Feminist Criminology

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An Argument for Black Feminist Criminology

Understanding African American Women's Experiences With Intimate Partner Abuse Using an Integrated Approach

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This article draws on existing feminist theoretical concepts to develop a Black feminist criminology (BFC), using intimate partner abuse against African American women to examine this pioneering approach. BFC expands on feminist criminology and is grounded firmly in Black feminist theory and critical race feminist theory. BFC recognizes a significant connection between intimate partner abuse against women and structural, cultural, and familial influences. It is argued that BFC aids in a more precise explanation of how Black women experience and respond to intimate partner abuse and how the crime-processing system responds to battered Black women.

Keywords: *Black feminist criminology; African American women; domestic violence*

Just as there are many types of feminisms and feminists, it undoubtedly follows that there are adaptations on feminist criminology and no single feminist criminology can exist (Britton, 2000; Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988; Flavin, 1998). The impetus for proposing a Black feminist criminology (BFC) is supported by Britton's (2000) argument that traditional feminist criminology still has much work to accomplish in theorizing from intersecting identities as opposed to placing emphasis on a solitary component—such as considering gender but not race—at the forefront of and central to an analysis. Flavin (1998) expressly promoted a BFC that focuses on the specific experiences of Black individuals in the crime-processing system.[1] Although feminist criminology has its roots in mainstream feminist theories (Britton, 2000; Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988),[2] the approach presented in this article, BFC, is grounded in Black feminist theory and critical race feminist theory (CRFT). To begin to understand and fully conceptualize BFC, this article considers intimate partner abuse against African American[3] women as an illustration of its ability to explain this transgression.

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Feminist criminology has aided in a notably improved understanding of gender variations in criminal activity and victimization and of the crime-processing system's dealings with female and male victims and offenders. Feminist criminology has significantly expanded the foci within the field of criminology beyond simply exploring female criminal offending and female offenders to also examining violent acts against girls and women (Britton, 2000). Although gender is certainly important and crucial to considering women's (and men's) involvement in crime either as victims or as offenders, for Black women, and arguably for all women, other inequities must be considered principal, not peripheral, to the analysis of women. This includes incorporating key factors such as race and/or ethnicity, sexuality, and economic status into any examination. Daly (1997) argued that considering how gender, race, and class distinctions intersect is absolutely necessary in criminology. Because traditional feminist criminology is built on mainstream feminism, which historically placed issues of race as secondary to gender (hooks, 2000; Lewis, 1977), it is reasoned here that starting at Black feminist theory and CRFT to investigate and explain the source of and reactions to crime among African Americans will be sure to explicitly take into account Black women's positions in society, in their communities, and in their familial and intimate relationships. This proposition does not serve to devalue the remarkable work resulting from the establishment of feminist criminology or the concepts purported by and examined under this rubric. Instead, BFC extends beyond traditional feminist criminology to view African American women (and conceivably, other women of color) from their multiple marginalized and dominated positions in society, culture, community, and families. Although the example provided here to tender a Black feminist criminological theory is on one form of victimization of African American women, it has been well documented in feminist criminology analyses that there is often a clear correlation and/or pathway between women's victimization and any ultimate criminal behavior (Belknap, 2001; Britton, 2000; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004; Richie, 1996). As such, using intimate partner abuse against African American women as an illustration provides us with an example that may be applied beyond Black women's experiences with victimization into other encounters with crime and the crime-processing system.

As is demonstrated here, BFC can advance future theorizing, research, and policy making regarding battered Black women. At the outset, this article presents an historical overview of the attention given to the issue of intimate partner abuse by feminist activists and the problems with examining African American women's encounters with domestic abuse using theory based on White women's experiences. A comprehensive description of BFC is then provided and followed by the Black feminist and critical race feminist concepts on which it is constructed. Support for a BFC is demonstrated by evaluating African American women's experiences with and responses to intimate partner abuse and the crime-processing system's intervention in domestic violence incidents involving Black women under this model. Presented throughout this application are previous assessments on battered Black women in the works of some Black and critical race feminists. As with any new theoretical proposal, criticism of the concept is to be expected. Therefore, anticipated criticisms and potential limitations are addressed.

