accused her of being too mothering. She doesn't know what that means, and they could not tell her, but she is certain that the problem lies within her.

> [Ann]: I've had two men tell me that part of the reason why our relationships did not work is because I treat them like children. I treat them like a child, or I mother them too much. And although they couldn't give me concrete examples of what- of what it was that I was doing, the fact that it came from two different sources, from my son's father and from my ex-husband, at two very different stages of my life means that somewhere in between those 30 years, it's- I haven't- I haven't been able to shift you know my approach from the mothering to the spouse, you know. Somewhere in between there I'm not learning some lesson that I think perhaps I'm supposed to learn.

Two respondents also assume responsibility *and* guilt for their sons' incarcerations. Along with their particular form of guilt is a sense of embarrassment and feeling ostracized or different. The following exchange occurred during Group 2, with one mother feeling *she* had done something wrong resulting in her son's criminal activities. She compared herself to the other group participants, perceiving that they had each done something better than she had. Another participant attempted to assuage her guilt by contextualizing the group members' collective experiences within a framework of systemic oppression:

> [Anita]: I mean you are citizens. You are all decent women, okay? I mean I gave birth to a thug! You know what I'm saying? I mean I'm alright with it, though; I'm just sharing with you where my guilt and anger is coming from.

> [Sara]: Anita, you just said something. I just so feel it in my spirit; feel the need to respond. You didn't give birth to a thug. You gave birth to a young man who along the way made some choices. When I was sitting in one of those classes I took for this MSW the professor said, "One of the things that racism does is it takes away someone's right to make an honest mistake." Okay? So these systems that our families wind up in, took away the right. Teenagers do shit, you know, but our sons can't! They can't! They better not, or else they wind up with labels like thugs, right? My son was not allowed to wear a hoodie walking down the streets in Brooklyn even though he was a straight A student from a top prep school, because I knew that if the cop stops somebody it was gonna be him and he was gonna be the thug. We don't give birth to thugs. We give birth to children. Sometimes they make mistakes, just like White children make mistakes. We just can't buy them out of them.

While they speak of not having done enough for their children, other mothers describe feeling guilty because they do too much. One woman expressed concern that her son has not grown up "poor," and now takes things for granted. Another mother describes giving her son everything—a stable two-parent home, a private school education, and a home away from the city. Yet, she feels guilty that she totally missed the cues that he was in a gang:

> [Susan]: My son now, he did join a gang. He was in the gang called The Bloods. And how in all of my mothering and all that we taught him, I managed to let this happen, right there under our eyes? I couldn't believe it. My mother was alive at the time and she says "Susan, I'm telling you now. You better go in that room and you better check things" because I bought his clothes and at the time when they said red, you know you have to check people wearing too much red. And I didn't realize it. I looked around and I did see a lot of red t-shirts and things like that, but I didn't pay any attention.

The Emotional Outlier: Anger

The study respondents did not frequently mention anger. It is not included as part of this emerging theme, but it warrants mentioning because of the passion with which the mothers discussed it. It is also an important finding because Black women are frequently depicted as being angry and hostile, yet it was rarely recounted in any of the women's stories about their sons' or their own experiences. The three times that this emotion-state was expressed was in relation to experiences the mothers had with school systems:

[Sonia]: Henry and another little boy were throwing paper in the trashcan, basket ball, you know, type of and the paper was on the floor. The teacher had the boys get on the floor and crawl to the trashcan and pick up the paper, and I was incensed. Both Black, in the class. And I was incensed. I was-I was so angry. I was incensed. And so, his dad and I you know went to the school and we eventually worked it out. They needed some sensitivity training. So I made sure they got a little bit that day.

[Interviewer]: What did that look like? The sensitivity training?

Oh, my goodness! Oh, my goodness! Well, first it was in the office, yellin' and hollerin' and screamin' {*group laughter*} I said, I will sue you! I will call the news for help! I will do a Jerry Springer on y'all! {*group laughter*} I will put you on TV! My former spouse was a little calmer than I was. And he's like, "Let's talk about this." *{laughter}* So they apologized, both in writing and verbally, cause that was my stipulation that they apologize to my child in front of the class where it happened! And also we got a written apology, because I was talking you know, discrimination lawsuit. I was talking the whole nine yards!

Brenda, relatively soft-spoken, raises her voice as she offers another example:

> My son used to come home and say to me "The teacher won't call on me. I raise my hand and she won't notice me or anything." And that used to hurt him. Because from that early on age being what, six, he recognized that he was being treated different. He was there from first to second. And both years, the teacher just did not know how to deal with him. Now the first grade he did have the other little boy with him in class and the parents kept noting their frustration about what was going on. We did bring it up to the school board, but not much was really done. It was a very small school. They couldn't understand so to speak, why we felt that you know, there was an issue. So the other family, for second grade, they took their son out. We stayed through second grade, then after that I took him out.

Stephanie speaks about the school required evaluation and the resulting diagnosis of her son.

> My son is very gifted and talented *and* annoying *{group laughter}*. And he was diagnosed with ADHD. Then they diagnosed him with a disorder. I am confused about what they are doing. Now he's on medication. I battle with him not thinking he is what that label says he is. I fight with the school all of the time.

THEME III: PRAYER, OTHER BLACK WOMEN….AND A GOOD MANICURE: INGREDIENTS FOR SELF CARE AMONG AFRICAN-AMERICAN MOTHERS OF SONS

The women in the study readily acknowledge that although they are very tired, they are not very good at taking care of themselves. Intellectually they understand the need for balance in their lives, but do not often prioritize making this happen. One mother's

comment about achieving success at work as her form of self-care resonated with several other mothers in her cohort. However, she also stated that she thinks this is problematic:

> [Evelyn]: Cause all that is in here and no one's dealing with it and I'm not dealing with it, and I'm so constantly disappointed and angry at myself for thinking like, "you can make all these other logical and gratifying decisions at work, like why is it your personal life can't be so cut and dry"?

The only self-care tactics that most of the women agree are paramount are prayer and other forms of spiritual practice. Repeatedly, the mothers indicated that they could not conceive of "making it through" without prayer and a relationship with God being part of their daily lives. Similarly, they recognize relationships with other Black women as being an important aspect of self-care, albeit one that is not as readily available to them, as is commonly perceived. The mothers in this study acknowledge that they get regular manicures and hair care, but they quickly dismiss them as being less critical to their sense of well-being. Even though often said jokingly, they do periodically wish for spa days, or moments when they can just let go of responsibility and act in more self-indulgent manners.

Prayer

Prayer and worship are the two practices most of the women actually do incorporate on a regular basis. Almost all of the women in all five groups state that they cannot imagine functioning without some form of spirituality in their lives. Samples of the statements made

by the respondents are included in the table found in Appendix B. It was not uncommon for the women to share narratives about attending church; instilling knowledge of God in their sons; even consciously giving their sons biblical or Christian names (the women who spoke of religion all identified as Christian). For some mothers, their sons embrace these practices and are either growing up “in the church” or returning to some form of religious practice. Other mothers describe hoping that their sons will find God at some point in their lives.

Although mothers’ fears for their sons leave them feeling somewhat helpless, they express great confidence in God’s ability to keep their young men safe. The two mothers with sons in prison referenced God more often than any other women in the study. They were not in the same group, but both made meaning of their sons’ sentences by attributing them to God’s plan. Another mother spoke of spending many late nights worrying and walking the floor, as she waited for her adult son to return home. She describes herself as a “praying mother”

[Anita]: But I got to thank God because if it wasn’t this way, my son would have been dead. I would have never got a high school diploma out of him. He got that in jail. I’m paying for college courses in jail.

[Janyce]: For me, um, mine has shifted because I realize that I can’t even… *{crying}* I’m not always gonna be there for him. Like I can’t walk with him all the way. Like I have to let him go and just pray that he’s gonna be okay. You know, um, like they say everybody has their own God, you know. And I just hope and pray that he has his God and he’s gonna walk with him.

[Sophia]: You know, it seems as though we’re all praying moms and it’s a good thing. It’s a very good thing. And I say my knees are bleeding from praying so hard that it’s shifted through the years. I still worry about the car.

Still worry about particularly if he's in the driver's seat because he's had some situations where his choices of whether he should drive and drink, have not been the best choice that he's made. I talked with other moms, who had boys older than mine and they said, "You know, you need to go to bed! Don't stay up waiting for him." So I would get in pajamas or get in my night clothes and I would stay on the couch until I would hear him come home. But as my faith got deeper, as I began to rely more on God, and pray--I go to bed. I put my pajamas on and I get right in the bed, but I don't really sleep hard. I hear that, you know, that lock turn and every time that I do, I feel a little more sense of comfort, and I say, "Thank you Lord."

[Rosalind]: Prayer changes things. Very powerful. Without prayer, I think I would be in the looney bin; in the psych ward. I'm not gonna lie!

<u>Connections with Other Black Women</u>

As much as the women in the study feel a close connection with God, they feel a loss of connection with other Black women. The mothers do speak of supportive relationships with mothers, mothers-in-law, sisters and other female kin. However, they do not have forums where they gather with women facing similar situations. The mothers want affirming spaces where they can vent, share thoughts and feelings, and get advice on different strategies they can use with their sons and others. This seemed an especially strong need for the younger mothers (in their 20s and 30s) who participated in the sessions. The two women, who were in different groups, spoke of not having close friends (one, by choice), and wanting to build relationships with older women, beyond their own mothers:

[Pat]: I'd like friends who have children a little bit older telling you some of their experiences that help. Then you could kind of recognize signs, you know?

[Stephanie]: Absolutely! Yeah, because mothers need it. Especially young mothers 'cause they- I mean how much really changes in terms of, you know, like some of the things that we're gonna have to go through; if we didn't have some of the ones that went before us to help, you know?

In addition to women asking for follow-up sessions to these groups, and exchanging emails and phone numbers with others in their participant cohort, the manner in which they introduced themselves during the meetings was informative. At each session, when the mothers were asked to introduce themselves, individuals quickly moved into lengthy, in-depth narratives about themselves and their sons. On more than one occasion, I needed to politely interrupt a person, to insure others had the opportunity to speak, as well. They moved to an intimate level of sharing so rapidly, that I was concerned for their vulnerability within a room filled with strangers. As the conversations proceeded, this level of sharing seemed in contrast to the concerns about maintaining a professional image. The desire to share their stories seemed to outweigh this concern.

Another indicator of the need to communicate with other Black mothers of sons came in the form of requests to participate in the study. Within two weeks of sending out the notices, 35 women responded. Calls continued to come in both during the study and after the formal interviews were completed. As I spoke with the women who eventually participated, as well as those who did not, they shared their eagerness to talk about their sons *and* their excitement about speaking with the other women. It was not uncommon for me to hear that they were grateful to finally have an opportunity to talk with other Black women about their journeys raising sons:

[Anita]: That's why, when Robyn was telling me about this research I said, "Thank you, Jesus! I finally get to say what I want to say." *{laughter}* Cause it's like I'm so busy holding up every-body else up.

[Jackie]: Now we need… Can I say this? We need to make sure we stay in touch with one another after this. because I'm telling you. I'm telling you, we got to do some positive thinking!

[Rosalind]: Without sister support you will go crazy. Like me, I don't deal with my family, so the outside, whoever I befriend from the outside becomes my family. I need more sisters!

[Shani]: Can't wait till we come back together! Are we coming back together?

