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Challenging controlling images, oppression, poverty and other structural constraints: Survival strategies among African American women in distressed households

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Abstract

Powerful controlling images perpetuate misguided messages about impoverished African American women that contribute to the oppression these women endure. These images inform policies and behavior that create and maintain structural barriers such as lack of access to education and meaningful employment further marginalizing oppressed individuals. This article uses in-depth interview data to analyze interlocking oppressions in the lived experience of impoverished African American women. The authentic women's voices presented serve as a counter narrative of resistance. Our larger goal in writing this paper is to encourage the public, policy makers, service providers and impoverished African American women themselves to fight against controlling images by deconstructing personal biases, educating the public, and developing culturally congruent interventions to social problems.

Keywords

African American women; controlling images; interlocking oppressions; stereotypes; social justice; poverty

Introduction

Impoverished African American women have endured a long history of interlocking oppressions at the intersection of sexism, racism, and classism (Alfred and Chlup 2009; Clark 1993; Collins 1998; Hooks 2005; Samuels and Ross-Sheriff 2008; Windsor, Benoit, and Dunlap 2008). Some argue that this brutality has been facilitated through the creation and dissemination of powerful controlling images that promulgate misguided messages which in turn sustain harmful and incorrect beliefs about impoverished African American women (2000; West 1995). Collins (1998) contends that the dominant group uses controlling influences to justify racism, sexism, poverty and other forms of oppression as a natural part of everyday life. In this manner, these stereotypes are central to the process by which impoverished African American women are blamed for their own oppression as opposed to supported in their struggles with difficult and interconnected challenges. On the other hand, some have argued that poverty, not controlling images or race is responsible for

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the oppression experienced by impoverished African American women. They explain that racism was addressed in the U.S. by the civil rights movement, and thus, those still struggling to achieve the American dream face challenges due to poverty and their own shortcomings (Glazer 1975). Most recently, proponents of these views have argued that the election of President Barack Obama is clear evidence that the United States no longer discriminate against people on the basis of race (Teasley and Ikard 2010).

In this paper, we examine the lived experiences of six impoverished African American women as they struggle against the oppression they encounter in their daily lives. The analysis examines the complex interplay between poverty, structural barriers, controlling images, and the interlocking nature of class, gender, and racial oppression experienced by participants. Poor persons living in high poverty neighborhoods face numerous and interconnected social problems including substandard housing, educational failure, inadequate medical and dental care, hunger, poor nutrition, drug abuse, crime, family stress, violence, and despair (Dunlap, Golub, and Johnson 2006b; Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, and Sameroff 1999; Johnson, Williams, Dei, and Sanabria 1990; Kasarda 1992; Kozol 1996; Massey and Denton 1993; Wilson 1987). Literature has examined whether, race, class, gender, or as a growing literature highlights the combination of the three has the greatest impact on the inability of many African Americans to excel financially in mainstream American society (Glazer 1975; Jencks and Mayer 1990; Massey 1994; Wilson 1987; Wilson 1996). This paper explores how the controlling images described below create obstacles for social-economic advancement.

Controlling Images and Interlocking Oppressions

Several of the central controlling images that dominate the lives of impoverished African American women today, actually date back to slavery (including the Jezebel and the mammy). Jezebel is a biblical figure portrayed in the Books of Kings as a conniving harlot devoted to false gods. This image was imposed on dark skinned native women by puritan European men even prior to slavery (West 1995). The Jezebel image helped justify slavery by portraying African women as subhuman. This image promotes the belief that Black women have insatiable sexual desires and promiscuity. Accordingly, they cannot be raped because they enjoy sex under any circumstances. This convenient lie blamed slave women for their sexual oppression. This imagery was conveniently employed further when the slave trade was finally outlawed in 1820. At that point, the use of slavery depended on domestic breeding. Slave laws said that children born to a slave woman were also slaves to the woman's master. As a result, slave women were examined at public auctions for their ability to bear children; then raped, and forced to bear children who served as slaves (Russell and Hodges 2005). The Jezebel image was used to blame Black women's uncontrollable lust for their oppressor. Today, many continue to view African American women as insatiable sex freaks (Collins 2000).

