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# **Social Work, Motherhood, and Mothering: Critical Feminist Perspectives**

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## **Mothering and Othering: Experiences of African American Professional Women**

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*African American women have been the backbone of American society. Since 1619, they have been and remain a stable force upon which families, communities, and institutions have been built and nurtured. In many cases, this role of nurturer has transcended forced servitude and is now both a personal and professional choice, which is demonstrated through her roles as mother and social worker.*

*Unfortunately, this positioning has required many African American women who are mothers and social workers to address demands associated with the intersections of their roles including role overload, role strain, and role confusion. In addition to challenges faced by role intersections, African American women must simultaneously manage societal issues, including racism, sexism, racial loyalty, racialized oppression and gender biases. Finally, African American women who are mothers and social workers must process internal conflicts associated with certain paradigms, including the strong Black woman, imposter syndrome, and superwoman schema.*

*Given these challenges, there seems to be a dearth of theories that adequately explore the noted intersections for this unique population of African American social workers who operate in multiple spheres. This conceptual article provides some historical context, reviews the relevant literature, explores strengths and gaps in related theoretical frameworks, and examines our experiences to promote the exploration of a comprehensive theory that seeks to explain the nuanced intersections of mothering and othering.*

### **Introduction**

For some, being a mother and serving the community as a social worker is one of the highest privileges in life. Unfortunately, contemporary social constructs and role intersections associated with motherhood and social work, including other subsequent and secondarily associated responsibilities, have significantly

contributed to role strain, role confusion, and role overload. Given the extensiveness of such additional responsibilities, we refer to completing these tasks as “othering.” For African American women who simultaneously endeavor to be competent mothers and social work professionals while managing the effects of racial loyalty, racialized gender issues, and the strong Black woman syndrome, these challenges are often magnified (Alleyne 4; Anthis 333; Edmonson Bell and Nkomo 11).

Using a semi autoethnographic, narrative approach, which includes testimonies and stories along with a review of the literature and relevant theories, this article explores the complicated relationship between mothering and othering for African American women who are mothers and social workers serving the profession through various roles. Furthermore, we call for greater examination and theoretical development in terms of exploring the intersectionality of race, gender, mothering, and othering for this important segment of the social work workforce. After providing a background and then referencing current literature, existing theoretical frameworks, and role exploration as the foundation for the article, we discuss and imply that such an examination could produce an adequate theoretical framework that uniquely represents the experiences of the dual identities of African American women in their roles as mother and social worker. The development of a much needed theory to examine African American women, mothering, and social work would seek to explain the myriad of layers experienced by African American women and perhaps other women of the African diaspora who are mothers and serve as social work practitioners, educators, and researchers.

Numerous theories are referenced to initiate an exploration of the experiences of African American women practicing social work, teaching social work, and producing knowledge for social work while simultaneously fulfilling the role of a mother. Although these theories seek to explain varying aspects of role intersections, we also argue that there seems to be no inclusive theoretical framework that addresses the stated role intersections. It is surmised that a proper theoretical framework should be developed, but it can only be developed in tandem with understanding the experiences of women who identify as African American mothers who serve as social work practitioners, social work educators, or social work researchers, and who can operationalize such factors as racial loyalty, racialized gender, and various perceptions of the strong Black woman syndrome from their lived experiences.

Stemming from our professional expertise and experiences, we provide a brief overview of theoretical frameworks and relevant concepts to contextualize a discussion surrounding the similarities, differences, benefits, and challenges associated with their roles as African American mothers and social work practitioners, educators, and researchers. These shared experiences serve as a foundation for developing a theory that addresses the intersectionality of these

roles, race, gender, and class that can explain and supports African American social workers who are mothering and othering.

## Background

From a historical perspective, Black women have been a foundational element within the Black community. The Black community is understood to be the geographic and/or philosophical closeness of people of African descent as well as a diversified set of systems and structures that compel or force their aggregation for mutual aid and collective growth (Blackwell 5; Frazier 27; Martin and Martin 2). Several historic and contemporary scholars have noted the attributes to and significance of Black women as major contributors within the community, particularly in areas including, but not limited to, education, community services, journalism, politics, and preaching (Brade 312; Higginbotham 147; Martin and Martin 63; McLane Davison 290; Washington 267).

