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Passing the Torch: The Communal Roots of Intergenerational Messaging

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Passing the Torch: The Communal Roots of Intergenerational Messaging

Intergenerational messaging has been shown in previous studies to play a pivotal role in providing continuity to knowledge generation in Black life, particularly as related to passing essential knowledge of cultural, social, spiritual and practice. An examination of the ways Black maternal activists perceive intergenerational messaging as supporting their work as organizers is still in question. This study fills this gap by examining the forces that keep the hands of Black maternal activists steady as they guide the threads of activism for the next generation of liberators. Even as Black maternal activists are guides themselves, intergenerational messaging establishes the ways they are also guided by others. This construct is central to African-centered thought and practice within Black community life. Intergenerational messaging has a potential role to play in shaping the perceptions and actions of Black maternal activists. The question of what messages are perceived to be essential to Black maternal activists and the ways Black maternal activists engage to make meaning of their perceptions is also explored. This study centers the lived experiences of Black maternal activists living and working in Chicago's west side. Through semi-structured interviews with ten Black maternal activists ages18 years and older, this study uses a phenomenological approach and case study design to discover key findings related to intergenerational messaging. Key findings are that Black maternal activists view teachers as pivotal intergenerational messengers and incorporate themes of remaining steadfast, maintaining a clear focus on purpose, practicing inclusivity and maintaining a spiritual foundation to their work as fundamentally important messages received from ancestors and community elders to inform their organizing work. Intergenerational messaging is being introduced through this article to be considered part of our practice work as community psychologists.

Introduction

Black maternal activists are leading efforts to rescue blighted neighborhoods all over the country. From the Black maternal activist co-founders leading the Movement for Black Lives to the growing number of political leaders, artists, and scholar-activists, the presence of Black women who mother communities through activist work is the needle guiding the thread to piece and hold together a liberation struggle to dismantle White supremacy and racist oppression in its varied forms. In her description of the home as a place of resistance, hooks (1991) describes the role of Black mothers as often repairing harm from the assaults on the minds and hearts of Black children. This role is rooted in the home place but not bound there. The community mothers, or other

mothers are Black women who play this role in the community at large, assuming responsibility for the health and well-being of children by providing various forms of help to children when necessary (Collins, 1991). Julia Cooper, a 19th century clubwoman and educator describes Black women's activism as "the fundamental agency under God in the regeneration...of the race, as well as the groundwork and starting point of its progress upward" (Giddings, 1984, p.81). Cooper's discussion of activism acknowledges the role as a spiritual calling, and the role of women as mothers, childbirth. Motherhood is defined as a principled role that contains knowledge,

strategies, tools, nurturance, and ways of knowing that can result in the ability to buffer the community from the ravages of anti-Blackness and White supremacy (Sakho, 2017). Motherhood is the regeneration principle that contributes to community knowledge and capacity. The question of what makes this transference of strategies, tools, knowledge, and ways of knowing possible and passed on from generation to generation is lesser known within scholarship on Black maternal activism.

The purpose of this study on Black maternal activism was to learn the role of intergenerational messaging in Black maternal activist practice. I wanted to learn who were the influences of Black maternal activists? How did intergenerational messengers inform strategies employed by Black maternal activists? And finally, what are the broader implications for activist practice? Intergenerational messaging is being introduced through this article to be considered part of our practice work as community psychologists. I am introducing intergenerational messaging as a means to displace coloniality and recenter indigenous knowledge and practice.

Methods

Researcher Description

The road that has led me to study this topic comes from my own background and family history. While growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area, I was taken to organizing meetings by my great-grandmother on a regular basis for many years. She brought me, my younger sister and our cousin, also a girl, with her to meetings that she either facilitated, prepared food for, and/or invited others to attend. I stood, sat and swayed next to my great-grandmother, a Black Indigenous woman, as we attended meetings in churches, mason lodges, private homes, and community centers. I observed and took in all her efforts to clean up alleys in our neighborhood where illicit drug activity took place on a regular basis, to advocate for more inclusive voting rights, along with a host of other causes she fought for. The experiences in these rooms, filled with primarily women varying ages and from diverse backgrounds, had an impact on me that lead to my own interest and lived experiences as an organizer.