Historical Development of Feminist Advocacy
Against Intimate Partner Abuse

An increased awareness of the problem of intimate partner abuse against women has occurred only during the past few decades. Until the 1970s, concern, advocacy, and protection for battered women by the general public and officials of the crime-processing system were tremendously lacking (Belknap, 2001; Tierney, 1982). Historians had sporadically recorded attempts of various individuals who raised public concern for these victims. However, these endeavors were largely unsuccessful until the 1970s. During this decade, there was an accelerating trend toward the criminalization of domestic violence perpetrators and an increase in the assistance afforded battered women. Feminist organizations began to highlight intimate partner violence against women as a social problem needing to be remedied (Schechter, 1982), and books written by battered women and their advocates began to appear with fervor (Belknap & Potter, 2006). In 1973, the United States saw one of its first shelters to assist wives battered by their alcoholic husbands at the Rainbow Retreat in Phoenix, Arizona (Tierney, 1982), and since this time, shelters have rapidly appeared across the country (Belknap, 2001). In addition to establishing places to harbor battered women and their children away from their male batterers, law enforcement and court intervention agents began to address woman battering more seriously with the enactment and increased enforcement of laws and sanctions relating to intimate abuse (Tierney, 1982). In 1994, President Bill Clinton signed into law the landmark Violence Against Women Act to combat violence against women by providing assistance to criminal processing agents (e.g., training), support for battered women's shelters and a national telephone "hotline," and funding for research on violence against women. The act was renewed in 2000 and provided financial support in excess of US$3 billion for 5 years. The second reauthorization of the Act was passed by both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives and was signed into law by President Bush in January 2006.

Along with the diligent labor of feminist activists, the battered women's movement was further assisted in its development and awareness efforts by the media's attention to the movement (Tierney, 1982). Through the mid-1970s, some popular magazines considered domestic violence to be acts of rioting and terrorism, but by the end of the decade, the term became equivalent with *wife abuse* (Tierney, 1982) and other forms of family-related interpersonal violence (Belknap, 2001). Indeed, between 1987 and 1997, the media representations of domestic violence as a serious issue were instrumental in decreasing the public's tolerance of wife abuse during this decade (Johnson & Sigler, 2000).

Although intimate partner violence has experienced increased attention by the public, researchers, and the crime-processing system, abuse among intimate partners as a social problem is still not receiving the level of attention it deserves from criminal processing agents (Erez & Belknap, 1998) and health professionals (Belknap, 2001; Rodriguez, Bauer, McLoughlin, & Grumbach, 1999). For instance, there is fairly recent evidence that police officers still respond leniently to male batterers (Fyfe, Klinger, & Flavin, 1997). That is, men who abuse their female intimate partners are

arrested less often than other violent offenders. In addition, battered women's shelters continue to suffer from poor financial support and the inability to house every woman and child in need of and requesting sanctuary from their abusers (Belknap, 2001). As indicated by a survey conducted by the Center for the Advancement of Women (2003), a sizeable number of women deem that intimate partner violence warrants continued attention. In fact, the report indicates that 92% of the women surveyed believed that domestic violence and sexual assault should be the top priority for the women's movement. Violence against women as a main concern was succeeded by the following priorities: equal pay for equal work (90%), child care (85%), reducing drug and alcohol addiction among women (72%), and keeping abortion legal (41%). This finding underlies the need that much more work is needed to improve the lives of battered women and to better address the unwarranted behavior of batterers.

It is unmistakable that with the identification of domestic violence as a social problem approximately three decades ago came an unprecedented amount of research and activism surrounding the plight of battered women. In both the research and responses to intimate partner abuse, however, cultural, racial, and ethnic distinctions among women victims of intimate partner abuse have not been afforded equal levels of consideration (Bograd, 1999; Richie, 1996, 2000). Much of the extant research and policies regard all battered women as victims with similar life experiences (Richie, 2000; C. West, 2005); yet African American women and other women of color typically have life experiences distinct from White women. The research in the 1970s was conducted with predominately White samples and a failure to take into account how the surveys and findings might be problematic in reference to victims and offenders of color. It is regrettable that more recent investigations continue to follow this precedent. Stated alternatively, using research designed to study battered White women may not adequately explain how African American women experience and respond to intimate partner abuse. It is notable that Black women encounter the serious ramifications of racism in addition to sexism, and findings indicate they are the victims of intimate partner violence at higher rates than their White counterparts (Gelles & Straus, 1988; Hampton & Gelles, 1994; Rennison & Welchans, 2000). Basing investigations on theories that do not defer to the unique experiences of Black women may be erroneous and impractical to these women because of their prospects of encountering both racism and sexism within U.S. society.

BFC and Its Origins

The Tenets of BFC

BFC incorporates the tenets of interconnected identities, interconnected social forces, and distinct circumstances to better theorize, conduct research, and inform policy regarding criminal behavior and victimization among African Americans. (This concept may also have applicability with other groups of color and possibly with White women.) The interconnected identities to be considered among African American individuals include race and/or ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class status, national

origin, and religion. Certainly, this is not a comprehensive list, as this precept allows for other identities to be included dependent on how an individual self-identifies. In U.S. society's stratified composition, occurrences of inequity are often experienced because of the spectrum of diversity within each identity and the intolerance and ignorance among some members of society. As such, various identities will be deemed of less value than others. This devaluation affects how certain individuals maneuver through life, including how they respond to events and opportunities with which they are confronted. Starting from this advantage point can help us begin to improve our explanations for the experiences of battered Black women's (a) entry into abusive relationships, (b) response to their abusers, and (c) use of systemic resources to aid in withdrawing from the relationships.