The mammy image can be traced back to the 1800s when slave traders attempted to hide the cruel reality of slavery by presenting it as a paternalistic system in which slaves and slave owners loved and took care of each other. Stories and pictures of happy and caring slave women and their masters hugging and smiling became prevalent and Black care takers were called mammies (McElya 2007). This controlling image encouraged Black women to remain submissive to their own oppression, and teach their own children to remain submissive. Today, the mammy image persists as the overweight, happy, lazy, and stupid African American woman who is not capable of performing well in meaningful employment positions (Collins 2000; West 1995).

More recently developed controlling images -- including the sapphire, welfare queen, and crack whore-- hold that African American women are angry, pathologically dependent on

welfare, abuse their children, abuse drugs and are incapable of adhering to mainstream norms regarding morality and self reliance. These images seek to justify poverty by blaming individual's nature and fail to see other structural constraints and challenges (Dunlap and Johnson 1992; Reinerman and Levine 1997).

The sapphire image perpetuates a belief that African American women are aggressive, domineering, and masculine. Sapphire Stevens was a well-known character from the Amos and Andy radio and television shows in the 1940s and 1950s. Sapphire was aggressive, loud, obnoxious, and capable of taking down any men. The Sapphire has recently been reproduced on the popular television show *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. This image of toughness justifies imposing heavy work and violence on unfeminine, coarse African American women (Thomas, Speight, and Witherspoon 2004; West 1995).

In the 1970s, Ronald Reagan crowned the welfare queen controlling image when he described the African American woman who had successfully received a significant amount of money from the government by "playing" the welfare system. This controlling image reflects the belief that African American women are lazy, unwed, negligent mothers who start bearing children during their teens and then depend on the government to support their household. This controlling image serves to reinforce the idea that impoverished African American women are undeserving of government aid because they are innately mischievous and will take advantage of the state's "goodwill" (Hays 2003; Limbert and Bullock 2005; Quadagno 1996; Roberts 2002).

In the 1980s, the crack whore controlling image emerged contending that African American women who use crack will do anything to get their drugs especially trading sex. Indeed, many Black families were devastated from the mid 1980s to the early 1990s by a mother's crack use (Dunlap, Golub, and Johnson 2006a; Murphy and Rosenbaum 1997). The crack whore image emphasizes that these women continue to use drugs during their pregnancies despite awareness of the negative effect of these drugs on their children. The crack whore controlling image was shaped by research and observations describing the behavior of women who used crack and reinforced by controlling images such as the welfare queen, portraying Black women as unfit mothers and therefore justifying the forceful removal of their children by the state. Controlling images function as a powerful mechanism which justifies and maintains the disproportionate impact of structural forces such as poverty, inadequate education, and housing on impoverished African Americans. The current paper describes findings from secondary data analysis of an ethnographic, longitudinal data, examining the impact of controlling images on the lived experiences of African American women. The analysis explores how controlling images in combination with structural barriers oppress poor African American women.

Methods

This paper examines qualitative data collected from two longitudinal ethnographic studies funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA): Co-occurring Drugs & Violence in Distressed Households and Transient Domesticity & Violence in Distressed Households. Both studies were designed to examine the underlying dynamics and context of family relationships, violence, and drug use among impoverished African-American families in New York City from 1995 through 2007. Both studies were approved by an Institutional Review Board, participants provided informed consent and were paid for each interview. Participants were interviewed every six months for three to five years. Ethnographers also conducted regular household observations in the studies. The ethnographers' detailed field notes of their observations and transcripts of the in-depth interviews are maintained in a FileMaker Pro database for convenient retrieval (Johnson, Dunlap, and Benoit 2010).

Analysis

Analysis followed methodology described in Stake (2006) to develop a holistic description of overall patterns while preserving the uniqueness of each case. Each narrative was analyzed on its own allowing initial themes to emerge. Afterwards, cases were compared and viewed from a controlling images perspective. The stories presented use the participants' own words to provide an authentic view of their experiences, their coping strategies, and their resistance to the ideology that sought to justify their oppression. Their experiences, challenges and narratives illustrate the interplay between internalization and resistance of controlling images.

Participants

All of the participants were poor, lived in a high-poverty section of New York City, were African American, and had used illicit drugs. This paper describes the six women from two families whose experiences are diverse and illustrative of the mechanics of controlling images: Diane and Bernice are mother and daughter; Marie is Peaches' aunt and Peaches is Carmen and Candy's mother. Table 1 lists participants' demographic information. Codenames were used to protect participants' identities.