<u>Manicures and Other Self-Care Strategies</u>

Collectively, the women in the research study had fun senses of humor. In spite of the painful emotions that were discussed, there was frequent laughter, possibly a coping mechanism, that peppered the dialogues. In several of the sessions, while laughing, women described getting manicures and pedicures as primary forms of self-care. When asked what recommendations they would give to social workers working with Black mothers of sons, one group unanimously agreed that they should offer the mothers regular spa days!

[Kathy]: So first thing I did was get rid of my husband *{group laughter}* and that was a long, just awful process, costly, but you know, sanity is priceless *{group laughter}*. You got it! It really is. And then earlier this year in February I started exercising. I probably lost about 22 pounds.

[Arlene]: I'ma tell you what I do *{laughter}*. I take me a hot bubble bath with a glass of wine. I go shopping. I

shop. I go get my nails done, my hair done. Guys, you just gotta do you.

[Jackie]: Bring us some vouchers so we can go get a spa. *{group laughter}.* So that we can be able to release and relax, enjoy. Yes. Release, relax.

In the same breath that they claimed these activities, they laughed and then disclaimed them as meaningless, and not having real value on the road to self-care:

[Joy]: I just had a birthday and I hadn't been out to the spa and stuff in a long time, and that's what I do. It relaxes me, you know, revives! You know, I did like she said; take a little shopping therapy, but I'm going to keep it real with you. Um, I'm tired of doing that. I'm tired of doing that now. I feel like in my life that I have not done anything. You know like this, this may say-sound bugged out, but I'm 41years old. I've never had a one-night stand! Not that that's good to do, but I've never *{laughter}* had little things that I can sit back and say, "Damn, I was something else!" *{laughter}*

[Jackie]: Yeah, like I wanna just put my head down, like why I gotta be responsible?

The women's. ideas of self-care seemed more connectional in nature—being with other Black women, especially their mothers; and communing with God:

[Susan]: Well, family, friends, help you get through the moments. God's brought me thus far in life. So I stay in the present and I enjoy singing with my church choir, you know.

[Robin]: Well I mainly lean towards my faith in God.

[Maizie]: Praise Him all the time, everyday. Everyday. Just bring my son here and bring him back.

[Karol]: I have to take it to God. That's why I started writing it down.

[Pat]: Yeah, my mom. It's me and my mom and I would say my grandmother I get comfort with them and I can also say that now, me and my mother-in-law is getting closer. She's explaining to me the dynamics of the family so I can understand my husband's side.

[Sylvia]: I have my mother, and my mother-in-law. I had the best mother-in-law a daughter could have, you know cause whenever his father would do his thing, she would always side with me.

[Wendy]: But I found my sisters, like I said, women at the job. They are my support system.

THEME IV: HOLDING THE ENVIRONMENT: MINDFULNESS, STRATEGIC USE OF SILENCE, AND CO-CREATION ARE HELPFUL WHEN WORKING WITH AFRICAN-AMERICAN MOTHERS OF SONS

The final finding in this research inquiry examines the interplay between the mothers and me, especially pertaining to how it seemed to inform the group process. Reaching this finding involved paying close attention to my own internal thoughts and feelings, while simultaneously observing participant behaviors during the sessions. I concede that other variables, unbeknownst to me, may also have been at play. Therefore, these observations, while insightful, remain somewhat speculative. The three major subtexts to this theme are mindfulness; strategic use of silence; and co-creation of the setting.

Mindfulness

How could I remain neutral and removed from the process, when as the African-American mother of a son, so much of what was being shared was my story as well? Should I periodically interject my own reactions and experiences, or would that be in violation of ethical social research? Would not doing so encroach upon some of the unspoken rules of communication styles among some Black women—call and response, or the storytelling

methodology selected for this study? The months and years spent planning this project did not prepare me for these and other dilemmas that I carried in my head.

The double consciousness of being Black and American was multiplied for me: I am Black, American, a woman, the mother of a son, and a researcher. In my mind, to build trust with the participants, I needed to find a way to consciously hold and use all of these identities. I needed to effectively merge conducting good, objective research with being present to the group experience. As I listened to the women's narratives, I recognized that a reason that their accounts so strongly resonated for me, was because my story was their story. They, too, were wearing all of those hats and identities; in many cases more than me. Were they also holding conversations in their heads, unable or unwilling to name the emotions they were feeling? Were we all trying to "do it the right way"? If I were a participant, what questions would enable me to disclose the vulnerable parts of my persona?

Once I tuned into the possibility of our common experience, it took me a little while to push through my own inhibitions, and to reframe my interview questions. In an early session, I tried shifting from the "how do you feel when…." type questions to "as the mother of a son, I feel…..fill in the blank" type statements. It was through this type of questioning, that mothers began to name the emotions addressed in Themes I and II. They also grappled with how these named emotions were shaping their relationships and their sense of themselves. For some it sounded as though this was the first time that they began to make such connections:

[Sara]: And another thing I'm leaving here with most strongly is this issue of guilt as mothers; that whole strong Black woman scenario that I think we all labor under, Talk about the message to the boys and the boys' messages to us: you know pull it all

> together! Keep it together! You know, the whole scenario—
> I think there's something in there for us about being
> inder and more balanced in our acceptance of ourselves and
> the choices we've made. You know, that there's a way in
> which we're holding ourselves accountable for a standard
> that is just not real. I want permission to have some insight
> into the strong Black woman and to this struggle, so then
> rather than add to it, help me go further in the process of that
> whatever we've done, you know it's been good enough. It
> hasn't been perfect, but it's been good enough.

The reward was hearing the emotion-states that are not part of my lived experience. I understood the mothers when they spoke of emotional weariness, but I was very surprised at their sense of abandonment. Being mindful, tuning in and using my own experiences, as a barometer to inform my questions did not compromise good social research, as I had feared; it allowed for discovery –the cornerstone of qualitative inquiry.

Strategic Use of Silence

Deciding if, when and how to speak, was another dilemma for me in my role as researcher. A recurring theme for the women in this study was the need to vent; the need to be heard, as Stephanie suggests what she thought a good social worker could do with Black mothers of sons:

> I think, I want permission; I want space to release
> the guilt, the anger, the pain and just to hear that
> it is what it is. Don't judge us, because it creates
> anxiety. Tell me "You did what you could do;
> now what do you want to do? What support do
> you need?" And let's just take it from there like
> it's a new journey.

Taking my cues from the respondents, I erred on the side of limiting my own commentaries, and keeping probing questions to a minimum. Holding a firm belief in the

agency of African-American women, I consciously chose to be silent, when the mothers were crying or sharing painful memories. I delayed my own responses to questions the women raised, cautiously confident that the women would support each other through whatever situation emerged.

I did attempt to validate what the mothers were sharing through non verbal cues, such as eye contact, head nods and facial expressions that corresponded with what they were sharing. In fact, the mothers spoke readily, and at length. Their conversations flowed easily. On several occasions, I did interrupt a dominant speaker, to allow other voices to be heard, but more often I remained quiet during the respective narratives and exchanges. In doing so, I watched how the respondents self-guided the conversations: they questioned each other, challenged comments with which they did not agree, and comforted those who cried or expressed some form of pain. At first I assumed that this was due to the number of social workers and other human service providers who were in attendance. However, the same pattern emerged in Group 5, which consisted of a totally different demographic.

Holding the environment, partially through the use of silence, enabled the women to chart the direction of the dialogue. They determined how deeply they moved into the conversations, and they determined the style of expression that suited them. I believe it enabled them to also “test the water” regarding what being with other Black mothers of sons would look and feel like in actuality. During the process, I was not at all sure that the dialogues were offering any substantive information; I imagine this is every novice researcher’s fear. However, the follow up probes, which came from the women themselves, generated much rich and helpful data.

Co-Creation of Environment

What initially appeared as a happenstance by-product of this study became a key discovery pertaining to the importance of collective work for the women who were involved. I was very deliberate in identifying meeting space that I believed would help the mothers feel as comfortable as possible. The meals that were provided were all homemade, and included meat and vegetarian options. Dinnerware, while disposable, was of very high quality. I wanted mothers to feel nurtured and cared for as they shared their stories, as my intuition was that many would enter the session carrying the strong Black woman persona. I wanted the environment to offer a brief respite from that identifier. I wanted them to feel served, rather than feeling the need to serve.

Instead, the mothers arrived and quickly made themselves comfortable. Without being asked, they removed their shoes at the front doors, and immediately began looking for something to do. My interpretation of the spontaneous shoe removals was two-fold. In many homes, this practice is a form of respect, of recognizing the sacredness of the space. I also equated it with rolling up sleeves and getting to work. So often, the gathering of Black women, especially in kitchens, includes moving about in bare feet or "house shoes." This imagery came to life in each of the sessions, even the one held in the church!

They mothers set tables, made plates of food for each other, figured out where to place coats and helped those who arrived after them to do the same. When the sessions were over, some mothers fussed at me for getting ready to throw out the "good kind" of disposable plates. Volunteers rolled up their sleeves, retrieved the tossed dishes, and began washing them! They packed take home bags of leftover food and split them amongst

themselves. A few women in Group 5 lived in the same housing complex. They decided to take the leftover food to some families that they knew.

I wondered if this collective work was an aspect of being with other Black women that the participants had described as a need. I also wondered if it was a socialized role they felt they needed to play as strong Black women. Was it one of the contributing factors to the weariness, the "being all things to all people" to which many participants had alluded? The atmosphere during this process, consistent with an African way of being, was almost festive. It caused me to wonder, if in fact such collectivity is a form of self-care. Regardless of the session attended, the participants co-created the environment in which they shared with each other. The seeds may have been planted by the methodological design, but it was through the agency of the women in these groups that the space in which to hold these discussions was formed.