These interconnected identities are greatly shaped by larger social forces. That is, groups of individuals and society at large produce and perpetuate conflict, competition, and differences in merit between the members of society. It is not battered Black women's identities that exclusively form their perceptions and reactions but the treatment of these identities filtered down from (a) the impact of the social structure through (b) the community or culture and to (c) familial and intimate exchanges. Nevertheless, this does not necessitate a linear association in every case; instead, it serves to demonstrate and argue that a patriarchal, paternalistic, and racialized social structure affects all other institutions and interactions in society. Black women's reactions to abuse are affected by their "place" in society because of their intersecting identities. Being at the least valued end of the spectrum for both race and gender places these women in a peculiar position not faced by Black men or White women (although Black men and White women are indeed challenged with their relative and respective dominating forces). In a similar manner, other women of color, such as Latinas, Native American women, Asian American women, and immigrant women of color, can easily be placed alongside Black women in this analysis.

Last, the characteristic of "battered woman" or "criminal offender" should not be considered an element of the identities of women victims or offenders. Being abused or having committed criminal acts are situations which women encounter or in which women become implicated, not those that are endemic of their identity. Of course, this is not to diminish the seriousness of women being victimized or of criminality among women; instead, it is to emphasize that the individuals themselves rarely recognize these characteristics as central to their identity (see Potter, 2004, for an analysis of how battered Black women do not identify as victims or survivors and how abuse is a temporary setback and an additional act of oppression in their lives). Furthermore, incorporating these distinct circumstances into Black women's identity risks pathologizing Black women victims or offenders by making these events appear normal or expected among Black women.

Black Feminist and Critical Race Feminist Origins of BFC

BFC addresses concerns in the lives of Black women that are categorized into four themes: (a) social structural oppression, (b) the Black community and culture, (c) inti-

mate and familial relations, and (d) the Black woman as an individual. As outlined above, the first three themes are components of interconnected social forces, whereas the fourth theme considers the interconnected identities of the Black woman as affected by the societal influences. The tenets of BFC are cultivated from Black feminist theory and CRFT. In general, Black feminist theory is the theoretical perspective that places the lived experiences of Black women, including any forms of resistance to their situations, at the focal point of the analysis. It considers Black women as individuals encompassing numerous and interwoven identities. The standpoint is that Black women are frequently oppressed within both the Black community (by Black men) and society at large based on their subordinated statuses within each of these spheres and that research on Black women should be conducted based on this perspective. Although the sexist oppression in the Black community may not appear as obvious as that in larger society, and presents itself in a different form, it undeniably exists. CRFT is similar to Black feminist theory in that it also considers women of color as individuals with multiple intersecting identities where one does not eclipse another. Specifically, however, CRFT has been used to consider the devalued position of women of color in greater society as their status relates to the legal field.

Unlike many White women who enjoyed the "feminist lifestyle" because it provided them the opportunity to meet and bond with other women, Black women have always had a sense of sisterhood (hooks, 2000). Although it is often assumed that Black women did not participate in the development of feminist ideology and the practice of gender equality, it is evident that Black women have indeed been involved in liberation efforts. By reading the works of women who considered themselves to be Black feminists, or were identified as such by others, Black women have a lengthy and valiant history in the liberation movement (Guy-Sheftall, 1995; King, 1988). Their struggles can be traced back to the 1600s when African women who were captured and enslaved in the so-called New World endured multiple forms of oppression by their slave masters (Fishman, 2003; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Many of these women made attempts to defend themselves against the inhumane treatment. Recent survey research demonstrates that Black women, even more so than White women, are discontented with women's situation in society and are in want of changes in the social world that benefit women. According to Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003), a Gallup poll conducted in June 2002 finds that 48% of Black women affirmed they were dissatisfied with the treatment of women within society as compared to 26% of White women.

