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# A Womanist Supervision Framework for Promoting Anti-Racist Therapy With Black Women

Camellia E Green, Danielle Burton

A counselor's anti-racist disposition is particularly needed for Black women clients due to unique treatment needs. Womanist values and pedagogy are used to develop a culturally responsive supervision framework encompassing key themes of anti-racist supervisee development such as critical consciousness development, awareness of power dynamics, social justice activism, and honoring the cultural self. Womanist pedagogy, previously used in K–12 schools, prioritizes the community orientation of maternal care to promote the survival of Black people in oppressive systems. A call to action for counselor educators is introduced for the promotion of an anti-racist supervisee disposition.

*Keywords:* anti-racist, supervision, Womanist, critical consciousness

Much research has been done on the topic of Black women and differences in needs due to barriers to treatment, limited resources, discrimination by the counseling field, and lack of understanding of differences in how certain diagnoses may appear (Abrams et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2014). As a result, there has been a longstanding discourse and recent mandates to address the challenges of multicultural awareness in counseling (Ratts et al., 2016; Sue et al., 1992). The 2014 American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics clarifies the importance of multicultural awareness, whereas the 2015 Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) provides a framework for developing the counselor self-awareness that is necessary in developing multicultural awareness with a social justice orientation (ACA, 2014; Ratts et al., 2016).

Counselor educators and supervisors have an ethical obligation to be aware of multicultural issues that may arise in the supervisory relationship (ACA, 2014). However, among the many models of supervision that a supervisor may employ, few provide a culturally based framework (Arczynski & Morrow, 2017; Gomez, 2020; Nelson et al., 2006). A culturally based framework is best described in juxtaposition of a Eurocentric framework; Eurocentric frameworks and counseling theories exemplify White, male, middle class, and heterosexual as symbols of health and normalcy (Crenshaw, 1989; Williams, 2005). Eurocentric models of supervision often neglect or skim many aspects of cultural competence if they are left only to the mandate within the 2014 ACA Code of Ethics, section F.2.b, that "counseling supervisors are aware of and address the role of multiculturalism/diversity in the supervisory relationship." Additionally, neglecting the use of a culturally based framework is dangerous because the use of Eurocentric counseling modalities has created a culture of denial surrounding microaggressions, anti-Black policies and practices, and the ongoing perpetuation of the color-blind disposition within the field (Johnson et al., 2018).

With the MSJCC, a call for counselors was made not only to address and honor cultural differences in treatment but also to act (Ratts et al., 2016). Both the MSJCC and the sociopolitical zeitgeist have made the professional mandate of cultural competency, anti-racism, and social justice activism more present than ever. As such, counselors and supervisors can extrapolate the need for centering the MSJCC's tenets of multicultural and social justice competency in all counseling relationships, including that of supervisor and supervisee.

A culturally based supervision framework is especially crucial for supervisees working with Black women clients. Abrams et al. (2019) state that Black women clients are particularly vulnerable due

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to cultural misunderstandings because the "strong Black woman schema," where cultural expectations of dealing with challenges on their own interfere with the counseling process. Further, clinicians using traditional treatment modalities that overemphasize symptom reduction may be counterproductive or pathologize showing strength without acknowledging the sociocultural demands placed on Black women (Abrams et al. 2019).

Here, a culturally based supervision framework proposed will be developed using Womanist values and teaching pedagogy. Alice Walker, who coined the term *Womanist*, defined it as a "feminist of color committed to the survival and well-being of all people … emphasized the commitment of Black women to resist sociopolitical oppression they and other groups have endured" (Belgrave, 2019, p. 1). Womanism focuses on the development of critical consciousness and collective social awareness and action. Concepts that are interwoven within Womanist values such as intersectionality, critical consciousness, awareness of power dynamics, and social justice activism will be used.

Further, Womanist pedagogy in K-12 frameworks use the concept of maternal care to encapsulate Womanist values as the teacher has the responsibility of not just imparting academic content but also exemplifying how to survive and thrive in oppressive settings. Maternal care, then, is emphasized as an important component of the Womanist supervisor's disposition. Womanist pedagogy is applicable to the role of the university supervisor, which challenges the supervisor to monitor the academic and professional growth of the supervisee while imparting anti-racist values and practices.