Similarly, throughout history, Black women have been primarily responsible for managing the family, which includes immediate and extended family (i.e., kinship and community mothering) in many cases. To fulfill these extensive familial expectations, Black women heavily rely on kinship networks of community support that includes biological and nonbiological “aunties” (Butler 593; Dow 194; Hall 497). Some researchers have described this concept of biological, kinship, and community care by African American women networks as “othermothering”; African American women can share the burdens of mothering and other related responsibilities.

In varied roles, including that of mother, Black women, also understood to be women of colour whose lineage is linked to the continent of Africa, have been the progenitors of racial identity, gender identity, spiritual identity, faith, social norms, and financial viability (Boyd-Franklin 78; Kilgour Dowdy 15; Martin and Martin 117). Notably, the roles and role identities of Black women have been directly influenced by some of the following cultural experiences and values: gendered roles (e.g., caregiving, breadwinning, and environmental/homecare); the importance of children (e.g., healthcare, school matriculation, immediate needs, and nurturing); strong achievement orientation (e.g., educational orientation, communal and peer approval of achievement, self-esteem, and resilience); strong work orientation (e.g., work ethic and the value of work); flexible family roles (e.g., kinship, mentoring for children of single parents); and strong religious orientation (e.g., commitment to service, spirituality, and spiritual/religious practices) (Butler, 593; Dow 194; Hall 497; Hill 37).

African American women—one subculture of Black women or women of colour, whose lineage is linked to the continent of Africa and who self-identify as Americans—take the role of mothering seriously. The essence of these

experiences and values, as galvanized through mothering, has produced strong African American individuals, families, groups, communities, and organizations. Although these experiences and values provide a rich foundation for various systems, intensive mothering, as coined by Sharon Hays (156), also produces a significant degree of conflict and is correlated with adverse mental health outcomes for many African American women who attempt to simultaneously maintain all values associated with culture and roles concerning mothering (Rizzo, Schiffrin, and Liss 614).

In addition to reports of poorer mental health, considerable research documents that Black women experience significant declines in physical health due to the compilation of mothering and related responsibilities (Hall 491; Liao, Wei, and Yin 97; Nomaguchi and Milkie 202; Rodriguez 67). The multifaceted and complex role of mothering does not include a sole or individual focus. For African American women, mothering is often associated with othering, which we conceptualize as performing associated and secondary tasks affiliated with embracing cultural experiences and values.

For example, many African American mothers are expected to prioritize the role of caregiver and nurturer within their traditional families (mothering) while simultaneously nurturing other members of one's faith group, geographic community, and non-immediate family through, for example, kinship care, mentoring, planning, transporting, counselling, teaching, and disciplining (i.e., othering)—as operationalized demonstrations of the value of flexible family roles. In addition to assuming responsibility for the moral and academic achievement of one's biological and sociological children, she is expected to achieve peer-approved excellence while demonstrating the highest level of work ethic at her place of employment and the highest regard for the gender-influenced role expectations at home.

This significant quest to mother and other leads to role strain, role conflict, and role overload. Scholars have documented that the experienced weight of these excessive responsibilities for African American women has led to the label of the strong Black woman syndrome (Woods-Giscombe 669). Although such a label could appear favourable to some, the strong Black woman syndrome has been linked to significantly poorer health outcomes and increased mortality rates for African American women (Baker et al. 305; Liao, Wei, and Yin 85).

Although the task to balance mothering and othering may exist for many women, regardless of racial and ethnic identity, the culturally influenced expectations and values that lead to role conflict are exacerbated for African American mothers, particularly when concepts such as racial loyalty, racialized gender, and perceptions of the strong Black woman are injected into the discussion. These concepts introduce the added responsibility of aligning with and caring for an entire race of people while operating within the role and

expectations that have been assigned to her as a mother. In addition to having responsibility for the regeneration of the racial values, cultural practices, and values, strong Black women are perceived as strong, resistant to vulnerability, resilient, committed to helping others, and carriers of history. Research has documented the inferred premise that African American women must be the alpha woman who manages all biological, psychological, sociological, and spiritual components of life while still being vulnerable, gentle, respectable, and desirable (Woods-Giscombe 674).