Mainstream feminist theory places gender as the primary consideration in women's liberation efforts (hooks, 2000). Black women have expressed difficulty in identifying with mainstream feminist theory because of its focus on this single aspect of womanhood and because the lives and concerns of White middle-class women were placed at the forefront of the liberation efforts (Collins, 2000). Black women regularly convey that they deal not only with issues of gender inequality but with racial inequality as well (Crenshaw, 1994). It is this status, Crenshaw (1994) argued, that relegates women of color to an invisible class and pulls these women's loyalties in two directions, that is, feeling the need to either choose between being loyal to feminist ideas or being loyal to their racial or ethnic community. Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Black feminist author of

Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, distinguished Black women's experiences from those of other groups of women and also considered Black women's lives as individuals:

> On the one hand, all African-American women face similar challenges that result from living in a society that historically and routinely derogates women of African descent. Despite the fact that U.S. Black women face common challenges, this neither means that individual African-American women have all had the same experiences nor that we agree on the significance of our varying experiences. Thus, on the other hand, despite the common challenges confronting U.S. Black women as a group, diverse responses to these core themes characterize U.S. Black women's group knowledge or standpoint. (p. 25)

This collective, yet individualized, aspect of Black women's lives is an important aspect in Black feminism and when considering Black women.

Used in conjunction with Black feminist theory, CRFT is a valuable approach for studies of crime and African American women because it provides a specific application to issues of women of color involved in the crime-processing system as victims, offenders, or both. Just as with many Black feminists, most critical race feminists have not involved themselves in the mainstream feminist movement but admit that they make use of certain themes of mainstream feminism in the social sciences (Wing, 2003). Developed in the 1990s, CRFT is based in the tradition of Black feminist theory, critical legal studies, and critical race theory (Wing, 1997). People of color, White women, and others were initially attracted to critical legal studies because it challenged laws related to oppression based on race and gender (Wing, 2003). Those credited with developing critical race theory reported disillusionment with critical legal studies' exclusion of the personal and intellectual viewpoints from scholars of color and White women scholars. Accordingly, critical race theory places more focus on the role of racism and a racist and classist society in the construction of realities among people of color. Although deemed as a move toward the inclusion of all people in the analysis of social interaction and social justice, many women of color continued to feel gender was not often introduced as a concern within critical race theory discourse and consequently, CRFT was born (Wing, 1997). According to Wing (1997), CRFT, like Black feminist theory, is grounded in "antiessentialism" and intersectionality. Antiessentialism asserts that there is more than one essential voice of women.[4] Battered Black women's experience with the crime-processing system and its agents can suitably be analyzed by incorporating a CRFT viewpoint into BFC.

In summation, numerous Black feminist and critical race feminist scholars have addressed the "intersecting oppressions" of Black women. In the classic article "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," Frances Beale (1970/1995), journalist and civil rights activist, wrote of the burden of the Black woman's disadvantaged status based on gender, race, and class. Gordon's (1987) analysis identified these three conditions as Black women's "trilogy of oppression" and stated that Black women are often confronted with determining which form of oppression is most important. King (1988) advocated for the term *multiple jeopardy* to describe Black women's oppression, given that Black women often undergo even more forms of subjugation and that

these categories of oppression affect Black women simultaneously (also see Cleaver, 1997; Collins, 2000; Gordon, 1987; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Hull, Bell Scott, & Smith, 1982; Smith, 1983; Terrelonge, 1984; Wing, 1997, 2003). Wing (2003), who used the term *multiplicative identity* to capture the identity of women of color, argued that "women of color are not merely White women *plus* color or men of color *plus* gender. Instead, their identities must be multiplied together to create a holistic One when analyzing the nature of the discrimination against them" (p. 7).

Although there is increased acceptance of a variety of feminist theories, hooks (2000) has continued to question whether contemporary White women understand that their perspectives may not be indicative of all women's realities and that their views may still be racist and classist. In referring to the issues raised regarding Anita Hill's reports of sexual harassment during the U.S. Senate hearings for Clarence Thomas's confirmation to the U.S. Supreme Court, McKay (1993) wrote that White women feminists "forgot that for Black women, issues of gender are always connected to race. . . . Black women cannot choose between their commitment to feminism and the struggle with their men for racial justice" (p. 276). Crenshaw (1994) echoed this sentiment by maintaining that modern discussions on feminism and antiracism have disregarded how racism and sexism are interwoven and "because of their intersectional identity as both women *and* people of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one *or* the other, the interests and experiences of women of color are frequently marginalized within both" (p. 94). Collins's (2000) theoretical approach can be applied to how investigations on the lives of battered Black women should be conducted, as evident when she established that Black feminist theory is positioned within the "matrix of domination," as opposed to being dissociated from sociostructural truths.