Results

The participants' experiences of oppression and resistance were quite varied. Some were able to maintain consistent low income, stable public housing, and retain custody of their children despite the oppression they endured. Others reported experiencing extreme physical and sexual violence, severe poverty, and chronic homelessness throughout their lives. Some of the major challenges faced by participants were sexual abuse, substance misuse and addiction, violence, poverty, and lack of parental supervision during adolescence. Participants alternatively internalized or resisted the ideology which justified their oppression. Their lived experiences illustrate the complex relationship between the multiple ways in which different people respond to severe distress at different settings and at different times. This section is organized to present their struggles in response to five inter-related controlling images: the Jezebel and the crack whore who are dominated by their illicit obsessions; the welfare queen and the mammy who are lazy, stupid and socially irresponsible; and the Sapphire who is tough and sassy and can endure any hardship. These details from real life stories present powerful and grounded insight into the rich and complex interlocking oppressions experienced as well as resistance by impoverished African American women in response to prevailing controlling images and structural barriers. These stories present the authors' interpretations through the lenses of controlling images, structural barriers, and intersectionality theory of a few elements of the participants' otherwise complex narratives.

The Jezebel

This study did not find any cases in which a participant internalized the Jezebel image and adopted promiscuous behavior. Rather, the Jezebel image seemed apparent in the way participants were viewed and treated by others. Participants were often seen as sexualized objects with little or no value. The vast majority of participants in the studies were regularly raped or sexually abused. The women quickly learned that no one would interfere to stop the sexual abuse and that they were often alone to defend themselves. Indeed, participants often felt responsible for their own sexual abuse. Sometimes they felt helpless and went along with the abuse. Other times they resisted their position and struggled to seek justice, stop the abuse, or protect their children.

Peaches and Carmen's stories illustrate the complexities of sexual exploitation, assault, and rape. Over time, Peaches realized her attempts to stop it were fruitless and she came to accept this as her lot and gave up on fighting. Instead she would quietly endure rape from various men, and eventually she started charging money or drugs for sex (also see Dunlap, Golub, and Johnson 2003). As a child, Peaches shared a Single Room Occupancy (SRO) welfare hotel room with her mother. They had to share the bathroom and the kitchen with the tenants on their floor. Most tenants in the SRO were male drug users who repeatedly abused Peaches sexually starting when she was about 6 years old. Around the same time, her father began to fondle her. The abuse progressed to rape when Peaches was in her mid teens, continuing until she was approximately 19 years old. She described one of those incidents:

I was in my bedroom sleeping and I felt something but I thought it was a dream. I felt a man... somebody touching me. And then I felt a weight lift off of me. And I just knew it...at the last minute I opened my eyes and I saw my father standing there. Then I saw him run out the room. I know it was my father. He was having sex with me. And so I said, Oh my God! And I said, oh that must have been a dream. I felt down there and it was wet. It wasn't a dream.

Throughout her childhood, Peaches felt helpless to stop her father. As an adult, she resisted, not by refusing to have sex with her father but by demanding to get paid:

After a while, later, when I got older and started messing with crack and going on dates and the few times I saw my father and he would...I would see him trying to come on to me. I act like I was sleep. I just opened my eyes and said, "Look! Let's just put this in perspective. If you wanna have sex with me, you gotta pay like everybody else." And I made...he gave me money and I had sex with him and I felt horrible afterwards because I felt like I enjoyed it too.

In this manner, Peaches was taught early on that her body was a sexual object that could be taken by men at their will. Yet, a part of her continued to resist the notion that her incestuous relationship was normal because she was horrified to realize she enjoyed having sex with her own father. Peaches became addicted to heroin in her late teens, so her mother had her committed to an inpatient drug rehabilitation program. Peaches hated the program and soon ran away from the facility with a friend. They took refuge in a hotel room, sharing the same bed with Peaches' maternal uncle. The uncle raped Peaches regularly. However, Peaches kept the secret because this uncle was the success story in the family. He had been in the army, was popular among family members, and had been written up as an African American who had made something of his life. She could not bring herself to tell her grandmother or anyone else about the abuse. Peaches felt that maintaining his positive image was more important than protecting herself from his abuse. At the same time, remaining silent was a way to cope with the trauma of sexual abuse because victims often feel responsible for the abuse and they feel ashamed (Pino and Meier 1999). In one sense, Peaches clearly employed a maladaptive coping strategy. However, in an odd sense, her actions also represented resistance to other controlling images of African Americans by upholding her uncle's positive image in the community.