For African American women who assume the tasks of mothering and othering, the inability to actualize all culturally influenced values, normalized behaviours, and stereotyped perceptions equally and simultaneously can lead to role confusion, role overload, and a threat to one's identity. While many professions, including social work, promote distinctions and separations of professional and personal values and roles to manage role confusion better, other research suggests that there is a less clear distinction between the personal and professional self for women in traditional and nontraditional professions, particularly for African American women (Burlew and Johnson 302; Edmondson Bell and Nkomo 11).

Dr. Altra Charles suggests that our holistic identity, even while operating in our professional roles, includes "professional and social status, such as faculty member, wife, or mother, and this influences how we feel about ourselves" (qtd. in Alleyne 37). Additionally, she notes that if one has a threatened identity, they carry an emotional burden that weakens the body (Alleyne 37). Similarly, Darrius D'wayne Hills argues that the stereotypical trope "mammy," initially attributed to Black women during slavery, can be extended to academia, whereby scholarly productivity and quality of home and professional life are compromised due to excessive demands to support the agenda of others with little to no support for their own (8). For African American women in faculty positions, kinship support systems are essential for improving mental and physical health outcomes. This community support is also critical for professional mobility in the academy (Gregory 131).

Within the context of role theory, critical feminist theory, and womanist theory, this article explores the similarities, differences, benefits, and challenges associated with the dual roles of mother and social work practitioner, educator, and researcher for African American women. We hope that these shared experiences will serve as a foundation for developing a theory that addresses the convergence of these roles and race.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Existing theories consider components of the professional African American woman's experience. Much of the literature about roles and identity related to African American women references theories and perspectives, such as feminist theory, Black feminist theory, standpoint theory (Payne and Suddler 387), critical race theory, womanist theory, intersectionality theory, and role theory. These theoretical perspectives focus on the unique experiences of professional African American women when considered independently. However, from our perspective, none of the aforementioned theories adequately frame or explain an integrated experience that includes gender, race, gendered racism, ethnic identity, spirituality/religiosity, cultural experiences, values, class, personal roles, and professional roles. Instead of a single theory to address each component of these integrated experiences, we use various theories including role theory, critical feminist theory, and womanist theory with reference to Black feminist theory to examine cultural experiences and values associated with mothering and othering for mothers who also serve as social work practitioners, educators, and researchers.

### ***Role Theory***

Role theory has been widely used as a theoretical framework for over ninety years. It has its roots in theatre and psychodrama (Jakovina and Jakovina 151). Social scientists considered actors assigned roles to play based on written scripts. This basis has since been used to explain human behaviour in the social environment. The fundamental premise of role theory is that an individual's behaviour can be "predictable depending on their respective social identities and situation" (Biddle 68). Role theory aims to explain how the social environment influences an individual's behaviour, both directly and indirectly. It is a coherent framework and may give theoretical and empirical focus on social work's historical emphasis on person-environment interactions. Bruce Biddle further described the following three components of role theory: patterned and characteristic social behaviours, identities assumed by social participants, and scripts or expectations for behaviour that are understood by all and adhered to by performers (68).

Research on role strain and dual identities are plentiful, particularly related to African American women and mothers (Hall 496; Liao, Wei, and Yin 96; Nomaguchi and Milkie 200; Rodriguez 67). However, the literature examining African American women, mothers, and their role as social workers is minimal. Few studies look at how these three categories relate to a mother's dual identity as a social worker. The author's anecdotal observations and practice wisdom suggest that role strain is common among African American women.

The primary social work skills embedded in the profession (e.g., genuineness, empathy, and warmth) are also foundational in interactions as mothers. Whereas some mothers navigate personal and professional environments, the mother-social worker seldom has an opportunity to modify attributes of her identity. The complex interconnections between societal expectations of the nurturing, supportive, and matriarchal Black mother and the caring, compassionate, and advocating social worker may leave many feeling overwhelmed, overworked, and unseen. In and of themselves, these attributes are positive and perceived as strengths. Yet given the intertwining of role overload and the mother-social worker attributes, we surmise that many mother-social workers risk losing their identities in these roles.

