Dimensions of Oppression in the Lives of Impoverished Black Women Who Use Drugs

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Abstract

Oppression against Black women continues to be a significant problem in the United States. The purpose of this study is to use grounded theory to identify multiple dimensions of oppression experienced by impoverished Black women who use drugs by examining several settings in which participants experience oppression. Three case studies of drug using, impoverished Black women were randomly selected from two large scale consecutive ethnographic studies conducted in New York City from 1998 to 2005. Analysis revealed five dimensions of oppression occurring within eight distinct settings. While dimensions constitute different manifestations of oppression, settings represented areas within participants' lives or institutions with which participants interact. Dimensions of oppression included classism, sexism, familism, racism, and drugism. Settings included the school system, correction system, welfare system, housing and neighborhood, relationship with men, family, experiences with drug use, and employment. Findings have important implications for social justice, welfare, drug, and justice system policy.

Keywords

oppression; substance abuse; Black women; poverty; violence; sexism; classism; racism

> I feel that I was forgotten. I feel that I was—I was expected to do more than I could. I feel that I was tired of people saying, you're a very strong girl. Like what is wrong with you? Why I have to be strong? What is that? Is that a compliment, or is that—? You know what I'm saying. That's something that used to just get me angry. But, um, so that was, um, I had to grow up too fast. It was, you got to grow up; maybe when you neglect a child, maybe you leave the Pamper on the child, just as an example, and they get a butt rash. But when you tell that child, you got to change your own Pamper, or it ain't gone never get changed, it goes a little step further than neglect. They's forgotten about, you understand what I'm saying? So that's why—you know, I went from okay to not being there.
>
> Carmen, age 23

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Extensive literature has examined and documented the devastating impact of oppression on impoverished Black women. Oppression is understood as a multidimensional and complex hegemonic system developed from social beliefs in group superiority that justify privilege. Oppression can be manifested in many forms, including racism, classism, and sexism (Collins et al., 2000; Du Bois, 1903; Fanon, 1952/1967; Freire, 1970/2000; Gramsci, Hoare, & Nowell-Smith, 1971; hooks, 1995). Despite the efforts of many organizations and policies to increase public awareness and diminish inequality, oppression against Black women continues to be a significant problem in the United States. Several authors have argued that oppression against Black women in the United States contributed to racist and sexist reproductive and antidrug policies, resulting in serious negative consequences in the lives of Black women who use drugs and their children (Benoit, 2003; Dunlap & Johnson, 1992; Reinarman & Levine, 1997). An important example is the legislation that ordered the removal of a child in the event that the mother tested positive for cocaine. Research identified serious flaws in this policy and demonstrated that it was based on racist, sexist, and classist assumptions (Roberts, 1997; Zerai & Banks, 2002).

Studies of oppression have been influenced by different perspectives. Theories such as intersectionality, Gramsci's study on hegemony, and Fanon's and Foucault's studies on internalized racism and sexism have played significant roles in theoretical, epistemological, and methodological attempts to understand oppression (Alexander & Mohanty, 2001; Fanon, 1952/1967; Foucault, 1980; Gramsci et al., 1971; hooks, 2005). While the consequences of oppression as well as its mechanisms have been widely examined, more research is needed to understand how dimensions of oppression are manifested in the lived experiences of impoverished, drug-using Black women in the United States.

The purpose of this study is to identify multiple dimensions of oppression experienced by impoverished Black women who use drugs in New York by examining several settings in which participants experience oppression. Informed by the literature described above, oppression is defined as a system of power imbalance and exploitation maintained by unrealistic social norms and expectations within contemporary American society that make it impossible for certain groups of people to fit in and excel. Dimensions constitute ways in which oppression manifests itself in different areas or settings.

Method

Three case studies of drug-using, impoverished Black women were randomly selected from two large-scale, consecutive ethnographic studies conducted in New York City—Violence in Crack User/Seller Households: An Ethnography and Transient Domesticity & Violence in Distressed Households (Dunlap, Stürzenhofecker, Sanabria, & Johnson, 2004; Johnson, Natarajan, Dunlap, & Elmoghazy, 1994). In-depth interviews and observations were collected from 1998 to 2005. Code names will be used to ensure confidentiality.