Intimate partner abuse has been considered by many Black feminist scholars, even if only in a portion of their work (see Collins, 2000; Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003; hooks, 1981a, 1981b, 1989, 2000, 2004; Richie, 1996, 2000); and although still in its youthful stage, CRFT has been specifically applied to domestic violence in the lives of women of color (see Allard, 1991; Ammons, 1995; Coker, 2003; Crenshaw, 1994; Kupenda, 1998; Rivera, 1997, 2003; Valencia-Weber & Zuni, 2003). Considering issues of both multiplicative identity and intimate partner violence, Richie (2003) argued, "We now have data that supports [*sic*] the existence of racial and ethnic differences in rates but a theoretical orientation and public policy that can't accommodate or make sense of this new understanding" (p. 203). Using Black feminist theory and CRFT as foundations in considering the issues with intimate partner abuse against African American women, as well as considering their involvement in criminal behavior, will assist in addressing this limitation and contribute to the development of BFC.

Understanding Intimate Partner Abuse in the Lives of Black Women Using BFC

As established above, the four themes considered within BFC include social structural oppression, interactions within the Black community, intimate and familial relations, and the Black woman as an individual, all operating under the premise that these

segments are interconnected. Each of these themes is addressed in detail here, specifically examining how BFC can assist with formulating analyses of African American women's encounters with intimate partner abuse. Use of this framework allows the connection between woman battering and structural, cultural, and familial restraints to be made.

Social Structural Oppression

Under the theme of social structural oppression, matters of institutional racism, damaging stereotypical images, sexism, and classism are routinely addressed by Black feminists and critical race feminists and incorporated for analysis. Included in the examination is the limited access to adequate education and employment as consequences of racism, sexism, and classism. As education and employment deficiencies have been found to be common among battered women (Rennison & Welchans, 2000), this area of focus by BFC considers the impact of these shortcomings on battered Black women's lives. Even for Black women who are able to attain advanced levels of education and high-status employment positions, it is unlikely they reached these junctures in their careers without facing blatant or covert racist and sexist attitudes, behaviors, and policies (see Collins, 1998; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). As a result, the sociostructural stressors of even middle- or upper-class battered Black women and how they may respond to intimate partner abuse must be assessed from this standpoint.

Concerns external to remaining in abusive relationships because of poor financial status must be considered with all battered Black women, particularly battered Black women belonging to higher socioeconomic statuses. Stigmatizing constraints forcing battered Black women to remain in abusive settings could include their resistance to engendering the controlling stereotypical image of the single, Black matriarch (Collins, 2000). Based on socially constructed perceptions of Black women, BFC scrutinizes how stereotypical images of these women affect the ways in which others respond to them. Poor responses by social services professionals and crime-processing agents to Black women's interpersonal victimization crises can be considered under the auspices of this framework. Social services used by domestic violence victims in their process of leaving abusive relationships include medical assistance, battered women's shelters, and therapeutic agents. It is regrettable that African American women are often reluctant to seek assistance via these opportunities (Crenshaw, 1994; Potter, 2004; Short et al., 2000). The barriers to using these sources may be in relation to not only the short supply of battered women's shelters and therapeutic resources in Black communities (Asbury, 1987; Sullivan & Rumptz, 1994) or known to the Black community but also the ability and lack of trust in those working in the helping professions who are not able to deliver adequate culturally competent services to African American women who have suffered abuse from their intimate partners (Ammons, 1995; Sharma, 2001; Williams & Tubbs, 2002).

The criminal processing system also has not been swift to aid battered Black women (Ammons, 1995; Robinson & Chandek, 2000), and battered women of color report distrust in using the formal criminal processing system to assist with their exo-

dus from abusive relationships (Bennett, Goodman, & Dutton, 1999; Richie, 1996; Weis, 2001). A history of poor relations between criminal processing agencies (and their representatives) and communities of color can account for these misgivings (Brice-Baker, 1994). Even with higher law enforcement reporting rates than battered White women (Bachman & Coker, 1995; Rennison & Welchans, 2000), Black women victims still express reservations with trusting authorities in the criminal processing system. Reservations about using the crime-processing system are also said to transpire because speaking out about intimate partner violence can involve the risk of generating racial shame (Ammons, 1995; Kupenda, 1998; C. West, 2005; T. West, 1999), and Black women may be viewed as traitors to their race for adding more African American men to the system's offender population (Brice-Baker, 1994; Richie, 1996; Sorenson, 1996).[5]