## **Theoretical Considerations**

### ***Critical Feminist Theory***

The proliferation of critical feminist theory is often credited to Catherine MacKinnon and emerged from critical race theory in recognition of the various forms of oppression that exist within American societies and subcultures. Since its initial introduction in the 1980s, critical feminist theory has been used as the framework for numerous studies, including Brandi Geisinger, who researched critical feminist theory, rape, and hooking up. Stemming from the research of other theorists, Geisinger outlines the following as assumptions of critical feminist theory. One, gender oppression is endemic in our society. It is normal, ordinary, and ingrained into society, making it so it is often difficult to recognize. Two, traditional claims of gender neutrality and objectivity must be contested to reveal the self-interests of the dominant (male) groups. Three, social justice platforms and practices are the only way to eliminate gender discrimination and other forms of oppression and injustice. Four, the experiential knowledge of women or their unique voice is valid, legitimate, and critical for understanding the persistence of gender inequality, and these unique voices are often demonstrated through storytelling and counternarratives. Five, women are differentially discriminated against depending on the interests of the dominant group and depending upon the intersections of their identities. Six, history and historical contexts must be considered to challenge policies and practices that affect women. Seven, critical feminist theory must be interdisciplinary in nature (9).

### ***Womanist Theory***

Womanism is a concept generally considered to contextualize Black women by race, gender, and class within American society (Rousseau 452). The concept of “womanism” was coined by Alice Walker and is often used interchangeably with the Black feminist perspective (McLane-Davison and

Hewitt 191). Both are concerned with systems of oppression and introduce compassion for women working and loving each other, regardless of sexuality (McLane-Davison and Hewitt 191). Walker is widely known for describing a womanist as a Black feminist. Womanism is an alternative to an expansion of feminism, which challenges sexism in the Black community and similarly challenges racism in the feminist community. Other scholars note that womanism embraces the concepts of race and gender within the context of equality, community, collectivism, self-determination, culture, experience, empowerment, liberation, power, reciprocity, and love, regardless of gender or sexual orientation (Gilkes 15; McLane-Davison and Hewitt 191; Rousseau 452).

A discussion of womanist theory and womanism would be incomplete without acknowledging Patricia Hill Collins's seminal work on Black feminist thought. Collins's work illuminates the marginalizing effect and cultural distinctions between white feminism and Black feminism. These competing and sometimes conflicting distinctions have impacted definitions of Black motherhood and arguably invalidated the interpretations ascribed to related mothering experiences of Black women (Collins 110). Collins's discussion on such concepts as blood mothers, othermothers, and women-centred networks magnified lesser-known aspects of Black motherhood in the literature (Collins 178). She asserts that the experiences of motherhood in the Black community are tied to status and social activism and analyzes the perceived incompatibility of work and motherhood while emphasizing the necessity for Black mothers to work (Collins 176), thus highlighting the strength and implied challenges Black women face balancing work and motherhood.

Existing research examines Black motherhood by combining the perspective of Black feminist thought as delineated by Collins, the definition of womanism as presented by Walker, and the extended critique of womanism by Layli Maparyan (Craddock 2-4). Through this inherently multifaceted lens, Craddock presents a "three-point prism of inquiry" (5) that examines what she identifies as the contours, contexts, and considerations (CCC) of Black motherhood. These points of inquiry emerged from a robust qualitative study that resulted in profiles of resistance, which were developed to reveal case study findings of Black women and their responses to resistance within the CCC of Black motherhood (7). Craddock's qualitative examination of the contours' profile disclosed the critical aspect of socioemotional and relational health and its opposing dynamics. According to Craddock, Black mothers operate within a myriad of foundational contexts (e.g., community advocates, caregivers, and social workers) that empower them to resist oppression resulting from a persistent array of societal factors. Throughout decades, Black women have given significant considerations in their routine planning and strategizing related to their career, family planning, and professional development, to name a few.

## Literature Review

### *Integrating Role Theory, Critical Feminist Theory, Womanist Theory, and Social Work*

During the same era in which role theory and critical feminist theory evolved between the 1970s and 1990s, women's roles and social positions evolved. Time-specific research noted that African American women tended to select roles and careers in traditional fields for women (e.g., social work, teaching, and counselling) versus nontraditional fields for women (e.g., law, medicine, and engineering) (Burlew and Johnson 302), despite growing interest and involvement by other women. This maintained commitment to traditional fields of work is largely because these traditional professional roles provided the most flexibility and alignment with cultural values and gender roles, despite feeling oppressive to some.