Summary

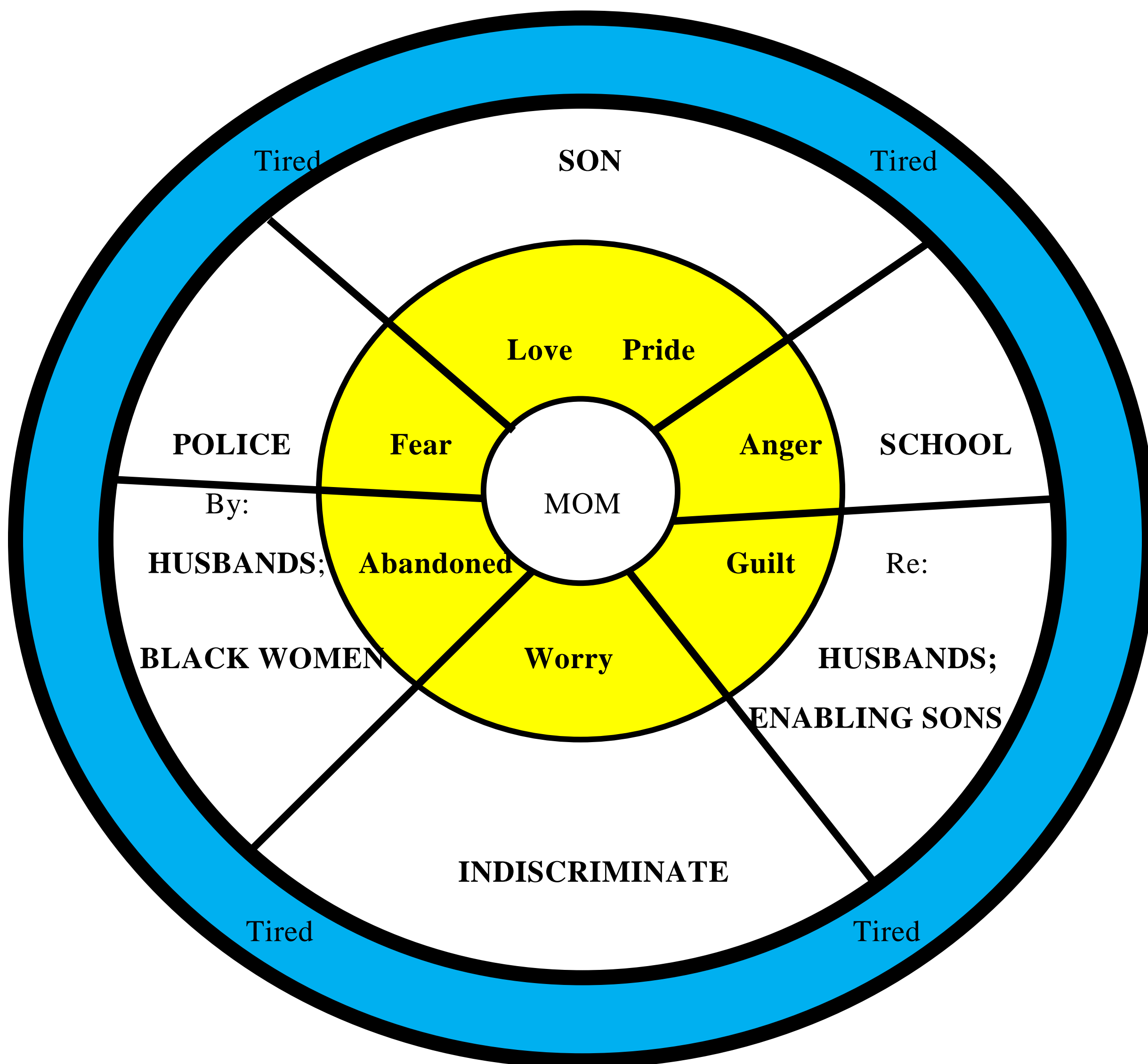
The findings in this study provide insight into the lived experiences of some African-American mothers in the greater New York City area. The women in this study are service providers and service recipients. They are from all socioeconomic levels and educational backgrounds. Their communication styles may differ, but their lived experiences and their concerns for their sons are remarkably similar.

The women love their sons deeply, and are proud of them. Yet the exhaustion, fear, worry and guilt that accompany this love and pride leave them feeling emotionally drained and tired. Furthermore, the women describe feeling abandoned as they try to move their sons to and through adulthood. They feel abandoned by husbands and partners and in some

cases by their own mothers and friends. Although prayer and personal relationships with God are their primary ways of caring for themselves, they long for opportunities to connect with other women who are having similar experiences.

Figure 1 offers a visual recapitulation of the emerging emotional themes found in this chapter. It shows Emerging Theme I (African American Mothers of Sons are Tired) and Emerging Theme II (African American Mothers of Sons are Proud, Afraid and Worried; They Feel Abandoned and Guilty). The section encircling "Mom" depicts the range of emotions that the women shared during the sessions. Moving outward, the next section highlights the experiences or people who the mothers identified as shaping these emotions. The outermost circle captures the way in which being tired is an outcome of the intersectionality of all these feelings and experiences.

Figure 1: Mothers' Emotions and Sources of Emotional Content



The popular image of strong Black women and mothers does not necessarily take into account their weariness. The image does not project their feelings of fear, worry and self-blame. The findings in this study bring these emotion-states to the fore, and underscore the mothers' needs to have these feelings heard and acknowledged. Social work as a profession is uniquely situated to do this; the study findings suggest that there are specific strategies that can help

support this process. Chapter Five examines what these combined findings potentially contribute to our understanding of these women, and discusses implications for social work practice and further research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This chapter discusses the findings of this study and their implications for social work practice and future research. It examines the ways in which words, behaviors and interactions joined to create meaning of the experience of being the African-American mother of a son. The chapter is organized into four sections. The first section restates the purpose of the study and the five research questions. Next is the discussion of the findings, within the contexts of the literature review and the theoretical frameworks. The third section highlights implications for social work practice, as well as future research. The final section focuses on the limitations of the research. Concluding comments end the chapter.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to learn more about the range of feelings that African-American mothers experience while raising sons under what they perceive to be the systemic oppression of racism within the metro New York area. The parenting practices of African-American mothers have been studied for decades, however little empirical attention has been given to the unique relationship that exists between Black mothers and their sons.

The interactions with sons are complex and multilayered (Bush, 2004; Golden, 1995; King & Mitchell, 1990). There is a need to protect them from the harsh realities of racism, while simultaneously enabling them to thrive within its confines. Knowing that their

abilities to protect them from police, gangs and other acts of violence are limited, mothers are consumed with fear (Martin, 2012; Millner, 2009; Reid, 2012; Reynolds, 1999), sometimes as early as at their sons' births (Schuster, Halfon, & Wood, 1998). There is a sense that their boys are under seige, and Black mothers are powerless to bring it to an end. In spite of this, Black mothers' self-definitions include recognizing motherhood as a site of power and high value (Polatnick, 1996; Thomas T. , 2000). There is an acknowledgment that mothering does not take place within the narrow sphere of the nuclear family, but is a shared communal experience with blood mothers, othermothers, other Black women and fathers (Hill R. B., 1999; Hill S. A., 2001).

Furthermore, African-American mothers must raise their sons while simultaneously contending with their own challenges: the multiple oppressions of racism, sexism and classism, to name a few. Although, Black mothers throughout the ages have managed to carry out these varied responsibilities with relative success, there is little research exploring what the emotional toll has been on them. Therefore, the emphasis in this inquiry was on how the emotional well-being of Black women influences their ability to guide their sons' growth in a society that is deeply oppressive toward Black males. The research explored five primary areas of interest:

1. What are the range and prevalence of emotions that African-American mothers feel while raising their sons from infancy to age 30?
2. What are the ways in which mothers and sons' experiences with racism shape this emotional content?
3. What are the ways in which African-American mothers' expression of emotions affect the mother-son relationship?

4. What are the ways in which African-American mothers take care of themselves during their son-rearing experiences?

5. In what ways does this tacit knowledge contribute to improved social work practice with African-American mothers of sons?

A retooled phenomenological approach was used for data collection in this inquiry. Phenomenology, a qualitiative research strategy, is the study of human experience from the perspectives of those who are living it. Wilson & Washington (2007) argued that a retooled phenomenological methodology could affirm the experiences of African-American women. To that end group interviews, dialogue, storytelling and participatory witnessing were used for this study in an effort to create a more culturally grounded design.

Nonfinite loss was used as a theoretical context within which to consider the emotional responses of the study participants. A second frame, Africana womanism, added an additional perspective through which to understand the respondents' narratives.

Conceptual Framework

The findings of this study offer a conceptual framework for understanding the experiences of African-American mothers of sons through a lens that seemingly has not been considered previously. Existing literature, albeit limited, accurately denotes the fear, worry and guilt that mothers feel for their sons as early as their birth. The literature also suggests the sources of these concerns; often law enforcement, educational systems, and gang involvement. Abandonment and loss is emphasized throughout historical journalism in the forms of lynchings; sons, daughters and husbands being sold away during the institution of slavery; husbands relocating during the Great Migration north;

and repeatedly, through the controversial murders of sons—Emmett Till, Sean Bell, Trayvon Martin, to name a few.

Missing from these accounts is the landscape of emotional exhaustion that begins to take shape when the range of feelings are woven together. This exhaustion is exacerbated by African-American mothers' efforts to live up to the unreasonable demands and expectations of the stereotypical Strong Black Woman syndrome (SBW). SBW views Black women as being equally engaged with and responsive, at a minimum, to family, career, community, and religious affiliations. It often depicts Black women as self-sacrificing, graciously, joyfully and without complaint placing the needs of all others before themselves. The women in this study intellectually understand SBW as being as much as a myth about Black women as are the Mammy, Jezebel and Sapphire archetypes (Harris-Perry, 2011; West, 2008). Yet, they collude with the SBW expectations and demands, and concede that they have no idea how to break away from them.

Figure 2, through the weight and direction of the arrows, provides a visual depiction of how SBW, the range of feelings and the limited sources for nurturing and self-care contribute to the emotional exhaustion that the women discussed and exhibited. The mothers' relationship with SBW is reciprocal. It presents a set of unrealistic demands and expectations which are somewhat unchallenged by the women. Power and control is relatively elusive for Black women in a society that affords these privileges to those who are White and those who are men. SBW, even by nature of its title connotes strength, power to make decisions and manage multiple priorities, and some control of outcomes within a specified sphere of influence. There is cultural pride that often

accompanies the notion of being a SBW, *and* there is silence and an internalization of the stress, grief and trauma that may also be part of owning this identity.

Fear and worry are the dominant emotions that the women expressed when directly speaking about their sons. They are highly associated with concerns about potential altercations with police and law enforcement, as well as with a host of other issues that may threaten the young men's safety and well-being. The mothers also express deep pride and love for their sons; the sense of urgency they feel regarding protecting them overshadows the dialogue about love and care and joy. Ironically, the conversation about protection *is* the conversation about love, but the sons hear their mothers' laments as unnecessary worry and concern.

On the other hand, abandonment is the feeling most expressed when mothers talk about their own needs as they raise their sons. The women feel abandoned by husbands and partners, who they feel by nature of their gender are better suited to teach sons how to become men. There is a seeming disconnect, here, as mothers also describe the guilt they feel having chosen the men who fathered their sons. Regardless of marital status, many women in the study are not happy with the fathers' characteristics, yet they want them to guide their sons to adulthood. The women do not seem to recognize that they are actively in the process of raising their sons, with or without the emotional support of their husbands or partners. When they do recognize it, they do not seem to feel that what they are doing is "good enough."

Abandonment is also the sentiment expressed regarding the relationship with other African-American women, including the women's own mothers. This is an

especially troubling finding, given the ways African-American women have always relied on female networks as primary sources of emotional, physical and material support. The importance of these networks was underscored in many ways during the group interviews. When some women heard other women describe not “being” or “doing” good enough they challenged them for putting themselves down. Yet the sentiment resonated for them; they heard reflections of themselves in the stories, and began to question the ways in which they act or think similarly. If the opportunity to do this through connections with other Black women is disappearing, it does not bode well for the sustained mental, emotional or physical well-being for Black women, in general. The women in this study specifically long for the connection with other African-American mothers of sons.

The potential loss of female networks is also troubling, because as depicted in Figure 2, there is a significant imbalance in the emotional energy the mothers expend, and the sources of self-care and support that can facilitate a sense of wholeness. God, prayer and other spiritual practices are the primary ways in which the women in this study care for themselves. Other, more self-indulgent activities like manicures and massages are incorporated, but simultaneously trivialized. At once, there seems to be a longing for *and* a sense of not deserving or not needing someone else to take care of them. This certainly resonates with the SBW theory.