This manuscript will emphasize the importance of using Womanist values and pedagogy in supervision to reinforce anti-racism in therapy, particularly with Black women clients. Anti-Black racism is "the system of beliefs and practices that attack, erode, and limit the humanity of Black people" (Carruthers, 2018, p. 26). The anti-racist disposition of Womanism enables supervisors to advocate for clients' empowerment by emboldening supervisees with deeper respect for the differences that impact clients' cultural realities.

**Black Women Clients**

Intersectionality, as defined by Crenshaw (1989), describes an understanding of the complex and multiple ways in which various systems of subordination can come together at the same time. Black women clients, then, automatically belong to ethnoracial and gender groups that are marginalized in the United States. In prior studies, Black women have been shown to place great emphasis on being strong, resilient, and independent pillars of their families and communities (Abrams et al., 2019). Class, race, and gender are integral parts of the Black woman's identity—particularly where gender norms and societal expectations are concerned (Abrams et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2018; Williams & Wiggins, 2010). Black women have described being overwhelmed by pressures to embody strength and resiliency for their families and communities while integrating collective cultural values into their own identities (Abrams et al. 2019; Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

The emphasis on Black women's strength, both among and apart from Black women, takes a significant toll on their mental health. In 2013, the percentage of Black women who reported depressive symptoms was significantly greater than those reported by White women (Holden et al., 2013). Moreover, according to the 2013–2016 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, depression was almost twice as common among women as among men, and the proportion of adults with depression increased with decreasing family income levels (Centers for Disease Control, 2016). Overall, the factors that confound and contribute to the reported depressive symptoms exist at an intersection of class, race, and gender. Interventions targeted for Black women, then, must be intersectional in nature to be effective.

Maintaining awareness of, and focus on, intersectional issues endemic to the Black woman client at hand is key in conceptualizing therapeutic care. Intersectionality is also at play within the supervisory relationship, which parallels the therapeutic milieu. Eurocentric supervision models that largely rely on the individualization of clinical issues may prove ineffective in comprehensively addressing Black women's mental health needs (Abrams et al., 2019); these orientations may

pathologize Black women for exuding strength without validating how, at times, it is useful and encouraged in their lives.

Unfortunately, the use of Eurocentric counseling, supervision, and treatment modalities finds Black women often seeking treatment from counselors who may not esteem each aspect of their integrated identities; cultural incompetence breeds mistrust of the therapeutic milieu (Johnson et al., 2018; Rosenberg et al., 2012;). Consequently, many Black women forgo therapy altogether, choosing to perfect "the act of portraying strength while concealing trauma—a balancing act often held in high esteem among Black women" (Abrams et al., 2019, p. 518). To address these concerns, clinicians are tasked with enhancing their critical consciousness, which is seminal to their ability to undertake culturally responsive care with an anti-racist disposition (Gomez, 2020; Mosley et al., 2020). When considering that Eurocentric-based counseling and supervision models inherently disseminate messaging that has historically sought to subjugate Black women in integral identity areas such as race, class, and gender, it is important that supervisees have a culturally responsive and anti-racist framework to use. From a therapeutic task-oriented perspective, cultural responsiveness can assist clinicians in diagnosis, treatment planning, and case conceptualization. Cultural responsiveness also increases the clients' perception of clinicians' competence; clinicians who are flexible in creating a safe environment for identity negotiation may be perceived as more trustworthy, which may indicate a more solid rapport within the dyad over time (Katz & Hoyt, 2014; Meiring et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2014).

## Culturally Responsive Supervision Using Womanist Values and Pedagogy

Culturally responsive supervision is useful to both clinician and client. A Womanist supervision model is inherently culturally responsive and anti-racist as Womanism was created to be anti-racist and anti-sexist (Belgrave, 2019; Jones, 2015; Walker, 1983; Williams, 2005). Culturally responsive supervision couched in Womanist values focuses on critical consciousness development and social justice advocacy, is aware of relational power dynamics, and attends to the entire cultural self of the supervisee. Conceptualized by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, critical consciousness is "an educational pedagogy to liberate the masses from systemic inequity maintained and perpetuated by process, practices and outcomes of interdependent systems andinstitutions" (Jemal, 2017, p. 602). Critical consciousness works to develop the anti-racist clinician identity through awareness of self. Campbell (2015) suggests the acknowledgment and acceptance of cultural self-identity (conceptually and personally) are essential to the development of culturally responsive counseling skills. Culture provides the context through which individuals conceptualize their experiences, and this conceptualization is directly related to the development of an anti-racist disposition. Increased critical consciousness is proportionate to social justice–oriented behaviors such as advocacy (Mosley et al., 2020).