Over the last thirty years, womanist research has argued that African American women tend to gravitate towards and build communal bonds with those who identify with their gender and culture (Burlew and Johnson 309; McDowell and Carter-Francique 402; Payne and Suddler 394). This seemingly natural gravitation was beneficial in buffering the challenges associated with simply existing and achieving in environments perceived as more hostile and discriminatory (Burlew and Johnson 309; McDowell and Carter-Francique 402; Payne and Suddler 394).

Despite this expansion of roles and community-building practice for African American women, the challenges to fulfill work roles while meeting the cultural values and gender-assigned expectations have remained consistent. Along with issues associated with racial and ethnic differences, there are additional challenges for African American professional women, particularly in consideration of personal relationships (e.g., marriage, children) and educational achievement (e.g., degree attainment) (Anthis 335). It is reasonable to consider that domains can be precursors for life changes, identity confusion, role conflict, role strain, and role overload (Anthis 335; Burlew and Johnson 309).

In one study, African American women in nontraditional work roles reported the additional barrier of race. They noted the role conflict between the work-family interface demonstrated in earlier research on white women (Cooper, Cary, and Davidson 50). It has also been stated that Black women have amended the traditional path to professional identity and leadership, having entered careers traditionally dominated by white males; Black women have had to contend with sexism and racism. These experiences contribute to separate approaches towards navigating their careers and making a change in the workplace (Dickens and Chavez 771; Edmondson Bell and Nkomo 678; Hills 8).

Within social work practice and social work education, the complexity surrounding the intersection of race, gender, and social roles for women of colour has been noted (Dickens and Chavez 771; Vakalahi, Starks, and Hendricks 13). Concerns regarding mentorship, leadership opportunities, equity, and white and male privilege—often reinforced by structural and institutional racism—are some of the issues women of colour face in social work (Burton, Cyr, and Weiner 5; Corley and Young 322). Furthermore, the challenges that women of colour, particularly African American women, encounter concerning work-life balance are that much more difficult due to the cultural expectations and values surrounding the need to provide financial stability and manage additional stressors within organizations (e.g., large workloads, limited resources, administrative paperwork, racism, and sexism) (Janasz et al. 1449). These challenges experienced by African American women in practice and the academy are numerous and have been well documented in the literature. Furthermore, awareness of the information mentioned above provides context for understanding our experiences as African American mothers and social workers.

### **Exploring Roles: Mothering and Othering**

References have been made to the challenges that African American professional women face in achieving work-life balance while serving dual roles as mother and other. However, to gain greater insight into how these roles are operationalized in daily living, we will provide experiential data via their reflections to explore the similarities, differences, benefits, and challenges associated with their experience as African American women who serve in dual roles of mother/other and social work practitioner, educator, and researcher.

#### ***Personal Reflections***

There are many similarities and areas of overlap in our professional identity as social workers and our personal identity as African American mothers. In both worlds, we assume the roles of teacher, mentor, nurturer, and supporter of others. It is our responsibility to ensure the health and wellbeing of those within our areas of responsibility. Although there are different accountability and financial reward levels, these roles ensure the continuity of professional and cultural experiences and values. In addition, the benefits of both positions are the assurance that positive contributions have been made in and to the larger society.

However, consistent with role theory, we are frequently challenged with role strain, role conflicts, and role overload as social work practitioners, educators, and researchers. Burdened by guilt, we unsuccessfully manage the numerous

roles and competing expectations placed upon us. The notion of the stereotypical Black superwoman is pervasive in the inner recesses of our minds and at the forefront of feeling empowered by our ability to persevere and show our resilience despite life's stressors. Society has placed this unrealistic expectation on Black women, and Black women have bought into this label and have become plagued by the documented and adverse effects of the strong Black woman syndrome. Even more troubling is the realization that our children may also internalize this syndrome as truth. The prioritization that some Black women have given to their careers in addition to gender role expectations within marriage may affect children's socialization. Exposure to this patriarchal structure leaves our children assuming that mommy does everything and is, in fact, a superwoman; therefore, the wife should do everything. This widespread inference is detrimental to our daughters and sons, who become socialized by these unrealistic and unsustainable mother and wife roles.