The cumulative effect of the intersectionality of SBW; non-ceasing fear, worry and guilt; and feeling abandoned by a presumed support system is a state of emotional exhaustion, that seems to be so insidious, it has become normalized. Theories of nonfinite loss (Bruce & Schultz, 2002; Jones & Beck, 2006-2007) and disenfranchised

grief (Doka, 1989) highlight the fact that the emotional state of the grieving person is not recognized by others as legitimate or even existing. As posited by these theories loss does not need to take the form of death to be real. In their stories, the mothers describe lost dreams for what their sons lives could be like without the practices of police forces and school personnel. They describe lost love with husbands and partners. Their mothers seem to prefer the women's brothers or their grandsons—a loss. There is lost sleep, as mothers wait for their sons to get home safely. Even the one mainstay throughout the centuries—strong relationships with other Black women—seems to be fading away. This is a major loss. The learned silence (Williams, 2008) discussed in the literature review, the social conditioning that teaches those experiencing loss and trauma to "get over it" (Farmer, 2002) and the SBW orientation that expects Black women to be able to handle it all, disregards the potential mental and physical health risks for these mothers.

Where is the opportunity for the SBW to say in the words of the late community and civil rights activist, Fannie Lou Hamer, "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired" (DeMuth, 1964)? As is the case for many of the women in this study, where is the forum for accomplished, educated, middle-class Black women to say "I am scared, and I do not know what to do to protect him?" Where is the place that low-income Black mothers of sons can say the same things without their words becoming pathologized? June Jordan wrote the lyrics to Oughta Be a Woman, made famous by the African-American a cappella group Sweet Honey in the Rock. The refrain, in this song about Black women reads: "There ought to be a woman can break down, sit down, break down, sit down. Like everybody else call it quits on Mondays, blues on Tuesdays, sleep until Sunday

down, sit down, break down, sit down" (Jordan, 1992). Where is there a place for Black mothers of sons to break down; sit down?

This framework invites social work practitioners to reconceptualize the lens through which we have been socialized to understand and subsequently intervene with African-American women, especially African-American mothers of sons. Emotional exhaustion is an overarching state of being for many of these women, and it is one that has received inadequate, if any attention in the literature. It is part of the historical trauma for Black women who throughout the centuries have feared for, worried about, and lost sons to slaveowners, lynchings, Ku Klux Klan mobs, mass incarcerations, false rape allegations, stop and frisk policies, drive-by shootings and armed neighborhood watch volunteers. Applying the theoretical frames of nonfinite loss, disenfranchised grief and SBW, Black women are so adept at camouflaging the feelings associated with loss, that they have become unrecognizable. The emotional weariness that encompasses the totality of the feelings shows up in case records as "non compliant", "hostile" "overbearing" and "aggressive" This developing theory suggests that these characteristics be considered within the context of tiredness, and that engagement, planning and interventions are designed accordingly.

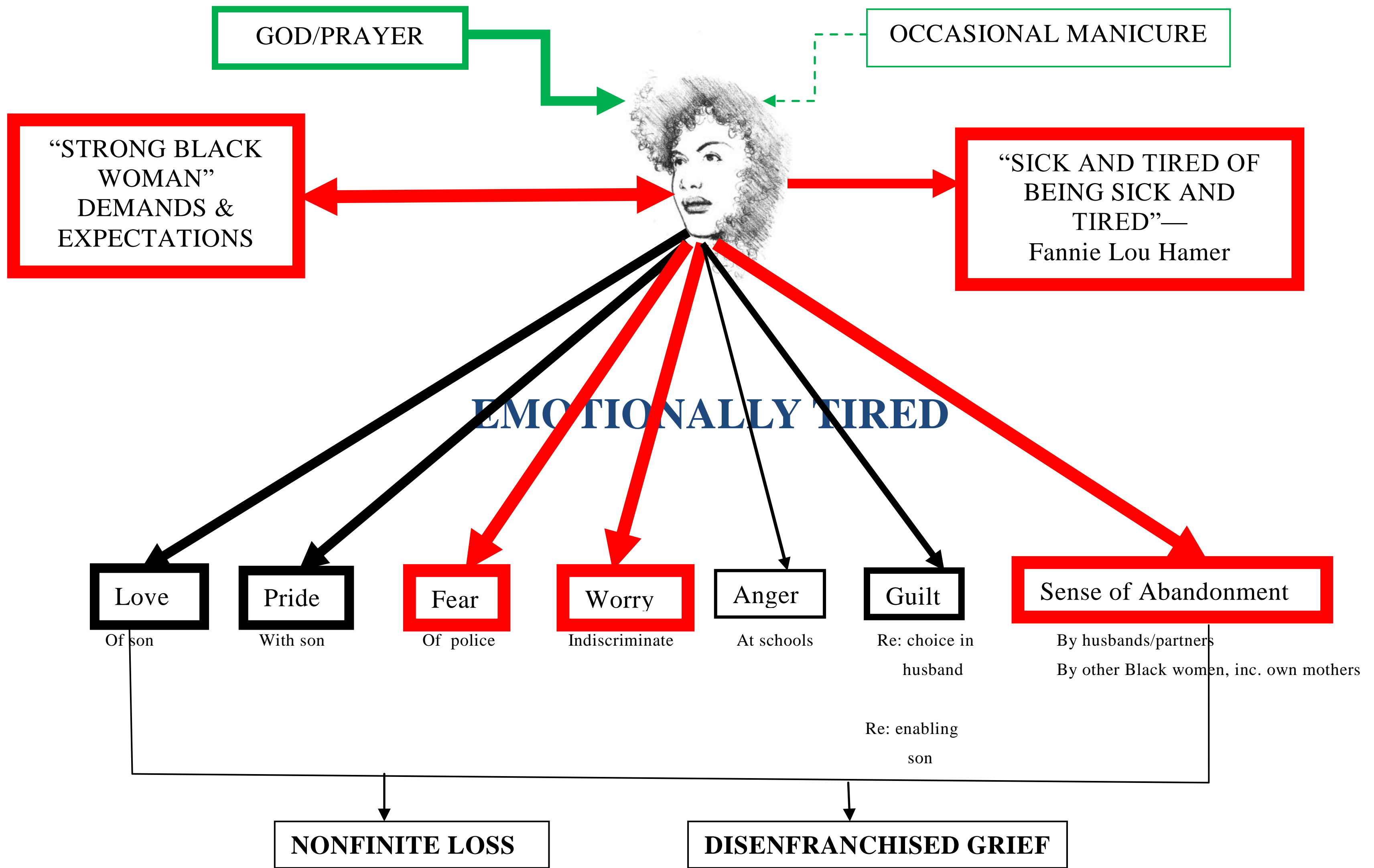


Figure 2: Emotional Journey of African-American Mothers of Sons

Overview of Findings within the Context of Literature Review and Frameworks

The stereotype of the all-giving, self-sacrificing Black female has existed in popular imagination since the institution of slavery. Researchers acknowledge it as a problematic It has been called role strain (West, 2008), the crooked room (Harris-Perry, 2011), and superwoman (Odom & Vernon-Feagans, 2010). It is commonly referred to as the Strong Black Woman syndrome, or SBW. Yet, it does not appear that anyone has recognized how the patterns of persistent fear (Phelps, Davies, McCart, Klein-Tasman, Melzer-Lange, & Heuermann, 2006; Reynolds, 1999; Schuster, Halfon, & Wood, 1998); worry (Millner, 2009; Muhammad, 2008); and guilt (Bush, 2004; King & Mitchell, 1990) are undergirding this emotional fatigue.

<u>Guilt</u>

The findings of this study confirm King and Mitchell's (1990) findings of guilt as a prevalent emotion for African-American mothers of sons. The current inquiry deepens their results by explicating some of the reasons for the guilt. The women hold themselves accountable for the choices they made in husbands and fathers for their boys. In many instances, they also blame themselves for doing too much for their sons, thereby preventing them from becoming men that are more independent. Conversely, some mothers' guilt derives from the sense that they have not done enough for their sons, often in the form of not providing them with material goods such as name brand clothing and sneakers. As eluded to by King and Mitchell, guilt is a strong emotion for African-American mothers of sons.

Fear

The data from this study also support Schuster, Halfon and Wood's (1998) findings that mothers of sons are fearful for them as early as their sons' births. These findings in this study move beyond birth, and highlight fear as an ongoing emotion, well into their sons' adulthood. As the historical literature chronicles Black mothers' fears for their sons being associated with threats and harm by slave owners (Haley, 1976; Lawson, 2000; Shaw, 1994; White, 1999), Klansmen (Mitchell, 2004; Schechter, 2001), lynch mobs (Schechter, 2001; Wilkerson, 2010) and the like, so too, contemporary fears are highly associated with police and law enforcement. As was the case with their ancestral sisters, the women in this study feel powerless to do anything to protect their sons from frequent stop and frisks, driving stops, arrests and other altercations their sons have with police.

Pride, Tired, Worry, Abandoned

The current research adds to the field of knowledge by offering insight into additional emotions not readily available in the other limited works on African-American mothers of sons. These emotions include pride, worry, a sense of abandonment and an overall feeling of being emotionally tired. In addition to naming these emotions, the findings offer some context within which these feelings emerge.

Self-Care

This inquiry finds that African-American mothers of sons have few means of self-care. In fact, the literature does not speak to self-care; instead, it refers to coping strategies

(Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). The coping strategies are connectional in nature, focusing on a connection with God (Bacchus & Holley, 2004; Brodsky, 2000; Everett, Hall, & Hamilton-Mason, 2010; Harris-Robinson, 2006) and with other Black women (Fouquier, 2011; Jenkins, 2002; Johnson, 2011). While this study supports the well-documented use of religion and prayer as a constant form of coping or self-care, it raises questions about the presumed availability of other Black women as consistent sources of emotional support. The mothers expressed a need and a desire for such a connection for their own senses of well-being. Given the limited ways in which African-American mothers of sons care for themselves, the loss of this network is critical. It is a surprising departure from existing knowledge about the lives of Black women, and although this small study is not representative of the larger community of Black women, this datum may be suggestive of an evolving phenomenon for some. It warrants further investigation.

Nonfinite Loss and Disenfranchised Grief

Collectively, the data from this study support many of the principles of nonfinite loss and disenfranchised grief. The narratives of fear, worry, abandonment and loss of female support systems illuminate what Harris (2011) describes as "lost beliefs that they once held about how the world should work or their ability to trust others" (p.84). Another characteristic of nonfinite loss is an ongoing uncertainty about what will happen next (Bruce & Schultz, as cited in Harris, 2011). This is evidenced in the ways mothers described giving safety instructions to their sons, and in their constant, indiscriminate worries. Bruce and Schultz also talk about the loss of hopes, ideals and dreams, mirroring mothers concerns

about their adult sons still living at home or the guilt they feel about the choices they have made in husbands.

A final condition of nonfinite loss is that because it is not associated with a death, the loss is often unrecognized or unacknowledged by others. Similarly, Doka (1989), defines disenfranchised grief as what “persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publically mourned, or socially supported” (p. 4). They are denied the right to grieve by the larger society. In light of these theoretical frames, the reported loss of female support systems is especially troubling, as this has traditionally been one of the few avenues available to Black women for recognition and acknowledgment. If African-American mothers, as Strong Black Women (SBW) are keeping to themselves the hurts of guilt, abandonment, fear and worry, the concern for their mental, physical and emotional well-being increases. If, a primary outlet for expressing these feelings, is itself becoming a loss, the implications for Black mothers are daunting, to say the least.