Grounded theory (Glaser, 1992) was used to analyze the data in the following steps: (a) We read baseline interviews for each participant, extracted sections that seemed to illustrate oppressive experiences, and categorized participants' experiences of oppression into settings where the experiences took place; (b) we examined each setting and extracted dimensions of oppression experienced by participants; and (c) we consolidated dimensions across settings to ensure that each dimension included the full spectrum of oppression it described. The following cases were included.

The first two women, Brenda and Olivia, are sisters. Brenda is 36 years old and Olivia is 38. Both of them identify themselves as Black, and they were born and raised in New York. Their mother graduated from high school and went to college for about 1 year. She was a

waitress until she had her first child. From that point on, she never worked again and the family was supported by welfare. Olivia and Brenda's mother and their oldest brother died of AIDS. Olivia is now the eldest living child, and Brenda is the fourth child of the original seven: four sisters and three brothers. Brenda and Olivia have different fathers, and neither woman knows her father. All of Brenda and Olivia's brothers and sisters receive welfare. Olivia and Brenda live together at Brenda's home with one brother and Brenda's children.

Brenda served 5 years in prison for attempted murder. She got her general equivalency diploma (GED) and attended college while in prison, though she never graduated. She dropped out of school because she was getting into fights and cutting class. Brenda had eight children; her first child was born when she was 14 years old. Her eight children have three different fathers. Brenda never had a regular job in her life. She worked for her welfare check as a custodian, but she had to stop because she did not have babysitters for her children. Brenda started using alcohol regularly at age 12 when her aunt offered her a drink. She quickly started experimenting with other drugs, especially marijuana. She stopped using drugs, but she still drinks twice per week.

Olivia stopped going to school in sixth grade and never returned. According to her, she simply stopped going, and the school never notified her mother about it. She had two sons by two different men: One son is 20 years old and lives with Olivia's grandmother; the other is 3 years old and lives in foster care. The father of her older son is deceased, and the father of the 3-year-old does not contribute financially or emotionally. She is trying to complete drug rehabilitation and get a one-bedroom apartment so that she can get her son back. Olivia started using and selling drugs at 16. Like Brenda, she used to take prescription drugs from her mother and drink alcohol. As a teenager, she was selling marijuana but not smoking it. At 18, Olivia started experimenting with multiple drugs. She quickly became an alcoholic and addicted to angel dust (PCP) and crack. She has been clean for 4 years now and is supported by disability payments from Supplemental Security Income (SSI) because she is HIV positive.

Carmen is a 23-year-old Black female born and raised in New York. She has one sister who lives in a shelter in Manhattan. She might also have a paternal brother, but she is not sure. Her sister uses crack and marijuana. Her mother graduated from high school and attended at least 1 year of college. Carmen's mother used to sell incense and oils when she was young. Carmen does not know what her father did for a living or how much schooling he had. Carmen grew up in the projects and moved to tenements at around 16 years of age. Her mother was evicted, and the family had a hard time acquiring stable housing. Carmen dropped out of school during 10th grade but later obtained her GED. She dropped out because other kids would tease her for not having good clothing. Carmen has a 2-year-old son, of whom she shares custody with his father. Carmen has had two legitimate jobs and one informal job, all temporary positions that did not last more than 4 or 5 months. She earned minimum wage on the legitimate jobs and less than minimum wage on the informal job. In order to make ends meet, Carmen also hustled, selling crack, stripping, and prostituting. Her main source of income is welfare. Carmen first started drinking with her friends at age 14. Unlike Olivia and Brenda, Carmen denied ever using hard drugs; however, she admitted smoking marijuana until recently. At the time of her interview, Carmen reported only using alcohol every other day.

Findings

Findings are divided into two distinct sections. First, settings in which oppression occurred are discussed and literature that explains how settings contribute to oppression is reviewed. Then oppression dimensions are presented, including examples retrieved from the data.

Analysis revealed eight settings in which oppression occurs and five dimensions of oppression.

Settings in Which Oppression Occurs

School system—The school system was a setting of oppression for women in the study as U.S. educational policies and expectations are usually based on Eurocentric and patriarchic assumptions (Evans-Winters, 2007). In order to meet school expectations, students had to be able to purchase appropriate clothing, belong to a family in which parents were involved and available to participate in their children's education, and have their basic needs of food and shelter met by their parents. Reality was quite different for this study's participants,[1] all of whom dropped out of school as a result of oppression.