I recognize that my story as a young organizer growing up in the Bay Area is quite different from the stories of the Black maternal activists interviewed for this study. The methods employed in this study emphasize use of contextual and subjective realities and community participatory research. The reason for my choice to use this approach is to ensure that the stories told, insights reached, and decisions made regarding next steps for Black maternal activism in North Lawndale belong to the women recruited to participate in this study. By design, meaning making is placed in the hands, hearts and minds of the Black women from North Lawndale, for this story is rightfully theirs to tell. I take the honor and privilege of facilitating the means by which their story is told and use research methodologies that ensure my own personal history with activism does not influence or impede upon theirs.

Phenomenological Approach

A phenomenological approach was used to describe the experiences participants had in common and distill their experiences to reveal the essential nature of a phenomenon (Palmer, de Visser & Fadden, 2010). Qualitative interviews were conducted with Black maternal activists affiliated with Black churches and local organizations to learn about their experiences with intergenerational messaging. These interviews were merely one piece of the data puzzle being used to understand the essence

of the experience of being a Black mother activist within a larger case study.

Case Study Research Design

The single case study design was used to capture qualitative and quantitative data to gain more in-depth understanding of the phenomena of Black maternal activism within the unique social and historical cultural context of North Lawndale, Chicago. Black maternal activists were the primary unit of analysis and North Lawndale was the bounded system and context for the unit of analysis. The case study approach was most appropriate and useful for this study for its utility to facilitate "exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 544). This case study drew from multiple sources of data, including archival data, and semi-structured interviews with Black maternal activists.

The case study approach emphasizes the use of data collection strategies that can inform understanding of knowledge utilization among Black maternal activists in North Lawndale (Yin, 1981). Knowledge utilization is defined as "the notion of adapting knowledge to the needs of society" (Backer, 1991). In the case of Black maternal activists in North Lawndale, the collection and analysis of archival data provided historical perspective on how knowledge utilization has been used historically in North Lawndale to address the concerns posed by various events and circumstances Black maternal activists were confronted with in the past. Qualitative interviews provided current context that informed on knowledge use as related to activist strategies employed by Black maternal activists. Learning about the context and decisions that led to how they used their knowledge of current systems they engaged as activists informs the perception of the problem they identify and the response that best responds to that problem or issue.

Participants

Participants were ten Black maternal activists who were either born and/or raised in North Lawndale and who have experience as activists in North Lawndale. Black maternal activists were defined as Black women engaged in activities associated with community organizing across issue areas and servant leadership working within churches, various organizations and public institutions. The participants included Black maternal activists engaged in pastoral leadership, housing advocacy, arts activism, neighborhood based and block club leadership, childcare, community planning and development. Black maternal activists included mothers and other mothers who were not mothers to biological children.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited using purposive convenience sampling targeting Black church members and Black organizations within North Lawndale. Purposive snowball sampling was useful as a recruitment methodology because it established a pool of eligible applicants through knowledge of individuals already identified and determined to be eligible for study participation. In line with purposive sampling methods, eligible participants identified and contacted by the researcher informed other participants they knew who would also be eligible to participate, which established the study and the researcher as a credible source for prospective participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The interviews were conducted in various places within North Lawndale over a 3-month period. Three of the participants were ages 18-35, three participants were ages 36-50 and four participants were ages 51 and older.