Like her mother Peaches, Carmen was raped repeatedly by people she knew, strangers, and family members. She disclosed being raped by the same man three times and felt helpless to defend herself. She was afraid to call the police because they would ask her questions about where her mother was and she was afraid they might arrest Peaches for her drug related charges. Carmen's rapist was a man she had hoped to date. He asked her out and she accepted. He forced her inside a house, held her captive, and raped her for hours with a gun pointed to her head. When her captor's friends arrived they also raped her. Carmen blamed herself for agreeing to go out with the boy and didn't tell anyone about it. The second time he raped her, he found Carmen in the neighborhood, grabbed her, and dragged her by the

hair for ten blocks. He threatened to drag her on her knees when she tried to hold back. Amazingly, many people saw her struggle but no one interfered. The third rape started when he spotted Carmen in the crowd at a block party. Against her will, he forced her to go to the roof. This time she didn't yell or struggle because she was afraid and felt there was no use to struggle. Carmen never reported any of these rapes. She explained that at the time she felt ashamed and responsible for what happened to her, even though she ultimately knew that the rape was not her fault:

Anyway, I figured I should have just not been-I figured it was my fault. Because I went to a block party, and he seen me there, and he dragged me to a building. I never had sex outside. I wasn't that type of person. But really, he would threaten me, pull my hair, hit me in my mouth. And another time I was on a street in the neighborhood, he literally dragged me ten blocks. My cousin could have helped me, but he was in jail. And other than that, like I said, I was scared. What am I supposed to do? I really didn't know. And I mean that was really forced. But like a year later, he raped this other girl, and got her pregnant. And she had to give her baby up for adoption. And he's been in jail since then.

Like her mother Peaches, Carmen initially attempted to resist the rape and fight back. However, as the abuse continued and her attempts to stop it failed, she eventually accepted it as a part of her life she needed to endure. Participants seemed to feel they needed to sacrifice themselves for the sake of other community members as illustrated by Peaches protecting her uncle and Carmen avoiding the police to protect Peaches. Enduring sexual abuse and rape was a normalized aspect of life and part of what these women had to accept. There was no expectation of outside protection or justice. Sometimes the participants appeared to have internalized the controlling image and sometimes they presented resistance. One thing that was always clear from our perspective as the authors of this paper is the severe injustice these women endured. No woman should ever have to accept rape as a normal part of life in order to make sense of the world in which they live. They should be able to expect personal safety as a human being and as expressed in the law.

The Crack Whore

The crack whore controlling image goes hand-in-hand with the Jezebel. This image exacerbated the oppression of women who became addicted to crack. From a very young age, Peaches was taught by the men who abused her that they would take her body whether she wanted it or not. She then resisted by at least demanding they give her something in return. In light of the poverty she experienced and the low value that society attributed to her, prostitution seemed like a way to resist her oppression. During the 1980s, many impoverished African Americans became addicted to crack when it became a profitable business and widely available in many American inner cities. People were caught by surprise in the devastation that crack brought into these already vulnerable communities (Dunlap, Golub, and Johnson 2006a; Murphy and Rosenbaum 1997). Peaches quickly became addicted to crack and she had very few resources to help her fight her addiction. Crack and the behaviors associated with its use had a devastating impact in people's lives. These behaviors helped reinforce the controlling image of the crack whore, blaming those addicted to crack for being unfit mothers, immoral, and marginalized. Society reacted by developing sanctions and punishments to correct the behaviors of those addicted to crack, further contributing to the victimization of African American women who were addicted to crack (Zerai and Banks 2002).

At age 35, Peaches began using crack daily. It was 1986 and the height of the crack epidemic in New York City (Dunlap, Golub, and Johnson 2006a). Peaches reported that her initiation into crack use marked the beginning of her troubles. Crack certainly intensified her

problems; however her life had not been trouble free before. While involved with her crack habit, Peaches neglected her children, became homeless, worked as a prostitute, did not use safe sex procedures, and contracted numerous sexually transmitted diseases including syphilis, gonorrhea, vaginitis, trichomonas, and ultimately HIV.

By late 1999, Peaches' lungs were weak and she coughed profusely. At first glance, Peaches' crack use seems to account for the various negative consequences she and her family experienced. It is easy to point out that Peaches' infection resulted from prostitution and unsafe sex. However, we contend a deeper examination of Peaches' narrative reveals how these experiences are all rooted in oppression and structural barriers based on controlling images.