Correctional system—The ostensible purpose of the correctional system is to serve the community and maintain public safety. However, participants viewed the correctional system suspiciously and purposefully avoided interactions with law enforcement. Participants' suspicions are justified when considering the history between African Americans and the police, reaching back to the era when law enforcement was responsible for capturing and brutally punishing runaway slaves (Franklin & Moss, 2005). Since then, numerous accounts of police brutality against African Americans have been registered. Considerable research has documented racism, sexism, and classism within the correctional system, demonstrating that the police often work to protect society from impoverished African Americans rather than viewing impoverished African Americans as members of the society the correctional system must serve (Coates, 2004; Terrill & Reisig, 2003; Weitzer, 2002). All study participants reported multiple encounters with the correctional system, yet the police were seldom contacted to address violence in the community because participants did not trust law enforcement. In order to survive and maintain their freedom, participants consistently avoided and deceived authority figures.

Welfare system—The welfare system includes Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, disability income (SSI), Child Protective Services, food stamps, and public housing. Considerable research has discussed how the welfare system has oppressed applicants and recipients due to assumptions based on a Eurocentric, patriarchic society. That is, based on assumptions of personal responsibility and plentiful opportunities, Americans who are poor and in minority groups are blamed for their own misfortunes (Brown, 1999; Hays, 2003). In this study, the welfare system had high expectations that were often impossible for participants to overcome. Women were expected to work, take care of their children, and develop work skills in order to become financially independent. Yet welfare did not provide the means to fulfill these expectations, forcing women to go into debt, lose their electricity, engage in illegal activities, and/or play the system in order to survive. All participants reported receiving public assistance throughout their lives. They struggled financially and explained that lack of child care was the main obstacle for them to find and maintain employment.

Housing and neighborhood—Housing and neighborhood were key settings of oppression because they exposed participants to violence, unsanitary living conditions, and drug use at quite young ages. Americans are expected to obtain their own housing, but the high cost of living in New York makes it inaccessible to poor New Yorkers. Their only alternative is to turn to the city's overcrowded low-income housing program. However, low-income housing is often located in violent and drug-infested neighborhoods that offer impoverished schools to residents. Housing and neighborhood have also been connected to

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[1]By participants we refer to the three case studies included in the analysis for this article.

racial segregation, which leads to worse living conditions among African Americans, especially those living in poverty (Shapiro, 2004). All participants experienced homelessness at one point of their lives. They grew up in impoverished and crowded tenements and projects, which they described as violent, infested with mice, and overcrowded. Landlords neglected the buildings and drugs were present everywhere. The same issues were present in participants' descriptions of their current housing experiences.

Relationships with men—This setting included participants' experiences with their male relatives, friends, and partners. Its oppression is rooted in the lack of value placed on Black women's welfare as evidenced by sexual exploitation, physical abuse, and inadequate legal protection. For instance, research shows that significantly fewer rapists of Black women are convicted than rapists of White women (Wheeler & George, 2005). In this study, all participants reported being victims of repeated sexual abuse and rape while growing up as well as engaging in at least one violent romantic relationship. Similar patterns were reported among participants' parents and friends. Accounts were quite graphic, illustrating the violence and lack of protection these women encountered while growing up. Perpetrators were usually family members, neighbors, or friends who were often much older than participants. Many of the incidents included multiple rapists. Abuses were rarely reported to the police, and those that were reported often did not result in conviction, due to lack of evidence. Participants reported not telling anyone about rape and abuse because they felt responsible and were scared and ashamed. Participants often saw their attackers regularly on the streets and dealt with these encounters by trying to avoid the perpetrators.

Family—This setting was oppressive to impoverished Black women because it incorporated assumptions that moral and appropriate families follow a Eurocentric, patriarchic, heterosexual model. In this study, mothers were the heads of household and they had children with multiple men. The roots of these patterns have been linked to slavery. It was nearly impossible for a slave family to be formed and to remain together because children, husbands, brothers, and sisters were often sold separately. Moreover, the brutality to which slaves were exposed left deep scars and practices that survive to this day, such as whipping to discipline children (Leary, 2005). All participants reported experiencing conflict, violence, and neglect by their parents due to poverty and drug use. All three of the women whose stories are analyzed here reported being raised by a loving mother who was addicted to crack/cocaine. When the mother was unable to care for the family, the eldest female child (no older than 12) often became responsible for taking charge of the household.