Africana Womanism

Africana womanism situates women within the context of their families at the center of research. Supporting qualitative methodology, it calls on Black women to name their own experiences and grounds the understanding of these experiences within an Afrocentric frame. This theoretical model recognizes spirituality, wholeness, storytelling, sisterhood, motherhood and collaboration with Black men as traits found in Black women (Alexander-Floyd & Simien, 2006; Hudson-Weems, 2001; Ntiri, 2001; Reed, 2001). Through words or actions, the study participants demonstrated each of these characteristics. They also spoke

of the areas that were missing for them; acknowledging them as losses is an indicator of their importance in the lives of the women. This was particularly true for women who described *not* feeling whole, *not* having a connection with other Black women and feeling abandoned by the men in their lives. Although, Africana womanism favorably represents the characteristics of Black women, it potentially colludes with an area that the mothers in this study struggled with--the stereotype of the strong Black woman. The respondents clearly stated that living up to the image of having it all together is unrealistic (West, 2008) . Not knowing how to counter the stereotype or how to do themselves differently contributes to the overall emotional weariness that the women described.

Emotional Expression

Finally, the narratives of the respondents in this study suggest that socioeconomic status is not necessarily a factor in the ways the mothers feel. There was a definite commonality of experience among the respondents, which the storytelling format may have facilitated; the elements of one mother’s story may have triggered a memory or similar experience for another. Although, this is desired in a storytelling process, breadth of information may have been the trade-off, as is the case in much of qualitative design. On the other hand, the ways in which the mothers periodically challenged each other’s perspectives indicates that some variation or nuance in experiences still remained.

Variation and nuance did exist in how feelings were expressed. Income and educational background appeared to influence the mothers’ styles of storytelling. It is important to acknowledge that the majority of the women who participated in the study were

in the middle to upper income brackets and held a minimum of one college degree. Their storytelling styles were relatively subdued. They seemed to think through their words and were very reflective and measured as they spoke. Their communication style felt linear, with one speaker following the other. Mothers from lower income brackets tended to be more animated and physical when they conversed with each other. They used a lot of hand gestures and facial expressions to punctuate what they were saying. They moved around the room as they spoke, in a manner that seemed more spontaneous than the other women. The findings on expression styles add to the knowledge base of middle class Black mothers, an understudied population. They may hold information about the socialization process for high achieving African-American women and how it shapes what they do and do not share, as well as how to "read" what they are saying. In addition, the findings provide enhanced ways of understanding and interpreting the behaviors of under resourced women, who are too often maligned in the literature as angry, belligerent and uncooperative (Cooper, 2007).

This study adds to the limited empirical research on Black mothers of sons. It places a spotlight on the emotional experiences of the women, thereby departing from the professional writings that focus on behaviors and parenting practices. The study confirms the small data sets that describe Black mothers of sons as feeling afraid and guilty. It expands recognition of pride, worry, weariness and abandonment as additional emotions that the women carry. The study underscores prayer and connections with other Black women as the primary methods of self-care, but introduces the notion that Black women's support networks are not as available as most of the literature suggests. The theoretical frames of nonfinite loss and Africana womanism contextualize the mothers' responses even as, is the case with one tenet of Africana womanism, the premise poses some problems.

Range and Prevalence of Emotions

The twenty-seven women who participated in the study were from a variety of educational, marital and socioeconomic backgrounds. Some were social service recipients; quite a few were social service providers. Others were in the ministry, education, health care and the corporate sector. As social service providers' stories and experiences were very similar to the other respondents, they may need another level of support as they examine issues pertaining to their sons. This is directly related to the nature of their work and is discussed more in the Implications Section.

Participants ranged in age from their mid-thirties to early sixties. Their mothering experiences were vast, from being birth mothers, stepmothers and grandmothers. Forty-one (n=41) sons met the age criteria of 30 and under, that enabled their mothers to particpate in the study. However, several of the women also have sons who are older. Some, but not many, also have daughters.

Each woman participated in one of five group interviews that were held. The group interviews consisted of participants sharing narratives of their experiences as mothers of African-American sons. Their stories were guided by the overarching research questions, as well as by some questions included in the semi-structured interview guide (Appendix C). The group format and the storytelling methodology allowed the women to construct their stories in ways that were meaningful to them. As such, a great deal of the responses were prompted more by the content of each other's stories than by the formal questions.

Through their exchanges, the mothers frequently mentioned the emotions of pride, fear, worry, guilt, and a sense of abandonment. However, a very important discovery in this study is that underlying all of these sentiments, African-American mothers of sons are tired.

Upon first read this may seem like a simple conclusion, but the fact that this state-of-being is not mentioned anywhere in the historical, empirical or theoretical literature reviewed for this research is disconcerting. In order to appreciate the responses to any of the remaining research questions, it is critical to recognize the extent of this fatigue and how it interfaces with each of the other named feelings.

Tiredness and Pride

Beginning with a strengths-based perspective, it is important to note that many mothers shared stories about how proud they are of their sons. For those with adult sons, they like the men their sons have become, even when they have not achieved what their mothers had envisioned for them. For those with younger sons, many are proud of their efforts and their personalities. Interestingly, their pride is independent of any role they see themselves as having played in their sons' accomplishments, efforts or personalities. In fact, many of the mothers agreed that as women they are incapable of raising a man (Bush, 2004) and, as proof, point to areas where their sons have not been as successful as hoped. It is as if luck or divine intervention gave them the sons, of whom they are so proud. One mother summed it up nicely when she said, crying, "I do not know what I did to deserve such an extraordinary young man."

For all of the mothers, however, the pride they feel is buried beneath the fears and worries they carry about their boys' safety and well-being. The emotional energy they expend on concerns about how to protect their sons is energy that is less available to celebrate the love and pride they feel for them. More importantly, the constant communication of their fears and worries to their sons is sometimes not in balance with

equally felt emotions of love and pride. The mothers' weariness seems to stem partially from their awareness of this imbalance. There is a desire to insure that their sons are well-grounded in their understanding of this love and pride. Yet the urgency to protect often overshadows this message, with mothers instead providing multiple instructions to their boys about what to do and not to do. These messages shape their interactions with their sons and contribute to the nature of their mother-son relationships.

Tiredness and Fear

First, the mothers are tired of being afraid that their sons are going to be harmed by police. These fears begin at birth (Schuster, Halfon, & Wood, 1998), but seem to lie dormant during their sons' early life stages. The mothers in the study whose only sons are still in pre-school or elementary school spoke of having these types of fears, but they were not especially overwhelming at this time. Mothers of young sons, who also have pre-adolescent and older sons, spoke of anticipatory fears. They assume that their younger sons will eventually experience the same types of police altercations as their older sons -- "stop and frisk" tactics, driving stops and getting picked up during neighborhood sweeps.

As the literature documents, the mothers feel a sense of helplessness and powerlessness to do anything about it (Millner, 2009; Muhammad, 2008; Reynolds, 1999). Much in the way that lynch mobs and forced witnessing of the whippings of enslaved men reinforced the sense of powerlessness in Black mothers, media accounts, news headlines and visuals of Black boys in handcuffs seems are their contemporary equivalents. The women who have sons that have been arrested or incarcerated fought for their sons after the fact. For many of the mothers the sense of powerlessness, however, comes from knowing there is

not much they can do to prevent such incidents from occurring. This is part of the emotional weariness.

Tiredness and Worry

African-American mothers are also tired from constantly worrying about all of the things that could possibly go wrong in the course of their sons' days. The root cause of this worry may be systemic in nature, as with the aforementioned police, or issues with school systems (The Sentencing Project, n.d.; Sickmund, Sladky, & Kang, 2008) and mental health diagnoses (Xanthos, n.d.). They are concerned about their sons' choices in friends or involvement with gangs. Mothers also worry about their sons' sexual orientation, whether or not a White girl will accuse them of rape, and at what age their adult sons will finally "find themselves." Whether large or small, real or perceived, their worries are persistent, ever-present, and exhausting.

Tiredness and Abandonment

Abandonment was a major and a surprising finding in this study. The sense of abandonment by their husbands that the women felt was pervasive, even if the respondent was currently married. Sometimes the reference was to physical abandonment, but more often it pertained to emotional abandonment. Adhering to the strong Black woman "mandate", the women described having to raise sons without knowledge, guidance and support from their sons' fathers and stepfathers. It was not uncommon for the mothers to liken being married to having an additional son. The irony is that in spite of feeling this

way, they still long for their husbands to have active roles in rearing their sons. They are unhappy with the traits of their husbands, but they want them to teach their sons how to be men. Some women described wanting men to be strong and nurturing. Others complained that their husbands were too soft with their sons; there was discrepancy around the definition of manhood.

Although, the mothers described needing males to teach their sons how to be men, they were unable to recognize how they, as women, had already done so. In almost the same breaths, they spoke of pride in the men their sons had become *and* how they needed husbands to "step up", because as women they could not raise men. Here, several thoughts emerge. On one level, the mothers appear to be challenging aspects of the strong Black woman phenomenon. It is not that they cannot raise Black boys to become productive men; it is that they do not want to do it by themselves. Africana womanism speaks to shared responsibility and activism with Black men. The fact that this is not happening for many of the women in this study gives emphasis to the sense of abandonment. Another thought is that unlike the other emotions, which are outwardly directed (fear, worry, pride,) or self-generated (guilt), being abandoned is something that is happening *to* the respondents. Even if there is some resistance to it, if the expectation is that they can handle it all, where do the mothers turn when this is their lived experience? Who do they tell "this is happening to me and I don't like it; I don't want it?"

Historically, African-American women have turned to other African-American women. Yet the women in this study suggest that such connections are not that available, and it feels like another loss, another abandonment. In some cases, the women shared feeling emotionally abandoned by their own mothers, who are critical of the ways in which

they are raising their boys. Some of the women described avoiding other Black women because they do not find the relationships to be supportive or validating. Yet, many of the women indicated a longing for such connections, especially as it pertains to raising sons. They need to know that they are “not crazy;” that what they are feeling and experiencing is real. The support from women who understand is an important way of alleviating some of the tiredness. The ways in which the women so readily connected and shared with mostly strangers during this study suggests just how strong a need this is.

The discovery that such Black women networks do not exist for the respondents is such an aberration of almost all of the literature reviewed for this study, that it may very well be unique to this research cohort. Yet, because of the overwhelmingly middle and upper class demographic of this group, this may be critical information regarding a reality for this population. It may be a feature of the socialization process that occurs in higher education. There are studies that support the idea of a loss of cultural connection as Black women move further up the socioeconomic ladder (Davis, 2008;Feagin & Sikes, 1994), where there are fewer opportunities to associate with other Black women. However, there is also literature that documents culturally bound networks and support systems that are available and utilized (Graham, 1999). Given the historical significance of support from other Black women, if indeed, this is a growing and transferable development for Black mothers of sons, it is a concern that warrants further study.

Tiredness and Guilt

Regardless of what they do, the women in this study described feeling guilty and blame themselves for the circumstances in which they have placed their sons. Sometimes the guilt is about school choice, especially if it is a predominately White private school. If their sons have had an extended stay at a private day or boarding school, some mothers felt guilty for not providing them with a more culturally relevant experience. The women described being mostly pleased with their sons' academic achievements in these settings, but frequently grappled with whether or not they had made the right decision. Indirectly related to school choice, other mothers described their guilt regarding medicating their boys after they were diagnosed with ADHD through a school-imposed evaluation. They wondered at times if they were doing more harm than good.

Sometimes the guilt pertained to overcompensating with their sons or in one mother's words "enabling him to the point of disabling him." In some cases, mothers felt guilty about not being able to provide their sons with name brand sneakers and clothing. Others felt guilty about not holding their sons more accountable for their actions. If adult sons were not working or living on their own, mothers questioned what they had done wrong and saw this is as further indication of their inabilities to raise productive men. The guilt and its accompanying tiredness frequently results in the mothers' resignation to the idea that their sons are still trying to find themselves. They stop placing demands on their boys and the guilt, self-questioning and self-blame continue.