Candy, Peaches' eldest child, experienced the crack whore controlling image first hand as she lost custody of her daughter to the state when her baby tested positive for cocaine at birth. At the time of Candy's first interview her daughter was 3 years old and had been in foster care her entire life. Candy was quite bitter about losing custody of her daughter:

With my daughter, my most frequent problem is dealing with the emotions I feel behind the fact that she's in foster care. You know, and dealing with the depression and stuff that comes over that. You know, and worrying over, you know, what kind of relationship she and I will have, since she more than likely won't be, I won't be raising her, more than likely.

Candy had a hard time coping with the anger she accumulated over the course of her life from being mistreated by her mother, multiple rapes, her difficulty in developing a career despite her love for books and math, and the loss of her daughter. While Candy pledged never to engage in an abusive relationship with a man as her mother did, she became addicted to crack. Her crack use aggravated the distress she experienced making it difficult for her to make progress. She struggled with feelings of guilt as she felt responsible for the distress in her life. Candy expressed great insight about the processes which triggered her addiction and ultimately her recovery. She felt torn and responsible for her daughter being taken from her. Fighting for custody of her daughter wrench left her feeling angry, guilty, and frustrated. However, as a mother she felt she could not give up. In Candy's case, ACS policies served as yet another obstacle for healing:

I notice that when I take too much on my plate, that there's a certain point that I get to that I know what I can handle, in terms of living life on life's terms and day to day, day to day. And when I feel like I've got too much things, too much pressures and stuff going, that's when I need to cut back on whatever those pressures are, instead of, you know, trying to tough it out and say, "I'll do it. I'll do it by myself. I'll do it by the skin of my teeth." and then just saying, "to hell with it," and going and getting high. Like for example, with my daughter, I should have just went on and gave up my custody a long time ago, instead of keep fighting that battle that I know was tearing me up. I know that all the stresses and shit I was under. But when I started dealing with that situation with Angela again, I could feel it coming. I could feel the pressure and the anger and the hostility, the frustration and the guilt, all of that. And I knew I should have just left it alone; but as a mother, I just kept feeling guilty, like, if I don't, you know, see her and do, you know, go through the motions, then I'm being a bad mother and stuff. And this went on forever.

The quote reveals the pain and confusion controlling images can induce in their victims. The crack whore controlling image reproduced in society via the media and oppressive policies told Candy that she is a crack addict, a bad mother, a sexual object, a criminal, and a punching bag. The messages she received blamed her for her own plight creating a tremendous amount of guilt, shame, and hopelessness. On the other hand, her anger tells her

that she is a victim, that she deserves more respect. She fights for her daughter because that proves to her that she is a good mother after all. The struggle results in a vicious cycle where Candy pulled her strengths together, stopped using drugs, made progress toward securing housing, just to make one mistake and lose everything she worked for.

Paradoxically, this image served as a protective factor for Carmen's generation who mostly avoided ever using crack (Furst, Johnson, Dunlap, and Curtis 1999; Golub, Johnson, Dunlap, and Sifaneck 2004). Carmen explained that watching the consequences of crack, powder cocaine, and heroin on her mother's life discouraged her from experimenting with these drugs. Consequently, Carmen only used alcohol and marijuana and never even tried any other drugs:

My mother use crack and she's on methadone. It affected me a lot when I was growing up because she wasn't stable and drugs were her first priority. Watching her made me never want to touch that shit.

Carmen's disgust with crack and heroin allowed her to focus her energy on providing for herself and caring for her children. Prior to becoming addicted to crack, Peaches nurtured the love for math in Carmen which gave her a critical skill in securing employment as an adult. Carmen recalled learning math from her mother:

Well, when I was seven or eight, my mother used to go to college. And I remember she would take me to her classes and teach me stuff, you know. So at an early age, my mother would read big, like, Stephen King books. And I'm like eight, nine years old, you know what I'm saying. I mean, that has to do with school, because I think that helped me a lot. And like teaching me big words, like don't procrastinate. That taught me big words, you know what I'm saying. So basically, you know, I was a good student, because she always did things like that. She loved math, so at seven, taking me to her math class, showing me how much she loved math; showing me simple algebra at seven, and when I guessed it, I would be able to yell it out in the college class, to the point that the teacher would say to my mother and me, "okay, sweetheart, we know you know it; don't yell it out any more." Because the college people wasn't getting it. I'm like eight years old. It made me love math. So she didn't directly sit down and say, let's study this math.