A focus by BFC on this documented history of poor systemic responses allows for an examination of the way in which professionals working with battered Black women may rely on stereotypical (thus, often inaccurate) assumptions of Black women when making decisions about how to respond to them. An example of the harm of cultural insensitivity and typecasting is found in this author's in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of battered Black women (see Potter, 2004). For many of the participants, assuming the role of the Strong Black Woman, as well as being perceived as a Strong Black Woman, had policy implications for battered women's shelter and counseling services. The women who capitalized on using shelters and therapy to assist them with terminating the abusive relationships were often singled out because of their distinguishing experiences with abuse and as Black women. When the participants' experiences with intimate partner abuse were pointed out by the other clients, it tended to be done for the purposes of placing battering and abuse in a hierarchical sequence and served as a perverse source of competition for the other battered women. When the participants were singled out by counselors, it was for the seemingly innocuous purposes of benefiting the battered Black women, to highlight how they are stronger than the other women (i.e., the White women) and strong enough to get out of the relationships. Even if these assertions by other battered women and service providers were true, they often served as a detriment to battered Black women's inclination to leave abusive relationships. Undervaluing battered Black women's violent encounters because they are not in abusive relationships as long as White women or because their injuries are not (or do not appear to be) as severe as other women's essentially justifies battering to a certain degree. Furthermore, it perpetuates battered Black women's impression that they do not need to seek alternative or supplemental assistance to their familial and personal resources.

Black Community and Black Culture

The second theme addressed by BFC, the interactions within the Black community, is based on the cultural distinctions of African Americans. The nature of relationships among Blacks is a topic scrupulously discussed by critical race and Black feminists. These discussions often include the impact of historical experiences of African Americans in the United States. Some specific subjects addressed by Black feminists

(although not an exhaustive list) include issues of Black women's and Black men's roles in the Black community, the occurrence of violence within the Black community, and the role of spirituality and the Black church as a staple institution in the Black community. Such a concentration allows for each of these features to be considered in how it affects Black women's encounters with domestic abuse. For instance, if indeed Black women's role in the Black community is one of an egalitarian and independent nature, how are issues of a batterer's power and control behaviors (i.e., typical qualities among batterers) displayed in relationships among Black couples? By scrutinizing the characteristics of batterers' abusive behaviors and the motivations for battered Black women to remain in abusive relationships, a sufficient explanation can be formed to demonstrate the method in which these men are still able to assert some level of power and control over the women. Again, recent qualitative research determines that battered Black women remain in abusive relationships more so out of fear of being without companionship, being without a father or father figure for minor children, and being stigmatized as yet another single Black mother than fear of further and more perilous battering incidents or of financial independence (Potter, 2004). Such fears are certainly inherent in Black women's distinctive experiences within U.S. society and the Black community and, thus, can be better understood from a BFC viewpoint.

The role of religion and spirituality must be strongly regarded when considering African American women's experiences with abuse. The substantial impact of religious practice and spirituality in the lives of battered Black women has been solidly established (Bell & Mattis, 2000; Potter, in press; T. West, 1999). Although battered Black women rely heavily on religion and/or spirituality, a number of clergy members have not always demonstrated the support that is expected of them by battered Black women parishioners (Potter, in press). To be sure, BFC considers the essential institutions and practices in any investigation of African Americans, crime, and violence, particularly in how they relate to preventing, controlling, or the perpetration of offending behaviors.

Familial and Intimate Relations

The intimate and familial relationships theme is the third area on which BFC concentrates. The family of origin and generational characteristics of the Black family is one of the foci here, including the embeddedness in othermothers[6] and family members outside of the immediate family unit (i.e., extended family). By considering family embeddedness as a major focal point among African Americans in an analysis of battered Black women's help-seeking behaviors, a more thorough assessment of their dependency on this custom as a resource, as opposed to relying on systemic resources, can be made. This same embeddedness can demonstrate how abuse in the family of origin and among other close family members can be a detrimental and compounding factor on the victims.

Intimate relationships of Black women and their roles within these relationships, including interracial and/or lesbian couples, are essential elements of BFC, particularly as they function in and are affected by the larger societal composition. Research

on interracial battering relationships is particularly lacking, but this cross-cultural dynamic would be well served by study under the auspices of BFC in determining how the various lived experiences of the members of interracial couples may affect the relationship circumstances differently. Lesbian battering relationships among Black women can be examined from the compounding element of sexuality, especially in how this component of Black lesbians' identity is viewed by others and how the quality of the relationship is consequently affected. Lesbian relationships among Black women gained more attention within Black feminist theory when lesbian Black feminists expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of attention heterosexual Black feminists gave lesbianism and homophobia in the Black community. As a result, Black feminists fastidiously include same-gender intimate relationships in their analyses. The implications for Black women who identify as both lesbian and battered clearly require future research (Robinson, 2003) and would prosper under a BFC investigation that necessarily considers intersectionality.

Black Woman as Individual

Last, the theme of Black women as individuals is afforded considerable examination in BFC. Although examined as an individual, the life of the Black woman is strongly connected to her location, status, and role in the social structure, the Black community, and interpersonal relationships. Within this category, issues such as mental health, sexual health, and sexuality are addressed. Inclusion of this precept allows a personal yet comprehensive view of battered Black women.

