

Black Feminist Epistemological Methodology

Bridging Theory and Methods to Research Health and Illness

James writes on how Black feminist theory (BFT) informed her methodology while researching the experiences of Black women with advanced cancer. The four tenets of BFT that James draws on were articulated by Patricia Hill Collins as "lived experience as a criterion of meaning, the use of dialogue, the ethic of personal accountability, and the ethic of caring" (James, p. 208, Collins, p. 266*). James focuses on how the collective dialogue intervention allowed her to form an illuminating relationship with one participant, Mary.

Lived Experiences

James used loose interview guides so participants could contribute to the pace and direction of the conversation. By talking to patients rather than medical professionals James is privileging the experiences of her participants. Further, she intentionally framed her interview questions in ways that would not compare her participants' knowledge and experiences to other groups of people.

Collective Dialogue

Interpersonal connection is important for knowledge validation. James asserts that the dialogical premise of BFT requires researchers' self-insertion in interviews. Having done a free-flowing initial interview, at a follow up interview, James would read the participants the summary she wrote on the initial interview -- allowing them to interrupt and correct her.

Ethic of Caring

A Black feminist ethic of caring values "individual expressiveness, the appropriateness of emotions, and the capacity for empathy" (p. 210). This requires taking stock of one's assumptions, expectations, and biases to responsibly tell another person's story. James deliberately integrates her feelings in her work and analyzes her affect with her participants' contributions.

Personal Responsibility

In doing work about Black women, James is responsible for producing accessible knowledge that can be understood by the average Black women. Personal responsibility responds to participants' sensitivities and desires with humility and vulnerability. Responsible practices require collaboration with participants and their consent to the presentation of their experiences in analytical work.

James' proposed collective dialogue methodology encourages both participant and researcher to fully see one another. James and Mary worked together to identify some themes and patterns from Mary's medical experiences that may not have been explored with traditional methods or interview styles. By inviting participants to the analysis and dissemination of knowledge Black feminists could make knowledge (and its production processes) more accessible to everyone.

Citations:

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*Collins, Patricia Hill. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.