Social justice activism is central to Womanist supervision as Womanism is rooted in recognizing oppression of all forms and using inherent strengths and community to fight against them (Belgrave, 2019). Mosley et al. (2020) proposes a model of moving from an awareness of anti-racism to embodying anti-racism. The understanding is that as critical consciousness is developed advocacy behaviors are increased due to the embodiment of anti-racism. The model Critical Consciousness of Anti-Black Racism (CCABR) involves witnessing anti-Black racism, processing anti-Black racism, and critical action against anti-Black racism (Mosley et al., 2020). Using CCABR in relation to Womanist supervision stresses the importance of the connection of critical consciousness development and being an advocate; it is not enough for counselor educators and university supervisors to be aware of anti-racism, they must be active participants in the community and within community actions.

Awareness of relational power dynamics and relational safety is a theme that is found consistently within Womanist frameworks (Arzcynski & Morrow, 2017; Belgrave, 2019; Ramirez Stege et al., 2019; Williams & Wiggins, 2010). Confronting relational power dynamics and relational safety involves "decolonizing'' educational environments and critically considering the role of power dynamics in the supervision process, within the

therapy dynamic and in sociopolitical power structures (Ramirez Stege et al., 2019). Additionally, supervisors must foster relational safety by "ensur[ing] that supervisees can bring their whole cultural selves into supervision and their therapeutic work" (Ramirez Stege et al., 2019). One way relational safety is built is by supervisors bringing their cultural self into supervision (Arzcynski & Morrow, 2017; Ramirez Stege et al., 2019).

Another aspect of embracing the cultural self within Womanist supervision includes attending to the spiritual needs of the supervisee. Williams and Wiggins (2010) highlight Womanist spirituality as an approach to balance demands of multiple cultural communities and begin integrating into a coherent sense of self. Further, a spiritual focus "moves the individual towards knowledge, love, meaning, hope, transcendence, connectedness and compassion" (Williams & Wiggins, 2010, p. 177). It is important to note that spirituality in a Womanist lens does not necessitate religion; Mosley et al. (2020) found many activists identified as spiritual yet nonreligious. Counselor educators are encouraged to embrace the spiritual needs of their supervisees as it relates to their critical consciousness and identity development. The Womanist values of critical consciousness development, social justice advocacy, awareness of relational power dynamics, and focus on the cultural self of the supervisee, in conjunction with the Womanist pedagogical principle of maternal care, create a unique and necessary framework.

**Maternal Care as Womanist Pedagogy**

The Womanist pedagogical concept of maternal care has been a part of K–12 educational research for decades but has yet to be explored in counselor education. Maternal care works to promote safety, understanding, and activism (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Ramsey, 2012). Importantly, maternal care is also focused on the success of the community; the idea of "if one fails, we all fail" is central. An example of the community orientation of maternal care can be seen in concern for the whole person not just the person's academic or professional well-being and development. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) explained the shift in mindset required by sharing in a quote from educator Kathe Jervis: "When I am in a quandary about how to handle a child, I think, 'What would I do if that child were my child?' and 'How would I want that child handled were my son or daughter in that situation?' Parents have an urgency about their own children. We need to feel the same urgency when we teach other people's children" (p. 74). This "other mothering" is an example of how the Black community and Womanist pedagogy emphasize a collective social consciousness that is both intentional and political (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002).

Other components of maternal care include political clarity, which is knowing that systemic injustices are both social and educational issues, and an ethic of risk, which is acting even while knowing that there are no guarantees of success (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). Political clarity stresses that survival of the Black community requires sharing knowledge; imparting an understanding of the existence of oppressive systems and how to navigate through them is essential. With political clarity comes an ethic of risk. In Womanist pedagogy, an ethic of risk can best be summarized as an awareness that action may not and often does not get results, but one must act anyway. An ethic of risk is only possible when educators can see the issue intimately and personally; abstraction and aloofness distance the risk from being experienced and understood as for the common good (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). Maternal care would be especially relevant to Black women clients as culturally, in the Black community, mothering has roots in showing commitment to the survival and wellness of Black people (Ramsey, 2012).