Surpassing all of these factors, however, is the tremendous guilt that the mothers feel about the men they have chosen to father their sons. Like the sense of abandonment, the

association of guilt with husbands and sons' fathers was so strong that it suggested the focus of this study should have been on the adult men in their lives, rather than on their sons. Regardless of marital status, almost every woman in the study talked about this form of guilt. If the guilt was not about the choice they had made, it was about whether or not they were "good enough" wives. Several of the women have been in physically or emotionally violent relationships. Several have current or former husbands who have been incarcerated. Some spoke of men who abused drugs or alcohol. Of interest is the fact that regardless of the circumstances, the women spoke of the men with an appreciation for the difficulties they experience as Black men. Nonetheless, they blamed themselves for bringing these men into their sons' lives. Exacerbating this is the fact that they described having let their families of origin down, because "my parents did not raise me to associate with that type of man."

Anger: The Emotional Outlier

Anger is not included with the other findings in this study, as it rarely surfaced in any of the group conversations. The three times it did emerge were in relation to self-described racist experiences their sons had in school. It is important to mention here, however, as the common descriptor for many Black women is angry. Womanist theories argue that the angry Black woman is as much a part of the American psyche as is the strong Black woman. For all of the experiences that could have generated anger—incidents with police, experiences with husbands, having to manage multiple roles with little or no support, the mothers in this study did not describe themselves as angry.

Combined with the other emotion-states, and juxtaposed with the strong Black woman syndrome, the overarching feeling is one of being tired. With no substantive references to this state of being in the literature, these findings make an important contribution to social work as well as other fields of clinical practice. This enhanced knowledge adds to the growing field of anti-oppressive praxis and offers a new lens through which to understand presenting issues. It offers a vehicle through which to develop appropriate interventions at multiple levels of practice.

How Mothers and Sons' Experiences with Racism Shape Mothers Emotional Content

For the purposes of this study, racism was defined as "a system of social structures that produces cumulative, durable, race-based inequalities. It is also a method of analysis that is used to examine how historical legacies, individuals, structures, and institutions work interactively to distribute material and symbolic advantages and disadvantages along racial lines" (Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, 2010). The expectation of this research was that mothers would define the daily forces of structural racism that affect their sons' realities. They would then describe how these perceptions shape the quality of their son rearing processes-emotionally, physically, spiritually and psychologically.

With the exception of school and police-related incidents, racism was not discussed as a contributing factor to the respondents' emotional content. Mothers viewed police tactics toward their sons and other Black males as racist in nature, and a major source of their fears. School systems were also seen as being very biased in their treatment of Black boys,

generating anger in mothers. As previously stated, anger was not a dominant emotion for the women in this study; when it was expressed, it was directly related to altercations and disagreements with teachers and school counselors.

There may be several reasons that mothers were not as responsive in identifying correlations between experiences with racism and their feelings. Similar to the metaphor of fish not knowing they are in water because they are surrounded by it, the impact of racism on the mothers' range of emotions may be so pervasive that it is hard to recognize. A second reason may be that within homogeneous Black groups, racism's existence is an understood reality. There is no need to outwardly state or name it. Finally, given the participants' unanticipated focus on husbands and fathers, sexism may have been the more relevant, or at least an additional frame through which to understand their narratives.

The literature clearly states that African-American women face multiple oppressions, especially racism and sexism (Bush, 2004; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981). In hindsight, asking the women solely to explore their emotions within the context of racism may have been too limiting. Fortunately, practicing the Africana womanism behavior of nommo, or naming their own experience, the mothers moved the conversation where they wanted it to go. They were able to name their sons' racist encounters in schools and with the police as primary contributing factors to their fear and anger.

Even though many of the situations the women described experiencing with their husbands were centered in male power and privilege, they did not describe them as such. Rather they explained them as aspects of the Black male experience under racism. Similarly, relationships with adult sons contained elements of patriarchy; the mothers said the young

men were "finding themselves." The respondents found ways to empathize with or explain the circumstances for the men and sons in their lives. Rather than attribute any of their own experiences to these systemic forms of oppression, they felt guilty and blamed themselves.

In light of the literature, this is an important finding. Several authors state that Black women learn to stifle expression of feelings, especially when sexism is at the root. The cultural norm is to only acknowledge racism. Whether or not it was stated, it was apparent how the intersectionality of racism and sexism shapes these mothers' emotional content, not just racism alone. Whether it is an inability to recognize these forces in their lives or a hesitancy to name them they, too, contribute to the emotional fatigue.

How African-American Mothers' Expression of their Emotions Affect the Mother-Son Relationship

The women in the study love their sons. Almost all of them described being overjoyed at the prospect of having a son, even if that joy was tempered when they considered what was in store for him as a Black man in the United States. Nonetheless, the mothers had hopes and dreams for his future. Many respondents talked about just wanting their sons to be the best they could be in whatever life choices they made.

Most of the women in the study have sons who are adolescents or adults. These mothers were able to trace the onset of their fears and worries to their sons' elementary school days. Several discussed the biased treatment their boys received in school, the lower standards they were held to by teachers, and school counselors' insistence that they have their sons evaluated for ADHD and other issues. The resulting anger, and in some instances

confusion translated into mothers' actions with their sons. Some navigated back and forth between giving their sons prescribed medications for ADHD and then taking them off. Another mother devoted significant energy to helping her son not succumb to this label. For several mothers, their decisions to send their sons to relatives in other states left them feeling a sense of loss and created a quiet tension between the boys and themselves.

Likewise, the mothers' fears of police threats at times sounded desperate as they recalled their efforts to get their sons to take safety precautions. Many respondents, who have adolescent and young adult sons, described their frustrations with the young men. The boys do not seem to take these concerns as seriously as their mothers do. For married mothers, adding to this frustration is the fact that their husbands do not seem to be as concerned either. This captures one of the ways that the mothers feel emotionally abandoned. After repeatedly giving their sons advice on how to handle incidents with the police, the women tend to resign themselves to the idea that he will have to "learn it the hard way".

An interesting finding in this study is the number of adult sons (18 and over) who continue to live at home with their mothers. Some are employed; many are not. None has ac college degree, even though many of their mothers have multiple ones. Although the refrain "I am not going to raise a grown man" was frequently repeated throughout the sessions, many of the women find themselves doing just that. Some mothers attributed this phenomenon to the state of the economy; others declared that their sons are still trying to "find themselves." Yet, the adamancy with which the mothers insisted they are not going to take care of grown men was not reflected in either their actions or their intonation when

they shared that their sons are still at home. The mothers recognized this disconnect, and blamed themselves for enabling their sons to the point of disabling them.

On a subconscious level, African-American mothers' fears and worries for their sons' safety may be so pervasive that they unwittingly facilitate them remaining at home. Maintaining their sons at home may be the mothers' last hopes of saving them from police, from gangs and from their own poor choices. This may be their response to an anticipated or perceived loss. The theory of nonfinite loss is applicable to this phenomenon, particularly as it "prevents some aspect of normal developmental expectations from occurring" (Bruce & Schultz, 2002, p. 86). Furthermore, the sense of despair and ongoing dread associated with this theoretical frame may offer a way of exploring this phenomenon with the mothers.

How African-American Mothers Take Care of Themselves During their Son-Rearing Experiences

The literature on Black mothers and Black women does not use the taxonomy of self-care. Instead, it focuses on coping mechanisms and strategies (Jones & Shorter, 2003). Coping means to deal successfully with a difficult problem or situation. It assumes there is a challenge that needs to be handled. For Black women, even the notion of self-care becomes part of the requisite "to do" list, as opposed to something that nurtures. This may explain why the women in the study spoke very little about specific ways that they care for themselves. With the exception of prayer and involvement with church, few self-care activities were mentioned. Although hair and nail care and the occasional spa date were mentioned, the women laughed or quickly dismissed these activities as trivial or insignificant.

Jones and Shorter (2003) observed that African-American women seek spiritual and emotional support through churches, religious communities, friends and family members. As a thank-you for participating in the study, each mother was given a canvas bag that had a design of four Black women on the front. The caption beneath the drawing read Praying Mothers. It was not realized, beforehand, how apropos this gift would be.

Research studies abound that highlight spiritual practices that Black women turn to for self-care. Prayer, bible reading or attending church are mainstays in the lives of almost every study participant. As Brodsky (2000) found in her research, the mothers in this study believe that God is the only source they can rely on to protect their sons. Their relationship with God is as real and as personal as any other relationship they have with one exception: they do not worry about God abandoning them. The women stated that the periodic reprieves they get from worrying, being afraid or feeling guilty come from prayer.

As stated, overall there was not a lot of emphasis on self-care activities. Within this limited conversation, some mothers mentioned not feeling connected to other Black women. The reasons given included self-isolation, mistrust of other women and in some cases, feeling abandoned by female friends and kin. Many of the mothers talked about needing opportunities to connect and talk with other Black mothers of sons. This is a major departure from the themes of previous studies, which all underscore the prevalence of other Black women as support systems. As previously discussed, if, in fact, this is an emerging pattern for contemporary Black women, it warrants closer study; this is discussed in more detail in the Implications Section of this chapter. Whether it is an emerging pattern or a distinct issue pertaining solely to this study, it is an indicator of yet another loss. Combined with the fears and worries for their sons and a sense of abandonment by husbands and male

partners, the lack of connectivity with other Black women further legitimizes nonfinite loss as a lens through which to view some of these mothers' experiences.

Implications

PRACTICE

Reframe Challenging Emotional Expressiveness and Behaviors as Indicators of Emotional Fatigue

Social work professionals interface with African-American mothers of sons in a variety of settings. They meet with them in juvenile detention centers, mental health clinics, schools and child welfare agencies. If the respondents in this study are representative, sometimes they are the social work professionals. Too often documentation in case records depicts Black mothers as angry, hostile, argumentative, non-compliant or aggressive. Rarely is there a notation about them being tired.

The findings in this study invite clinicians and other practitioners to consider reframing these behaviors to indicators of emotional fatigue. Rather than beginning a service or treatment plan with a list of tasks to be completed, examining the emotional content beneath the tiredness may be a more helpful and engaging strategy. Generating a list of tasks for the mother to accomplish, usually within an agency specified period, reinforces the idea of the strong Black woman who can do it all. The service plan does not create a space where she can share the range of feelings she contains regarding her son's well-being. Her attempts to give voice to the myriad emotions she feels are often ignored, dismissed or minimized (Garrison, 2006; Reynolds, 1999). An empathetic clinician may be the only

individual who outwardly gives the mother permission to feel helpless, angry, fearful, worried and abandoned; permission to let down her superwoman persona. The practitioner may also need to use the skill of reflecting feelings to help the mother name her weariness. Developing a plan that factors in her emotion-states and creates goals and tasks, accordingly, is a better way to build trust, enabling movement toward goal attainment.

Form Alliances with Black Mothers to Address Oppressive Police Tactic and School Policies

On a macro-level, it is important for all practitioners, but especially administrators and community organizers to form alliances with Black mothers of sons to address the oppressive police tactics and school policies that contribute to the emotion-states of fear and anger. Caseloads are filled with African-American boys and by extensions their mothers, who have been victimized by these forces. It is an imperative that practitioners become as committed to effecting change within these systems, as they are to supporting change on the individual and family levels.