Study locale

North Lawndale is abounded by Cermak (22nd St) to the south, Taylor to the north, Rockwell to the east and Kilburn to the west. The story of Chicago's west side communities and their struggles for justice and equity are not well known. The migratory ports of entry and politics of place for Blacks within the south and west sides were distinctly different (Seligman, 2016; Seligman, 2005). These differences in how each community area became defined as Black communities are stories that shed light on dynamics that directly demonstrate how Black mothers were able to organize themselves and their communities. Everything, from population density, to the relationship of Whites to geographic and political space, to the institutions that were built and maintained to sustain Black life, and the organizing mechanisms employed, all influence the ways that Black maternal activism have been shaped and sustained.

Data Collection

Interview Protocol Instrument

Semi-structured interviews included questions about their experiences growing up in North Lawndale, the migratory history of their families, influential Black women in their lives and their experiences as activists in North Lawndale.

Archival data collection and analysis

A preliminary analysis of North Lawndale's Black maternal activist community was conducted during the first phase of data collection using archival data. This phase of the study set the context for the next two phases of the study by identifying the institutions within North Lawndale that play a historical role and aid in understanding Black maternal activism. The churches that have played a particularly important role in the history of the community and context for Black maternal activists within that setting were identified. Archival records were used to examine Black maternal experiences within churches and their experiences and contributions within other institutions in North Lawndale. Using a coded data matrix sheet to record the findings, archival data sources were used to look for the presence of Black maternal activists passing on their knowledge of strategies to other Black maternal activists.

Semi-structured interview data collection, data analysis and procedures

Data collection began with a search of Black women in North Lawndale who would be most likely to lead me to find other Black women engaged in activist work. All interviewees were notified of procedures for providing their consent for participation, including being tape recorded. Interviews were held for 60 to 100 minutes, with an average of 80 minutes per interview. All interviews were transcribed and coded for themes related to intergenerational messaging through proverbs or sayings that influenced their strategies. Qualitative software on a password protected personal computer was used to analyze themes from all interviews. Field notes were taken while in the settings to capture all personal observations, reflections, interactions and activities (Creswell & Hanson, 2007). Each participant was asked a series of questions in order to generate the names of other activists and affiliated organizations within their network. The names they identified were also used to determine whether there were specific actors within the network who had passed on knowledge of Black activist traditions to others.

Analysis of results

The experiences of Black maternal activists were examined with qualitative analysis. The

transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews were analyzed to identify themes present in each transcription to find the common threads among the different interviews according to three age groups: 18-35, 36-50, and 51 and older. Three age groups were identified based on the interest to analyze how patterns related to meaning making in intergenerational messaging may emerge for different age groups. The research questions developed for the semi-structured interviews were used as a guide to establish the identification of relevant data. The responses were open coded and subsequent themes across the interviews were identified by a process of looking for consistent codes and ideas expressed by participants. Each transcription was analyzed to determine how often themes were present across all interviews. The identities of participants are kept confidential through a numbered system that was used for each transcription and written on all protocol materials. Pseudonyms were used in place of actual names of participants as part of this study. The coding system was put in place to ensure each finding was consistently coded to the participant and within their age group. Each transcription was prepared for analysis to identify evidence of repeated themes across the interviews within age groups. The codes were analyzed with NVivo, software for qualitative analysis.

Findings

Participants were asked to talk about their current activities as activists and to discuss how they saw activists as influencing and providing meaningful direction and inspiration to their current work. The question that helped to glean insight into the ways Black maternal activists were able to demonstrate the ways that their ancestors were influential to them was "tell me about the person who you remembered modeling that for you." Responses were coded to find statements that reflected actions taken, keen observations, and the behaviors connected to challenges they faced that they attributed to something they learned from a Black maternal activist. The following themes were found in coded transcriptions from their interviews: remaining steadfast, being clear on their purpose, inclusivity, and the importance of a spiritual foundation guiding their work as activists.

Remaining steadfast

Participants reported seeing their respective influencers in community outside of formal settings. For example, nearly all of the participants reported seeing their teachers in and around the community outside of the school setting. This observation made a lasting impression on them, regardless of their respective age group. This has directly influenced them to feel that their connection to community as an activist is not just grounded in a particular setting or planned setting.