Incorporating Womanist values and pedagogy into counselor education and supervision will require an openness and intentionality by counselor educators and supervisors (Beauboeuf- Lafontant, 2002; Nelson et al., 2006; Ramirez Stege et al., 2019). However, grounding counselor education and university-level supervision in Womanist values, maternal care and its components of political clarity and an ethic of risk will help supervisees develop into anti-racist clinicians.

## Call to Action: Discussing a Womanist Supervision Framework

This conceptual work is a call to action for supervisors to use the Womanist values of critical consciousness development, awareness of power dynamics, honoring of the cultural self, and a social justice orientation with the pedagogical elements of maternal care to promote anti-racism in themselves and in their supervisees. The framework proposed is presented visually in Figure 1.1.

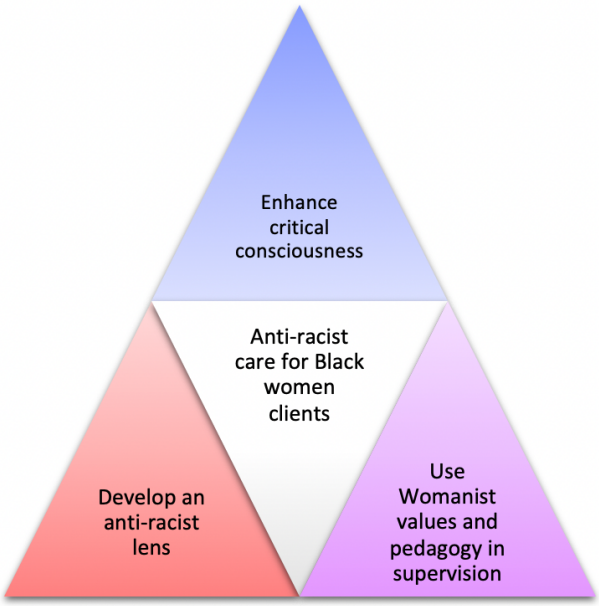


Figure 1.1 Discussing a Womanist Supervision Framework

## Enhance Critical Consciousness

Developing the critically conscious clinician requires that both the supervisor and supervisee engage in ongoing work of culturally understanding themselves. The supervisor should also strive to understand and embrace the cultural self of the supervisee. Critical consciousness development must be sensitive to relational power dynamics and safety within the supervision relationship.

## Develop an Anti-Racist Lens

As social justice advocacy is central to developing an anti-racist identity and providing culturally responsive care, supervisors must engage in and model activist behaviors. This may involve the pursuit of membership in professional or civic organizations, attending community events, planning community actions, or simply engaging in conversations to broaden awarenessof cultural and community issues.

## Use Womanist Values and Pedagogy in Supervision

Maternal care serves to promote a sense of urgency and connectedness to the success of the supervisee. As the survival and success of the supervisor is tied to that of the supervisee, the supervisee will educate the supervisee of potential systemic pitfalls and how to navigate them. Support and encouragement for taking action to advocate for self and community, despite expected failures, will be crucial to the success of the supervisory dyad.

## Conclusion

The proposed framework works to improve therapeutic outcomes for Black women clients when embodied by an anti-racist supervisor. It is the intention of this manuscript to inspire supervisors to mobilize their supervisees toward anti-racist, culturally responsive treatment by integrating Womanist values and pedagogy. Anti-racist supervisees, through their own critical consciousness development, will be able to identify and meet the needs of Black women clients, fostering relational safety and directly engaging in advocacy for their Black women clients according to the client's presenting issues. Through the social justice advocacy endemic to critical consciousness, supervisees reinforce the Womanist values that oppose racism.

The anti-racist disposition described in this manuscript must be consistent in messaging and in practice throughout the supervisory relationship to promote positive outcomes for supervisees and Black women clients. Further, the use of this framework may inspire perseverance in the difficult work of anti-racist supervisee development. The Womanist values and pedagogy discussed are personal and transformative in nature, ideally spurring introspection and meaning making related to one's own cultural experience.

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