Consequently, battered Black women's personal strategies for dealing with the abuse can be analyzed under this notion. These strategies include how a battered Black woman may frame the effects of the abuse. As established, Black women face many forms of oppression, and this subjugation will undoubtedly affect a Black woman's mental fitness. It is clear that being abused by an intimate partner serves only to deteriorate a Black woman's mental health beyond the injury of the bias bestowed on countless African American women on a daily basis.

Another strategy exercised by battered women includes the use of physical force against batterers. The propensity of Black women to physically strike back against their intimate abusers has been determined to be at greater rates than battered White women's retaliation (Hampton, Gelles, & Harrop, 1989; Joseph, 1997; C. West & Rose, 2000). Although it is seen as a personal tactic among many battered Black women, considering their self-defense strategies through BFC would allow for the introduction of structural and cultural influences to be considered to begin to explain this phenomenon (see Potter, 2004, for an extended analysis on this topic).

Response to Anticipated Criticism

Although evidence has been presented to support the use of BFC to better understand domestic abuse and African American women, some criticism of this approach can be foreseen. To start, this theoretical contribution may be viewed as being too lim-

iting because the examination expounded here is grounded in Black and critical race theories and focuses on Black women specifically. The claim might be made that this approach does not serve an overarching benefit to responding to and preventing intimate partner abuse. A rejoinder to this potential criticism would rationalize that because Black women are estimated to be victims of abuse at higher rates than White women, it is imperative that we make greater efforts to understand and determine how to address this concern. As Black women are also overrepresented in areas of the crime-processing system as offenders (e.g., arrests, incarceration; Belknap, 2001; Britton, 2000), a new approach for comprehending this trend should be welcomed as well. For both victim and offender status among Black women, starting at a place where Black women's historically and contemporarily situated place in society is strongly embraced will afford a more comprehensive understanding of a group disproportionately implicated in offending and victimization. Ignoring distinctions in identity and experiences based on that identity serves only to perpetuate indifference toward Black women and their plight.

BFC may also be critiqued as pathologizing Black women. By placing focus on Black women's distinctive standpoint, it may be seen as deeming Black women's victimization and criminality as something normal and endemic to their personality or genetic traits. Although there is a history within communities of color to not want to reveal the injurious behavior taking place between members of these communities—oftentimes for fear of upholding criminal stereotypes—it is imperative that more attention be given to the abuses subjected on women of color (see C. West, 2005). Exposing these concerns via a BFC demonstrates that the instances of crime and violence in the Black community are not because of a so-called acceptance of such behavior and illuminates the compelling effects of structural influences. In turn, this approach helps explain the prevalence of intimate partner abuse, how Black women experience such abuse, and the reactions by the criminal processing system and its representatives.

A third anticipated criticism of BFC is that by examining Black women as a group, it will be assumed all Black women have the same experiences. Although Black women in U.S. society indeed encounter similar circumstances, there are numerous gradations and variations in their lived experiences. As addressed above, Black feminist theory (see Collins, 2000) and as follows, BFC, consider Black women from their collective and their individual experiences simultaneously. Stories communicated by battered Black women result in similar trends that will aid in improving culturally competent services available to Black women. As with all battered women, their individual circumstances must always be considered in conjunction with the shared experiences of these women.

The specifying of a theory that seems to consider only Black females actually opens the field to considering gender, race, and class analyses of criminality, crime victimization, and observation of the crime-processing system. BFC highlights the need to consider intersectionality of individual identities in all crime-related concerns. Certain individuals in society are more privileged than others and social structure

influences culture, families, and the individual; thus, it stands to reason that individuals other than Black women and Black men are affected by their positions in society.

As established at the outset, there can be many variations on feminist criminology. It is quite possible that there may be variations on BFC as well. Even so, this concept provides a solid starting point for placing Black women victims of intimate partner abuse at the center of analysis. As such, even if another BFC theoretical proposition leads in a different direction than that presented here, at least Black women's (and Black men's) interlocking identities will be considered central, as opposed to tangential or not at all, in relative investigations. Although there exists the potential for disapproving reactions to a BFC, such an approach to understanding abuse in African American women's intimate relationships is more desirable than disadvantageous.

Conclusion

Approaching issues of Black women and crime from the Black feminist and critical race feminist standpoints provides an extension to feminist criminology, which can aptly be titled *Black feminist criminology*. With increased attention given to women of color, violence, and nontraditional theoretical approaches (e.g., feminist), there is still a need to examine the experiences of "marginalized" women victims of violent crime from a combined gendered and racialized standpoint. Collins (2000) discussed at length the place of Black women scholars in the theory, research, and activism process. She argued that the continued development of Black feminist thought is imperative to the social theory discipline. This does not preclude those who are not Black women from participating in the advancement of Black feminist thought but instead, places Black women's intellectual and activist work on Black women at the forefront of theoretical hypothesizing and investigation. It is from this stance that examinations of the lives and experiences of Black women victims and offenders should be investigated. This article provides an analysis of how approaching intimate partner abuse against African American women from this position may offer a more comprehensive appraisal of their experiences with and responses to their victimization. Considering the historical experiences of Black women in the United States, which have been couched in multiple forms of domination, the approach advanced in this article is based on a fresh standpoint that regards how African American women's lives may position them to encounter intimate partner abuse differently than women of other races and ethnicities (especially in comparison to White women).