> *She [great-grandmother, who was a minister] describes in her book stay at your post. When God assigns you to an area you stay at your post until that job that assignment is complete. So that's been my mantra in most places that I've been, but now really holds near and dear to me as I'm in North Lawndale. Because it's my place, it's where I originally come, it's where I come from. If you know when you are from a place and even if you leave and come back, it's means something to you (Black maternal activist, Delores)*

> *I can't think of any specific phrases, but I can say the vibe or what the mood is like that's, it's steadfastness. 'I'm not going nowhere. A matter of fact, I'm going to open a store, or I'm going to start this right here. Now is the time to plant those seeds, so I feel that that's the mood that I'm always feeling from*

the women (Black maternal activist, Angie).

This also spoke to many as a deep commitment to the community and its wellbeing, in contrast to individuals tied to institutions who come and leave when their formal engagement with the community was no longer needed. This also related to the notion of always being seen by women elders, or other mothers in the community which also emphasized for them a certain level of comportment they had to maintain regardless of the setting they were in.

Clear focus on purpose

Participants shared stories and insights about remaining *on assignment* in their work as activists. The assignment they may be charged to carry out is not tied to a title, or some designation from a person or institution given power to validate their role or purpose. The use or place of a title does not define them in their role. This was evident in the number of women identified as leaders in the community without a title or designation that would indicate they were the head of a committee, organization, or organized effort. In fact, four participants identified people as heads of organizations or programs that were actually not, as part of the network data that was collected. For example, a participant would name an individual in their network as the head of an organization or program, when their actual title did not reflect this perception by the participant. When documented information or personal knowledge of the person identified was researched further, it was discovered that the person was not the head of the program or the organization, but the person assumed a leading role to ensure a program was implemented within North Lawndale and this is how the participants identified them as head of the organization or program.

When asked who the women were they identified as heads of organizations, the numbers were nearly synonymous with the number of women leaders identified. Three participants identified their influencers as having roles in the community as leaders through their work even if their actual occupation was decidedly different. Their ancestors often had leadership roles and rose to community prominence even if their occupation was not aligned to that role. Many spoke of their ancestors or community leaders as having full time jobs as homemakers, washer women, maids, farmers, but they weren't known in the community according to their occupations, but as having some say and influence in their neighborhood without a title. One participant learned years later after watching one of her community heroes growing up that her occupation was much different from the role she played in the community: "And I learned what Miss Judy did. I never will forget this. Miss Judy was a housekeeper, she cleaned people's homes. Blew my mind" (Black maternal activist, Delores).

This influential value also reflects the interest Black maternal activists have in not letting limitations inform their capacity to act and lead. Staying on purpose is also about limiting the influence of deterrents on their goals, or *making a way out of no way*. Teachers demonstrated this by changing their settings to incorporate non-curricular experiences that ultimately radicalized their students or directly influenced their interest in furthering Black pride in their own work or advancing community development. As one participant stated: "I felt like I was something that really represented true Blackness. Even as a kid I felt really special being in her classroom, that's the one that I can really think of" (Black maternal activist, Angie).

Inclusivity

Practicing inclusivity was a way for Black maternal activists to remain true to values they saw practiced in neighborhoods and in

their homes. This practice was the only direct tie to southern traditions that was identified as retained in North Lawndale, according to participants in age groups 36-50 and 51 and older. Returning to their family homes in the south, participants remarked on how they saw their mothers and grandmothers reach out to individuals that would not otherwise know about the resources available to them or helping out young families by boarding them for as long as they needed the support, opening their homes to people, sometimes little known to the family. This practice also occurred in North Lawndale for families who met misfortune due to an unexpected event or loss.