Not only had Carmen resisted becoming a crack whore, these early academic successes nurtured a positive self image.

The Welfare Queen and the Mammy

The data suggests the welfare queen and mammy controlling images tended to be linked. The mammy was manifested mostly through participants' inability to obtain a quality education that would prepare them for meaningful employment. Educators, employers and welfare workers often treated participants as if they were stupid and incapable of performing planning tasks. The welfare queen was manifested in participants' experiences navigating the welfare system. Participants' lack of opportunities and training contributed to their dependence on the welfare system, which in turn, failed to prepare participants to obtain and maintain meaningful employment.

The stigma of the mammy and the welfare queen were a constant reminder of the low value larger society attaches to impoverished African American women. Most of the distress Carmen's great aunt Marie experienced in her life came from her family's poverty which exposed her to violence, obstacles to acquiring work skills, and substance misuse and drug trafficking. Marie's family was directly descended from slaves. They had never accumulated wealth they could draw from. Marie's mother supported her family through welfare and various odd jobs including washing clothes for others, hosting gambling games, and selling

alcohol after-hours. While the illegal activity was a common way of supplementing family income, Marie was ashamed of being supported by welfare and she had a difficult time hiding her family's welfare status from others as she explained:

It's [welfare] sort of a shame thing. Because I remember the pea green, to me they was nice; they was new. The pea green skirts and the navy blue sweaters we'd get from the state. And shoes. They used to give 'em to my mother, so many outfits, two outfits or something. It was almost like uniforms, but it was a pea green and a nice sweater. I remember the colors. But that's the color of the state stuff. And the shoes, always black shoes. That's why I don't like black shoes today. We was young, and we knew the ones on welfare by the other kids in the school, and the way they dressed. They would wear nice clothes. That's why I approve of uniforms today. All children should have uniforms. There shouldn't be children coming in school, all got the latest styles and some kids don't.

Although Marie's family valued education, many members of her family dropped out of school prematurely due to racism they experienced that can be at least partially attributed to the mammy controlling image. According to Marie "what you put in your head cannot be taken away by the White man." They believed that they could use education to improve their economic and social condition. However, Marie faced many obstacles in acquiring an education including racism and the shame of wearing clothes provided by welfare. She felt inferior because her family was poorer than most other children in her school. Marie also recalled that light-skinned children treated better than dark-skinned children at her school as if they were somehow less of a mammy and more mainstream solely because of their physical appearance. She felt it was unjust that the teachers were "prejudiced against the darker ones." Marie would often cut classes, get into "scraps over petty things," and "cause a ruckus." Marie finally dropped out in the tenth grade after getting pregnant. Eventually, she attended a program where she earned her GED and 95 college credits.

Decades later, Marie's niece, Peaches, experienced similar controlling images, but from her peers that had internalized the images, not from her teachers. Compared to other students Peaches was very poor and like her aunt Marie, she wore second hand clothing, which embarrassed her. However unlike Marie, Peaches was always in honors and gifted classes, got along with her teachers and did not fight with the other students. She was agreeable, friendly, and spoke "proper English." Peaches was often told she "talked like a White girl," which she naively took as a compliment. She did not yet realize that this remark expressed a cultural norm that held that African American girls are not supposed to speak proper English, that they should reproduce the uneducated dialect of the mammy. Despite a love for books instilled in her by her mother, Peaches succumbed to the stigmatization of her peers and dropped out of high school in the 10th grade.

After experiencing tremendous challenges as a teenager, Peaches' daughter Carmen was able to improve her situation as an adult. At age 18, Carmen became eligible for welfare and she successfully applied to receive benefits. Welfare played a key role in alleviating some of the distress she experienced, though the process was often difficult. Prior to 1996, welfare was seen as an entitlement aimed at assisting single mothers in raising their children. After 1996, welfare became a state mechanism to force those struggling with poverty out of welfare and often into low-paying jobs. The current system is informed by the controlling images of the welfare queen and mammy contributing to the creation of a system that aims to motivate its *lazy and immoral* recipients to get off public assistance and join the work force through punitive sanctions that threaten to deny financial aid to those that do not comply (Quadagno 1996). Controlling images are pervasive within the welfare system justifying disregard for a needy and vulnerable population. Carmen described how she was

mistreated by her caseworker in her welfare office until she complained to then Senator David Patterson (currently Governor of New York State) who intervened on her behalf:

The workers act so stink. I never even met my worker. She gave me an appointment for face-to-face and it had no appointment date on there and no time. It just said, "If you don't come you are gonna get cut off." I was sitting there...my appointment is for 9:30. I was sitting there from 9:15 because I know how it is in there. When 11:30 comes around I'm still like...Hey! What's going on? It's only two phones working so it's like fifty people on the phones. When I reached her at...I mean when I finally got through on the phone at eleven-something they said, "She was not at her desk." They said, "You have to call back in the afternoon." I said, "Oh really!?" I went right across the street to the senator's office, explained it to him, and he called her and then they told me to go over right then. I was seen as soon as I came in there. That's why I told everybody in there to go to the senator's office right across the street in the state building...David A. Patterson. I voted for him so you're gonna help me buddy. See a lot of people don't know that. But I mean it's ridiculous over there.

Carmen's experience reflects the discrimination she experienced at the intersection of her gender, class, and race in the welfare office. The value and respect attached to Carmen as an impoverished African American woman is clearly much less than accorded Senator Patterson, a Black man occupying a well-respected position. The quote also reflects Carmen's resilience and assertiveness. As she explained, most people would not have sought assistance from their senators. While Carmen received the assistance she needed in this instance, impoverished African American women should not have to depend on preferential treatment from authorities such as the Senator's office to be treated with respect by welfare workers and to receive the benefits they are eligible for.

The Sapphire

The controlling image of the sapphire was manifested in social expectations that participants must be strong in enduring oppression throughout their lives. This expectation created much frustration at times as illustrated by Carmen's quote below:

I feel that I was forgotten. I feel that I was-I was expected to do more than I could. I feel that I was tired of people saying, "You're a very strong girl. Like what is wrong with you?" [This left me thinking,] Why I have to be strong? What is that? Is that a compliment, or is that? You know what I'm saying. That's something that used to just get me angry. But, um, so that was, um, I had to grow up too fast. It was, you got to grow up. Maybe when you neglect a child, maybe you leave the Pamper on the child, just as an example, and they get a butt rash. But when you tell that child, "You got to change your own Pamper, or it ain't gone never get changed," it goes a little step further than neglect. They's forgotten about, you understand what I'm saying? So that's why-you know, I went from okay to not being there.

In this quote, Carmen described her experience resisting the controlling image of the sapphire. This controlling image was used by others to minimize and justify the oppression Carmen encountered as an impoverished African American woman, growing up in a family struck by crack addiction. The sapphire implies that African American women are strong and can endure the violence and hard work they are subjected to. In the quote above, Carmen expressed her frustration in having to cope with tremendous distress starting at birth while trying to fit in and function in mainstream society. Carmen endured many challenges in her life which led her to shut down her feelings and display a strong, tough persona. She wished that she did not have to experience homelessness and that her mother had not been

addicted to crack. However, like many participants and despite the difficulties they encountered, Carmen managed to nurture hope for her future:

I think it's [my life] kind of in shambles; but I don't think it's wasted or anything, because I'm still young; I'm smart. It's just so hard to pick up and it's just like, arrhh, to go through-putting it back together. Even though I have to do that, it's not too late for me to do that. I don't want it to be too late. But I'm not like hopeless. I'm just like-still in the I don't care mode.

Like Carmen, Bernice reported a positive outlook when thinking about her past life experiences and how these experiences prepared her for the future:

I think I had a lot of good experiences growing up in the projects. It's different when you come from somewhere and you're kind of sheltered from things and you don't really know what it is to have tragedy around you. Which wasn't necessarily a bad thing, cause sometimes when you never experience something bad and something bad happens you just fall apart. But when you kind of-not, I don't want to say accustom to it. But when you had it around you, you kind of know how to deal with things a little bit better. Everything is not a worry and everything is not a stress. So I think I can say that my experiences were that I learned a lot. I'm open to a lot more things today.

Bernice's quote above illustrated a common form of internalization of the sapphire controlling image. It reflects the idea that *what does not kill you, makes you stronger*. In looking back at the violence and oppression she experienced in her life, Bernice concluded that they served the important function of preparing her to survive a hostile world. She accepted the responsibility to be strong and survive. Thus, while justifying the interlocking oppressions that participants' encountered by posing as strong enough to endure it, the sapphire image served a dual role to help participants assign meaning to their oppression. They felt better about their lives because they can be proud that they survived.