Black women have a long history of activism and agency. They are accustomed to being part of a collective and connective process. In fact, as seen in this study, it is a key component of their limited forms of self-care. These traits present a real opportunity to social work professionals, who are ethically responsible for insuring social justice and addressing systemic oppression. Working with African-American mothers to address these problems will serve to acknowledge the legitimacy of their fears and anger, and more importantly may help to alleviate some of their emotional fatigue.

Affirm Mothers' Feelings of Love and Pride for their Sons

Mothers are bombarded on a daily basis with negative images of Black male youth. Their constant efforts to protect their sons from harm often overshadow their demonstration of love and pride. It is therefore very important that feelings of love, pride and other positive sentiments be placed in the center of the therapeutic alliance. Mothers not only need to have someone recognize that they feel this way toward their sons, they also need helping professionals to recognize and articulate the young man's positive attributes.

The fact that the mother is meeting with a social service practitioner suggests that a problem with her son has already been identified. The guilt and self-blame that the women in this study described having, may be exacerbated because the young men are extensions of them, an indication that they did something wrong; that they are unable to raise a male child. Acknowledging their sons' strengths and validating the appropriateness of the women's love and pride can speak volumes and help move the clinical work forward.

Create Emotional Outlets and Supports for African-American Mothers of Sons who are Service Providers

Another implication of this set of findings is the need to create outlets for practitioners who are African-American mothers of sons, themselves. The various emotion-states, combined with the disproportionate numbers of Black boys who are involved in many of the aforementioned services, can add another layer of exhaustion for these professionals. The service providers are reminded multiple times throughout the day of the prevalence of such systemic oppression. As an agent of the organization, they may also be

reminded of their own sense of helplessness and their lack of power to effect meaningful change. Conversely, any guilt they may be feeling as mothers, may be projected onto their clients who are Black mothers. They may unwittingly blame them for not doing enough to prevent these situations; for not being superwoman enough. In this context, the helping relationship is ripe for countertransference issues.

Whether through supervision, internal or external support groups, or some other form of assistance, African-American mothers of sons who are working with a similar population may find it both personally and professionally beneficial to avail themselves of such opportunities. Organizations whose served populations are largely from this demographic should also consider creating such in-house possibilities for all interested staff, not just personnel who are African-American mothers.

Create Culturally Grounded Support Groups

Another important practice implication is the need for culturally grounded support groups for Black mothers of sons. Settings such as child welfare agencies, mental health organizations, schools, and juvenile criminalization systems are especially conducive to this type of intervention. Having the opportunity to meet with other Black mothers of sons was an expressed need in the study, and the women's responses to the group sessions were indicators of their potential effectiveness. Culturally grounded groups build on the mutual aid approach for which social work groups are known. The mutual aid, however, begins before the actual group session or process begins.

Self-care for African-American women seems to be associated with connectivity and collectivity, as is supported by Africana womanism (Hudson-Weems, 2001; Ntiri, 2001). Participants should be invited to help structure and prepare for all aspects of the group experience. Attention must be given to the type of venue, décor and food to insure as much comfort as possible. Rituals such as meal preparation, greeting styles, storytelling formats and healing circles, among others, should be an integral part of the group design. Ideally, the facilitator should be comfortable with these processes, as well as with playing a less active role during the actual sessions. Africana womanism celebrates Black women's agency. Culturally grounded group processes reinforce such agency.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Relationship between Mothers' Fears and Adult Sons Living at Home

The findings of this study highlighted the significant number of adult sons who continue to live at home with their mother or their mothers and fathers. It is not clear whether this is a factor of the current economy or if there is something else at play. It is important to note that although the mothers are not happy about this arrangement, they are not very demanding of their sons finding alternative living situations. Rather, they describe the young men as being in the process of "finding themselves."

Of equal significance in this study, is that although most of the women had a minimum of one advanced degree, many of the adult sons do not. These young men live at home. When the conversation that took place about educated men being at danger in this

society is juxtaposed with mothers fears for their sons safety, a question arises about whether or not mothers are unwittingly keeping their sons at home as a way of protecting them. This is a very intriguing research question for future study.

<u>Contributing Factors to the Loss of Female Support Systems, Especially Among Middle and Upper Class African-American Mothers of Sons</u>

Support from mothers, othermothers blood related kin and other females has been a mainstay in the lived experiences of African-American women. The fact that this is no longer true for several of the women in this study is a major discovery. The fact that almost every woman in the study asked when the groups would be reconvening speaks to the sense of need for such connection. It is, however, important to examine whether or not this is just an issue for these study participants, or if this is an emerging pattern for a larger cohort of Black women. Related to this is the question of whether or not this is true for all Black women or just those who have sons. Additionally is this unique to the experience of middle and upper class women, and if so what are the theories on causation? This is another area for additional empirical inquiry.

Limitations

There are two limitations to this study: unit of analysis and trustworthiness.

Unit of Analysis

One of the research questions in this inquiry pertained to the relationship between mothers and sons. However, mothers were the sole unit of analysis. Not hearing the perspectives of the sons may have restricted some of the data that would have added further meaning to the emotional expressions of their mothers. It may have contextualized the responses in ways that the mothers are not fully cognizant of, themselves. In addition, due to the storytelling format that was used, the mothers shared many memories that may have been recalled differently either by their sons, or in their sons' presence. Involving sons would certainly have changed the focus of the study, which is why they were not included. Still, excluding them posed the limits, as cited.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Patton, 2002) call for trustworthiness and authenticity in qualitative research. Researchers are asked to be conscientious and fair in their analysis of multiple perspectives, realities and truths. With the best intentions, such process remains a subjective interpretation. As an African-American mother of a son, I am certain, that subconsciously I have construed some of the data to mean other than what the respondents may have intended. I have attempted to redress this through enabling interested study participants to review and comment on the emerging themes. I also used reflexive journaling throughout the data analysis process, which revealed several interesting facts.

First and foremost, I discovered my frustration at the women feeling they were unable to sucessfully guide their sons to adulthood without male input. Based on this bias I was astonished to realize that I may have been one of the women who the mothers described as emotionally abandoning them. This realization helped me to step back and listen beneath the spoken words; only then could I hear the resistance to the strong Black woman syndrome. I could also feel the profound effect of being left alone.

Reflexive journaling also helped me to get more comfortable writing about the loss of Black female networks. This is not my personal experience and I was very resistant to documenting anything that I felt was detrimental to Black women. It was after I memoed these exact words that I was able to verify through the data that many women had indeed made these statements. Rather than view it as detrimental, reflexive journaling enabled me to think of this as a possible contribution to new knowledge and the ever evolving story of Black mothers.

Conclusion: Waiting to Exhale

When Terry McMillan penned the novel Waiting to Exhale (1992), the title resonated for Black women throughout the country. Its imagery of “holding it all in” for the opportune moment to “let it all go” is so powerful and reflects much of what emerged in this study.

This inquiry is one of very few empirical explorations into the emotional experiences of African-American mothers raising sons. The public discourse on the negative trajectories for Black boys in the United States is widespread. The narrow, stereotyped depictions of Black mothers are also well documented. As such, this study’s findings are an important contribution to the body of knowledge about both populations, especially the mothers.

African-American mothers love their sons. The historical literature, as well as these data, unequivocally supports this fact. Yet the ability to be present in that love is tempered by the vigilance needed to protect them from harm from racial oppression by schools and police. Doing so engenders both fear and anger in these women. These emotions are complicated by the mothers' constant worrying, guilt, and sense of abandonment. The interplay of all of these emotions leave African-American mothers of sons emotionally fatigued; the weariness is not recognized by others and sometimes not by themselves as they strive to fulfill the strong Black women imagery.

Too many Black boys, and by extensions their mothers, constitute the majority caseload of too many social service agencies. Too many are disproportionally represented in host organizational systems such as prisons, juvenile detention centers and special education classrooms. Social work, as a profession, is uniquely situated to respond to these dire statistics in ways that can effect real change. Clinicians are called upon to recognize the emotional fatigue and the sense of loss that Black mothers of sons feel. They must advocate and organize to shift oppressive policies and practices in law enforcement and schools. In addition, it is important that social workers co-create opportunities for mothers to connect with each other for support and validation. Given the historic agency, collectivity and activism of Black women, with this additional support, chances are they, themselves, will source the necessary systemic changes for their sons; and they will then exhale.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT PROFILES Mothers: n=27 *

Mother	Marital Status	Household Income	Mother's Education	Residence
Kathy	Divorced	100,001+	Masters	NYC
Susan	Married	75,001-100,000	Masters	NYC
Cookie	Married	50,001-75,000	Bachelors	NYC
Pat	Married	100,000+	Bachelors	Westchester
Brenda	Married	Undisclosed	Masters	Westchester
Mary	Married	50,001-75,000	Masters	NYC
Shani	Divorced	50,001-75,000	Masters	NYC
Ann	Divorced	50,001-75,000	Masters	NYC
Anita	Widow	75,001-100,000	Masters	NYC
Kelly	Married	100,001+	Masters	NYC
Evelyn	Married	100,001+	Masters	NYC
Valerie	Married	25,001-50,000	High School	NYC
Stephanie	Married	50,001-75,000	High School	NYC
Sylvia	Divorced	75,001-100,000	Doctorate	Westchester
Sara	Divorced	50,001-75,000	Masters	NYC
Joyce	Single	75,001-100,000	Masters	Westchester
Wendy	Divorced	75,001-100,000	Masters	Westchester
Sonia	Divorced	75,001-100,000	Doctorate	Westchester
Sophia	Married	50,001-75,000	High School	NYC
Janyce	Married	75,001-100,000	Undisclosed	Westchester
Robin	Divorced	75,001-100,000	Bachelors	Westchester
Arlene	Single	0-25,000	Undisclosed	NYC
Brooke	Single	0-25,000	Undisclosed	NYC
Karol	Married	0-25,000	Undisclosed	NYC
Rosalind	Single	25,001-50,000	High School	NYC
Jackie	Married	50,001-75,000	Bachelors	NYC
Joy	Single	25,001-50,000	High School	NYC

*All names and have been changed to protect confidentiality

Appendix B: Sample Statements Referring to God, Prayer and Religion x Group

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
Sample References to Religion, Prayer, Church as Forms of Self Care	“Going to church is not an option; whether you’re a kid or adult you go to church. They have been in church from the womb” “Let go and let God”. “And then when you get down there and talk to God! When I say pray, talk to God. God and we can do this again. And we can do it among each other. And you’re releasing, you’re letting it go. You’re speaking it into the atmosphere. Cause it helps”.	“And -to have this taken from you is a hurtful thing. I tell you, I have friends who are atheists. I still love ‘em, but nobody can tell me there’s no God.” “I was always someone that believed strongly in my faith and so I came up here and I ended up joining this church” “In coming up I had my kids in church a lot” “I have a daughter and a son. I feel that they are truly anchors from God you know” “God has a plan”	“But as my faith got deeper, as I really began to more rely on God--and pray, I go to bed”. “You know, I'm Baptist, Methodist, Holiness, I'm in this field. I am not Catholic. I don’t pray to anybody except God; when I need something I gotta go to Him. Thank Him for something. I'm going direct. I'm not going through any channels. That’s what’s in my world”. “So, I'm praying and hoping that something will get done”.	“Well I mainly lean towards my faith in God and how he’s brought me thus far in life. And so, I always realize that whatever lasts- whatever comes, it can’t last forever”. “I breathe and say okay, you know, he’s gonna find his way. You know, he’s gonna be okay. And just leave it in God’s hands basically”. It’s been four years and I haven’t stopped praying. My son still comes with a lot of stuff”. “He’s my first born. The only time I asked God to give me a boy and He gave me my son”.	“I immediately went to reading, cause everything’s in the bible” “All I do is pray. I say Lord, don’t let this happen to this boy because I don’t know which way he’s gonna go”. “I got to still go to church, bible study; I got to still do all these things”. “Well you have to keep praying because I'm still praying”.