> *Wow, my mother. My mother was very inclusionary. Like very. We had a neighbor who wasn't very neighborly but her house burned down. She had a place for herself to go but she didn't have a place for her two younger kids. My mom let those two young kids move into our home. When other family members were migrating from the south my mother would let them move in. My mother was a person who would feed everyone (Black maternal activist, Angie).*

> *When I became the manager of that program, I wanted a very good mix of community kids. I wanted the seasoned people and I wanted those that nobody wanted to hire. The kids on the corner, the guy on the corner. I wanted the sagging pants, the White t-shirts. I see them on the corner. I'd stop them and I said to them, "do you want to do something different? Do you want to try something different? Do you want to experience something different? Would you work for me?" (Black maternal activist, Tangella).*

Participants connected this practice to the traditional ways Black families welcome individuals into their homes. It was customary to offer food to every guest, no matter how much or how little a family had. It was also customary to accept the offer and not refuse. Families would *give their last* to someone in need. Three participants 51 years and older also saw the organizing efforts of the 1960s and 1970s as even relying on a mutual support system in order to be able to reach populations that would otherwise not be reached.

The practice of holding space in community settings that would otherwise exclude people was the primary way that participants expressed this influence in their own lives. One Black maternal activist uses her platform as First Lady of her church and pastor to carry out this practice:

> *Another time this guy raised up his hand and had a bunch of guns around his waist. I came over to him and I said 'I'm going to need you to stay in your seat and keep your arms down. That way you can stay. If you can't do that, then I'm going to have to ask you to leave, you got that darling? And can I get a hug?' He's in here. I don't know who else got guns. I don't know what's wrong with me, but I just trust God. I don't know if everyone got one but I know I seen this one and I have to address this one. I have to address the one that I see and I have to let them know that I am coming from a loving place. 'I know you have to carry a gun. I know you are a gang member. I know they might be outside waiting for you. But in the meantime, keep your arms down stay seated and if you leave you can't come back.' That simple (Black maternal activist, Angie).*

Inclusivity is also expressed as standing in the gap for individuals and sectors of the community deemed as the *underdog*. Those who expressed use of the practice of inclusivity were aware that they were indeed

standing in the gap for people who would otherwise not have advocates, champions bringing their stories to tables of influence. In the words of one participant, the meaning of holding space has implications for how service and faith are connected: "If we say that the Bible says there are many members but one body and we're all one so sayeth the Lord, we can't exclude you because you don't act like us." [Angie].

Spiritual foundation

Participants acknowledged the deep roots of faith and service that were evident in the work of their forebearers in community, their ancestors, and their own work. This connection was most clearly made among 36-50 and 51 and older age groups. This was a grounding principle for some participants, supporting their efforts to be at tables of influence, whether invited or validated by others, or not. This was particularly true among the spiritual leaders interviewed. They expressed their belief in God as the ultimate power, not those who try to control resources and perpetuate structural oppression and racism. As one participant said to a pastor who did not believe that women should preach the word of God: "whatever you need me to be that doesn't define who I am. And your pulpit, that's not God, because God would let me come" [Angie]. The acknowledgement of God as the ultimate power gave them the stamina and perseverance to think and imagine a world beyond the world in front of them. This connected them to ideas outside of racist and oppressive settings that were not conducive to progress and that inhibit negative thinking and naysayers. The belief that *God called me to this work* and that *God has the last word* or *God would let me in here if you won't* were evidence of this idea that oppressors are not the owners of justice.

Discussion

Key findings of this study are the importance of settings in facilitating activism and the ways that Black maternal activists observed and perceived their early experiences can influence how they approach and engage in their own activist work.

Intergenerational messengers were primarily teachers

This study discovered a connection between school settings and early influence on Black maternal activists. As students, teachers and other school leaders had a profound impact on Black maternal activists. They were able to feel a sense of safety, hope, pride, and mothering care from their teachers. This connection made them all strivers, eager to learn about Black history, eager to learn how to successfully navigate systems with support of teachers and counselors, and eager to remain in community as they had seen their own teachers do. Teachers brought in resources and connected their students to possibilities to reimagine the world they lived in. The participants saw their teachers as other mothers, extending the network of support and care they received beyond their homes and churches. Grace Lee Boggs (2011) refers to this and other strategies discussed in this study as the quiet revolution which takes the intentions of local leaders and emphasizes resource mobilization, navigational skills, intergenerational knowledge sharing and localized organizing to change neighborhoods.