Discussion

Black feminist literature has documented patriarchal and racist ideologies that continue to oppress African American Women (Collins 2000; Davis 1983; Hooks 1995). This analysis provides detailed insights as to how stereotyped beliefs regarding the value and character of impoverished African American women consistently posed obstacles in participants' lives. The stories presented illustrate the violence and deprivation controlling images such as the mammy, Jezebel, sapphire, welfare queen and crack whore imposed on African American women. Controlling images have and can continue to be reshaped and disseminated in contemporary society justifying the consistent surveillance and control of these women.

Controlling images have formed the backdrop for policies over the span of time from slavery to post-Civil War reconstruction and up through the current experiences of welfare reform (Quadagno 1996; Roberts 2002; Windsor 2008). Such policies helped create and maintain structural barriers (such as poverty and inability to obtain a High School degree or meaningful employment) that continually posed great challenges in the lives of the participants. In response, participants developed alternative coping strategies. Sometimes these strategies (such as illegal activities that supplemented their income) were critical in relieving their distress. However, many of these coping strategies also contributed to both their distress and oppression by exposing them to violence and harsh punishments imposed by criminal and welfare policies. Oppressive policies are based on racist, patriarchal expectations. Participants resisted, internalized, and/or coped with these assumptions. In resisting they refused to adhere to controlling images and developed their own theories about their identity and experiences. For instance, Bernice experienced the combined

brutality of violence, poverty, substance misuse, and drug traffic but consistently refused to accept the ideology that justified her oppression. Bernice's resistance involved the following steps to building her own counter narrative: (a) making sure she completed high school, (b) avoiding drug dealers and the violence resulting from the drug traffic present in her community, (c) caring and providing for her children's basic needs, (d) seeking meaningful employment, and (e) internalizing the importance of African American culture and community. Despite her efforts, she continued to struggle with poverty. To cope with the hard reality of her life, she reframed her experiences by claiming she is a stronger woman because of the challenges she had to deal with. This coping strategy allowed her to feel that the distress she encountered had meaning and purpose. At the same time, it helped her in confronting the injustices of growing up in an oppressive society as an impoverished African American woman. This analysis also revealed resistance and the resources available to participants in coping with great challenges. They counted on family and community support, welfare programs including housing, food stamps, cash assistance, and an ever present hope that, no matter how bad things may get today, the future will be brighter.

At the macro level, controlling images help justify the prejudice that biases social policy, thwarts opportunity and taints daily interactions. Thus, fighting the public use of controlling images and their impact on impoverished African American's lives presents a powerful mechanism for building social justice. By fostering critical thought, educators, service providers, and policy makers are central to addressing the macro-cultural problems that cause oppression. Specifically, policies must challenge mainstream assumptions by educating the public about the insidious affect of stereotypes, stimulate the creation of meaningful employment for the poor, and focus on family preservation as opposed to family separation. Moreover, comprehensive intervention programs are needed at the community level to foster educational attainment, employment, mental health treatment, and family preservation (also see Freire 2000; Gentlewarrior, Martin-Jearld, Skok, and Sweetser 2008). Service providers must continue to advance methods that inform the public and challenge stereotypes about impoverished Black women through research and practice.

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Table 1

Participants' Demographics, Experiences with Distress, and Number of Interviews

	Family 1		Family 2			
	Diane	Bernice	Marie	Peaches	Candy	Carmen
Relationship	Mother	Daughter	Aunt	Niece and Mother	Daughter	Daughter
Year Born	1960	1980	1940	1951	1969	1975
Highest grade completed	10 th	Some College	10 th and GED	12 th and GED	High School Degree	10 th and GED
Age at birth of first child	20	20	16	18	26	22
Single mother	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
# of children by 2007	5	1	3	2	2	3
# of children lost to ACS or others 2007	5	0	0	2	2	0
Drug(s) of choice	Crack and Alcohol	Marijuana	Alcohol and Marijuana	Heroin and powder cocaine	Crack	Marijuana
Has been arrested	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Experienced sexual violence	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Experienced Physical violence	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Health Status in 2007	Very Sick	Good	Unknown	Dead	Good	Good
Overall life Housing Status	Public Housing and Homeless	Public Housing	Public Housing	Public Housing and Homeless	Public Housing and Homeless	Public Housing and Homeless