The inherent stressors associated with the social work profession and familial and societal expectations of the wife and mother role are seemingly unmanageable. As a result of exceptional role strain, we regularly commiserate over missed academic and extracurricular activities along with other meaningful moments in their children's lives.

Although similarities in role strain experiences are evident, coping strategies vary among African American mothers. Faith and spiritual traditions have been a primary source of strength for us. Similarly, the bonds of sisterhood through friendship have sustained us through role-related stress. Strong reliance on faith and friendship is common among African American women and is foundational in Black culture. Like other women, we have also been plagued by several maladaptive coping strategies in response to the exorbitant stress related to role overload experienced as African American mothers who are also social work practitioners, educators, and researchers. Similar to other African American women, these maladaptive coping strategies have adversely affected our mental, physical, financial, and spiritual wellbeing.

Though taught, the concept of "self-care" is not easily integrated into our own lives. Long work hours are required to manage the countless responsibilities that accompany various professional roles. Consequently, individual energy levels are compromised. Whereas the stereotypical role of a wife may be to prepare healthy meals and maintain a tidy home, we rely heavily on our social support systems to mitigate competing responsibilities. This concept is widely practiced in the Black community, as it is akin to the well-known African proverb, "It takes a whole village to raise a child."

As social work practitioners, educators, and researchers, our decisions to prioritize professional roles over motherhood are occasionally rewarded by a sense of accomplishment when we are recognized for our scholarship, excellence in teaching, and service provision for our clients. Contrarily, these

same decisions are met with overwhelming guilt, which commonly pervades our consciousness. Regular internal battles commence with self-bargaining over the parameters of our divided attention.

## **Discussion**

Society often encourages women to employ strategies that would enable them to better integrate or manage their personal and professional roles in a less sacrificial manner. We argue that integration and management are unrealistic and virtually impossible, as the roles conflict. Sacrificial choices are almost inescapable. As confirmed by many notable people, “You can have it all, but not all at the same time.” Failure to accept this somewhat painful reality can contribute to significant anger and anxiety and manifest physically (e.g., migraines, fibroids, cancers, and weight gain) for many Black women, as we are expected to handle it all gracefully (Woods–Giscombe, 670). We can relate to the mounting stress African American women experience daily, along with enormous societal pressures to be strong and all enduring.

For decades, the Black superwoman and the strong Black woman syndrome have pervaded the African American community while academicians have continued investigating this perspective. Remaining is the need to develop and test a theory that seeks to explain and speak to the needs of African American professional women who serve in multiple capacities and roles.

## **Future Research**

Stressors associated with the multifarious roles of women (e.g., mother, daughter, wife, friend, employee, employer, community worker, volunteer, and chaperone) are well documented in the aforementioned studies examining role-related variables among women. An EBSCO database search yielded over 100,000 results using such keywords as “role confusion,” “role overload,” “role conflict,” “role strain,” and “women” or “female.” A similar search produced nearly eight thousand results when replacing the keyword women with African American or Black women. Notably, fewer studies emerged with a more selective inquiry that used “mother,” “parenting,” “motherhood,” “mothering,” and “social work” as keywords. This cursory analysis supports the need for additional research incorporating these variables in role-related research, specifically Black women.

Role overload is exacerbated by role conflicts, role confusion, and role strain. According to womanist theory, race intensifies these dynamics and resulting stressors (Gilkes 15; Rousseau 452). Moreover, although Black women may be perceived by some as resilient superwomen, the Black feminist perspective and critical feminist literature related to the resilience of women have provided

essential criticisms as well as guides related to theoretical and conceptual assumptions for scholars examining the intersectionality of race, gender, and concepts of resilience (Bracke 52). The literature remains deficient in theoretical conjectures on the effects of mothering on the intersection of race and gender, particularly for Black women.

The experiential data are confirmed in existing research and are aligned with role and womanist theories. Yet it reveals an indisputable need for a more robust theory, which explains the convergence of race, gender, and mothering for African American women. Such an approach would provide an adequate theoretical foundation for the myriad of layers experienced by Black women.

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