In her book, *The Next Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*, Boggs (2011) shares her experiences as an activist in Detroit over the span of 40 years and suggests ways we can best sustain activism for current and future generations. Boggs (2011) identifies the school setting as a critical component to sustaining activism over time. She views schools as prime locales

to formulate hubs and bring families, community members, educators and children together to solve local problems while advocating and working to transform neighborhoods. This is differently placed from the early experiences of Black maternal activists in this study but draws upon the activism that formed part of their early experiences. The restorative justice hubs that are community based and linked to school partners as anchor institutions to support reduction in community violence while transforming the relationships among local police, families and the court systems is one example of a current model in place. Reimagining the school setting as a place in which children can identify and lead social justice projects is another way to continue to advance civic engagement, activism, and transformative change.

Reimagining the school setting to be centered around solving community problems and preparing students to know their communities and the strengths, skill sets, and knowledge they have to contribute to making their communities better would continue the legacy of radicalized socialization that Black maternal activists were exposed to in their earlier years. The quiet revolution taking place within school systems is taking the connections that teachers have to students and communities and redefining the educator as a facilitator of learning beyond the demands of state-driven standards. Models of school development that emphasize civic engagement are being developed to bring new and relevant meaning to education for children.

Conclusions

Community psychologists are well versed in how to "*stay in our lane* as participant conceptualizers, but intergenerational messaging asks for more. Participant conceptualizers seek to understand community processes while also helping communities to make meaning of change in order for communities to effectively lead as change agents (Elias, 1994). In my practice, I am clear on the role that ancestors, tradition, and storytelling play in recentering the narratives of indigenous communities from the margins to the center. As community psychologists endeavor to advance anti-oppression and anti-racist work, our willingness to hold space with community will have to evolve to embrace practices that reflect our intentions. The ways of knowing that inform Black maternal activism through intergenerational messaging can be incorporated into a participant conceptualizer's understanding of community change and processes.

As community psychology continues to integrate decolonialized practices of questioning in both research and practice, we can grow in acceptance of methodological approaches that place indigenous ways of knowledge utilization at the center of our work and transform our connection with community and our own efforts to engage in decolonial practice (Maldonaldo-Torres, 2016).

Limitations of Study

Due to the limited number of individuals interviewed for the network survey, a truly representative sample of the Black maternal activist network was not obtained for this study.

Implications for Practice/Policy

The role of community psychology in working with community organizers has generally been to utilize our skills as participant conceptualizers, providing support and assistance as needed. As we enter local spaces and get to know community members, we may consider the role of intergenerational messaging to understand a community on its own terms. Intergenerational messaging is a

process that allows us to disavow ourselves of preconceived notions of what communities are like, how they define their own strengths, and what is important to them. We can fully focus our attention on their stories, and the stories of their community and family ancestors and learn how their examples and practices of remaining steadfast, practicing inclusivity, remaining clear on one's purpose, and maintaining a spiritual foundation support activist practices. We also learn through this process that no community has the same story, each one is unique.

Black maternal activists are in the driver's seat of North Lawndale's organizing, planning, and social service spaces. As we observe the changing landscape of the current national and local movements led by Black maternal activists to end the criminalization of Black bodies and to braid together the remaining strands of community that are forming the basis of current organizing efforts, we know that North Lawndale is not alone. Community psychologists are now charged to consider this as part of what community-based practice will look like in urban communities like Chicago. Developing strategies that incorporate intergenerational indigenous knowledge can only enrich our positioning as partners and collaborators with Black maternal activists and the communities they lead and support.

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