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

"We don't give birth to thugs; we give birth to children":
The Emotional Journeys of African-American Mothers
Raising Sons under American Racism

Core Question:

What is the range and prevalence of emotions that African-American mothers feel while raising their sons under American racism?

Introduction

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this group interview. I am gathering information that will be included in a study that I am conducting to obtain my Doctorate in Social Welfare. I appreciate your willingness to be part of this process.

The purpose of the study is to explore the range of feelings that African-American mothers experience while raising sons under American racism. (When I use the term *mother*, I am including those of you who are not necessarily the young man's biological mother, but have been actively involved in raising him [aunts, godmothers, grandmothers, foster/adoptive mothers, etc.]. Likewise, when I use the term *son*, I am referring to the child you raised, regardless of biological relationship). I am interested in learning how these feelings show up in your lives: what circumstances trigger them; how they influence your relationship with your son; and how you take care of yourselves during this process.

In addition to actual feelings that you have had, I will be asking you about thoughts that have gone through your minds while you raise (d) your son—about situations, racism, experiences, other people, etc. I will also be inviting you to share specific examples of situations you have faced throughout your son's lifetime.

You, however, have complete control over what you decide to share during this interview. If at any point you feel uncomfortable, and would like to end your participation, you are free to do so, with absolutely no consequences to you. There is a social worker here, who is available to speak with you, if you need support moving through whatever feelings you are having. For each of you, I also have a list of agencies and counselors in New York City and lower Westchester County, who are able to provide you with additional support, if needed, once this interview session is completed.

Finally, as discussed in the consent form that you signed, I will be audio taping the interview, as well as taking notes. I want to make sure that I capture everything that you share as accurately as possible. Once I have transferred the tapes into written form, you will have the option of seeing the write-up before it is in its final stage. At that time, you can advise me of any corrections that I need to make. All of the information that you share will remain confidential. Your personal identities will not be included in the final document; the tapes and other identifying information will be destroyed once the research is finished.

Are there any questions before we begin?

1. EARLY *EXPECTATIONS* OF RAISING SONS

A. When you first learned you were having a son, when your son was first born, or when you first began caring for a male child, what were your *expectations*?

Probes:

- Describe your visions for your son's life.
- What was your sense of what it would be like to care for a son/boy?
- Where did these visions or expectations come from?
- Were there messages that you received regarding Black mothers and sons? Can you give some examples?
- At that time, did you have any thoughts about how racism would affect his life? Can you describe these thoughts?
- What were your thoughts, if any, about how racism would affect your role as his mother?

2. EARLY *FEELINGS* REGARDING RAISING SONS

B. What *emotions* did you experience when your son was first born or when you first began caring for a male child?

Probes:

- Did any feelings of fear, anger, grief, worry or guilt appear at that time?
  - ✓ If so, what were your fears about? Of what were you afraid? What was your worst fear?
  - ✓ If so, what were you angry about?
  - ✓ If so, what were you grieving?
  - ✓ If so, why were you worried?
  - ✓ If so, why did you feel guilty?
- Did you have a sense of joy, happiness, pride or excitement?
  - ✓ Why were you joyful?
  - ✓ Why were you happy?
  - ✓ What caused you pride?
  - ✓ What caused you to be excited?
- Were there some feelings that were more prevalent than others? (Yes/No). If yes, what were they?
- If you identified any prevalent feelings, how, did you express these feelings? With whom did you share or talk about such feelings?
- If you identified feelings, but did not share them with anyone what kept you from doing so? What did you do with those feelings?

3. EXPERIENCES WITH AMERICAN RACISM

For the purpose of this study, the term racism refers to negative experiences you have actually had, witnessed or heard of that you believe are directly related to yours and your son's skin color. This experience may be the result of an interaction with another person or group, or it may be associated with an organization (e.g. school, hospital, social service agency, etc.). It may also be related to anything you experienced or felt as a

result of seeing something on television, reading something in the newspaper, searching the internet, etc.

It is also important to understand what racism means to you, even if it is a different meaning than the one given for this study.

C. What does the word racism mean to you?

Probes:

- What does it look like to you?
- What does it sound like to you?
- How do you know when you or your son are experiencing it?
- What does it feel like to you?

D. Has racism impacted your role as an African-American woman raising a son in this country? (Yes/No). If yes:

Probes:

- Describe a time when you think your son was especially threatened by American racism.
- Was your son actually involved, or was it a community or societal situation (e.g. police presence; racial profiling) that you thought would or could affect him?
- If your son was actually involved, how did you learn about it?
- As his mother, how did you feel during the incident?
- How did you handle it?
- If your son was not actually involved, what made the situation seem like a threat to you?
- If your son has not had any direct encounters with racism, does hearing about other situations influence your thoughts about potential incidents for your own son?
- How does thinking about such possibilities make you feel?

E. What kinds of events, situations or people do you believe will or have posed racist threats to your son? Please describe.

Probes:

- Son's behavior (language, aggressiveness, dress, experimentation with drugs, alcohol, sex)?
- Son's interactions with his friends (other boys, girls, peers of another race)?
- Police and other law enforcement personnel?
- School (his performance; school location; school demographics; school personnel; quality of curriculum)?
- Internet?
- Social activities (clubs, sporting events, shopping, community centers)?
- Armed forces recruitment?
- World events (wars; political uprisings; etc)?
- Choice of religious organizations (church, mosque, etc.)?
- Entertainment and the media (TV, newspaper articles, radio, music, video)?
- Community or neighborhood occurrences (shootings; gang violence)?
- Social service agencies?
- Mental health settings?
- Other?

F. How frequently have you thought about the possibility of these threats affecting your son?

G. If your son has had an experience (or many experiences) with American racism, how old was he at the time? Please describe.

H. If your son has not had an experience with American racism, but you have thought about the possibility, how old was he when you began thinking about it?

4. MOTHERING STYLE AND PRACTICES

I. In what way does experiencing, witnessing or hearing about Black males' encounters with racism shape your mothering style/behaviors/practices?

Probes:

- Have you done any of the following with your son? Please explain.

- ✓ Disciplined your son (corporal punishment, verbal communication or reprimand, removal of privileges, Tough-Love, delegated discipline to someone else)?
- ✓ Established curfews?
- ✓ Established a dress code or allowed him only to wear certain clothes?
- ✓ Limited his socialization with friends; specified with whom he could associate?
- ✓ Communicated with his teachers or been active in school?
- ✓ Instructed him about staying safe (from the police, gangs, storeowners; security guards, overt racist behaviors, etc)?
- ✓ Limited access to Internet?
- ✓ Limited exposure to entertainment and the media?
- ✓ Relocated to another community/city/state?
- ✓ Sent your son to live in another community/city/state?
- ✓ Sent him to a private, charter, boarding, military or religious school?
- ✓ Limited his independent travel or only permitted it to certain areas?
- ✓ Defended him against accusations regardless of whether or not they were true?
- ✓ Escorted him to public events that he was old enough to attend on his own?
- ✓ Cautioned him about dating outside of his race, especially with White girls?
- ✓ Other?

- Can you describe the feeling that motivated you to do any, some or all of these? Was it fear? Anger? Frustration? Something else?
- Did you feel more than one emotion at the same time?
- To the best of your ability, describe what the identified feeling(s) felt like physically; mentally; spiritually.
- Were the emotions directed at anybody or anything in particular? Who or what?

J. How have these parenting behaviors affected your relationship with your son?

Probes:

- Does he know the thoughts underlying your parenting practices?
- Does he know the feelings underlying your parenting practices?
- How have you shared them with him?
- If you have not shared them with him, what are some of the reasons for choosing not to do so?
- Have your behaviors resulted in any tensions between you and your son? Please describe.
- Have your behaviors created a strong or special bond between you and your son? Please describe.

5. CURRENT *EXPECTATIONS* OF RAISING SONS

J. Now that he is older, how would you describe the *experience* of raising a Black son?

Probes:

- How does the reality of raising a son compare with your visions and expectations for him when he was first born, or first came into your care?
- Did the experience of raising your son shift at different stages of his development (e.g.: what was it like at age two, versus age six, versus age 14, etc.)
- For those with sons over age 25, is your mothering style or behavior different now from when he was younger? Please explain.

6. CURRENT *FEELINGS* REGARDING RAISING SONS

K. Now that your son is older, how would you describe the *emotions* involved in raising a Black son?

Probes:

- How have your feelings about raising a Black son changed over time, if at all? Are there any feelings that are more prevalent now than when your son was first born? Can you describe them?
- Did your feelings shift during different stages of your son's development?
- What do you believe accounts for the changes?
- Have any of the feelings that you identified earlier been constant throughout the process of raising your son? Have they changed in intensity? Please describe.
- For those with sons over age 25, are your *feelings* as his mother different now from when he was younger? Please explain.

7. SELF CARE and COPING STRATEGIES

L. What are some of the ways you have practiced self-care as you have raised your son?

Probes:

- Do you participate in any formal religion or have a spiritual practice? Please explain.
- In what ways, if at all, do you see a Higher Source (e.g.: God, Jehovah, Allah, Buddha, etc.) helping you in the process of raising your son?

    - ✓ Regardless of whether or not you have a spiritual or religious practice, do you pray for your son? For yourself, as his mother?
    - ✓ If so, how are these prayers similar or different from other types of prayers you say?
    - ✓ If so, how helpful do you find prayer to be in the process of raising your son?
    - ✓ How often do you specifically pray for your son? What do you ask for in these prayers?

- Are you involved in any type of support group? Please describe.
- What roles do friends and family members play in your life?
- What roles do other African-American women play in your life?
- Are you involved in any community work or political activities? Please explain.

    - ✓ In what ways, if any, has raising a son influenced your involvement or lack of involvement in community or political activities?

- Do you exercise? Please describe?
- How would you describe your diet or eating habits?
- Do you smoke cigarettes? If so, how frequently and what amount?
- Do you drink? If so, how frequently and how much?
- Are there other ways that you take care of yourself?

M. In what ways have you found your form(s) of self-care to be helpful?

N. What form(s) of self-care have you found to be most helpful?

8. NEEDS and RECOMMENDATIONS

O. What needs do you have as a mother of a Black son(s) that you feel are not currently being met?

P. Based on your experiences, what would you like to say to an African-American woman who is new to raising a Black son? What would you tell her to expect in terms of experiences with her son, and feelings that she may have?

Q. In what ways could social workers and other service providers be more responsive to the needs of Black mothers of sons?

Probes:

- What do you consider the most important thing for social workers to understand about your experience as the mother of a Black son?
- What might social workers say or do that could be helpful to Black mothers raising sons?
- To your knowledge, are there existing practices or policies in social service agencies, schools, and mental health settings that should be adjusted to be more responsive to the needs of Black mothers of sons? Please explain.

9. CLOSING THOUGHTS

Q. Is there anything that I have not asked you that you think is important for me to know about the emotional experiences of African-American mothers raising sons in the United States?

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