The argument expounded here by no intention undervalues the important and noble work done by original feminist criminology and its adherents. It is the advent, subsistence, and practice of feminist criminology that makes the concept insisted on here obtainable because of feminist criminology's position that although women and girl victims and offenders have parallel life circumstances, there are variations among them based on cultural, racial, and other distinctions. Indeed, mainstream feminist theory and feminist criminology allow for a more suitable assessment of women and criminal victimization than traditional male-centered criminology, but BFC necessar-

ily provides for Black women's multiple and interconnected identity and their position in U.S. society to be considered as a central element of any analysis. This is an appropriate theory to apply when evaluating and attempting to understand intimate partner abuse against African American women, their responses to this maltreatment, and the responses to these women by official and unofficial outlets. Black feminist theory stresses that the Black woman encompasses many components that frame her identity. These elements include the general categories of race, ethnicity, gender, class, nationality, and sexuality. Moreover, the Black woman is not one or the other at different times and places in her life but all components at all times. BFC deems that being oppressed and discriminated against based on any or all of these parts of the Black woman's identity can occur at the structural/societal level, within the Black community, and within interpersonal relationships.

Although the example presented in this article involves intimate partner abuse against African American women, BFC can also sufficiently assess African American women's paths into criminal offending. Many Black women, regardless of offending status, are victims of differential treatment because of their subjugated racial status. As previous feminist criminology research has discovered that most female offenders have histories of childhood abuse victimizations (Belknap, 2001; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004), BFC will be sure to substantiate that Black women and girl offenders likely have similar backgrounds of being treated negatively because of their intertwined identity of gender, race, sexuality, class, and so forth. Accordingly, an analysis of African American girls' and women's lives under the rubric of BFC will consider their offending from an intersecting identities perspective using, at the least, a racialized, gendered, and classed assessment.

Just as feminist criminology has afforded a more inclusive understanding of girls' and women's experiences with offending and victimization, BFC reaches beyond feminist criminology to the specific concern with African American women's distinctive position and history of domination in U.S. society that has continued on— although in varying and changing forms—to the present day. BFC focuses on African American women's devalued societal position. BFC enables the domestic violence researcher to analyze the data with the assumption that sociostructural, cultural, and familial factors affect Black women's experiences with intimate partner abuse. Scrutinizing structural, cultural, and familial dynamics aids in critically addressing the effectiveness of formal and informal regulation of partner violence against African American women. BFC may also do well in explaining the onset of and responses to abuse and crime in the lives of other women of color, White women, and even marginalized men. Hence, it is not implausible to extend a Black feminist criminological approach to understanding crime and violence in the lives of African Americans.

Notes

1. Consistent with Belknap (2001), in this article the term *processing* is used in place of *justice* when referring to law enforcement agencies and agents, court systems and their representatives, and sanctions for individuals convicted as criminal offenders. *Justice* implies that victims and offenders are treated justly and

equally within the "criminal justice system," however, this is not always true, particularly with African American women.

2. In this article, *mainstream* feminism or feminist theory are those efforts made toward gender equality by groups of predominantly White women feminists. The choice in the use of the term *mainstream* relates to the considerable attention—both negative and positive—given to the efforts of these women, as opposed to that afforded smaller, marginalized groups of feminists.

3. Throughout this article, *African American* and *Black* will be used interchangeably to describe U.S. citizens of Black African descent. Although there are instances where *Black* will not be capitalized, it is done so only in direct quotes of others who do not capitalize the term. There is no set standard for whether the term is to be capitalized when referring to race.

4. Collins (2000) defined *essentialism* as the "belief that individuals or groups have inherent, unchanging characteristics rooted in biology or a self-contained culture that explain their status" (p. 299).

5. It is interesting that this author's investigation of battered Black women determined that none of the respondents were deterred from contacting the police because of the concern of criminalizing another Black male. For those who did not call the police, their reasons centered on other factors, such as maintaining a resident father for their children.

6. *Othermother* refers to a woman in the Black community who shares the responsibility of mothering children with biological mothers and may or may not be related by blood or marriage (see Collins, 2000; Troester, 1984).

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