Experiences with drug use—This setting includes participants' use or witnessing the use of drugs and/or alcohol. Moreover, it included the impact of their family's drug use on their lives. All participants reported either having used drugs in the past or currently using drugs. Two participants reported experiencing more violence in their homes after their mothers became addicted to crack. This setting's oppression is rooted in the expectation mat individuals struggling with drug use should be able to perform as well as those who do not use drugs. Such an expectation is particularly unrealistic in light of recent emphasis on substance abuse and addiction as a chronic disease of the brain that impairs the individual's ability to function in society (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2007). It is not reasonable to expect that someone who is struggling with substance abuse and/or addiction will be able to care for a family, obtain and maintain employment, and support himself or herself without help. Moreover, research has documented the role of stigma in exacerbating negative consequences of drug use, such as inhibiting users' ability to recover and develop positive self-esteem (Minior, Galea, Stuber, Ahern, & Ompad, 2003).

Employmen—Employment included participants' experiences with formal and informal work. This setting was oppressive because of the assumptions that there are plentiful employment opportunities available in the United States and that employment provides enough financial support for employees to avoid poverty. In fact, research has demonstrated that employment is not plentiful for everyone and that employment does not guarantee one's ability to support a family (Edin & Lein, 1997). In this study none of the participants managed to maintain legitimate employment for a significant period of time. However, all participants worked on minimum wage–paying, informal jobs and engaged in various hustles to supplement their income. Hustles included doing laundry for others, prostituting, and selling drugs. Informal jobs available to participants included stacking fish boxes, breaking wooden crates, and working as a cashier, teaching assistant, nursing aid, and messenger. All participants reported working as custodians for the Work Experience Program (WEP). Respondents reported leaving these jobs due to lack of child care, domestic violence, relocating, or being laid off.

Dimensions of Oppression

Classism—Classism consists of expectations that in the United States people have equal opportunity and consequently will be able to acquire material resources to support themselves. Participants were expected to feed and clothe themselves properly based on the assumption that in the United States food and clothes are plentiful. Classism further assumes that a high school education is available to all and that it fosters social and economic ascension. These assumptions completely disregard the harsh reality of impoverished Black families. Participants' poverty significantly contributed to their inability to graduate from school and obtain the skills necessary to secure employment. In this sense, poverty was a vehicle of oppression in participants' lives. Participants reported growing up in violent, crime-infested neighborhoods because they could not afford to live anywhere else. Some participants also experienced homelessness. Two of the participants reported experiencing hunger while growing up, and none of the participants had proper clothing. Olivia believes that her lack of proper doming might have contributed to her dropping out of school:

> I thought I was dressing old-fashioned. So they [her classmates'] shit compared to mine made me feel like I was looking stupid. They had on the new stuff … like the marshmallow shoes that came out. And I was wearing some ole' Payless or whatever you call it. [Laughter] And I didn't like it. Maybe that's part of what kept me out of school too. Because the girl would look at me like if I had, you know, had it like that so why would I be wearing Payless shoes.

The teasing of students can be seen as an expression of internalized repressive norms and assumptions of classism, and evidence that such norms and assumptions are reproduced by the school system. For example, Carmen explains how school policy contributed to her inability to feed herself as a young teenager:

> I used to be starving. And then come home and still be starving for all that. I just starve [at] home and hopefully somebody come bring me food. And then part of the way through high school, I couldn't even get the school lunch, because just to find my mother to copy the paper, you know. You got to do the paper with your financial thing to get school lunches. So I even was messed up with that.

Governmental agencies theoretically designed to help people excel placed further obstacles for participants by ignoring their special needs. Olivia discussed her family's experience with Child Protective Services. According to her, the agency disregarded her mother's previous good behavior and her struggle with drug addiction and poverty. They removed her children:

> Welfare, she was like she would get cut off and then um my mother was a good woman she kept all her appointments. … You know, my mother's house wasn't right cause underneath the sink was damaged … so they call um ACS on her and they took her two kids … and my son. … And my grandmother was there within a half hour to get them. … There was a hole under the sink the house was unmanaging [unmanageable] … because they said that she was unfitted some body called up on her and told some junk on her … and um that was that … they I mean they just came and took her. …

None of the participants were ever able to secure employment that paid more than minimum wage. Olivia was willing to work hard for little money, but better paying jobs were not available to her because she did not have her high school degree. In order to make ends meet, she had to engage in hustles and apply to welfare and SSI:

> Uh … 1 worked doing outside work on my own like stacking fish boxes and breaking down wooden crates. It's a big yard and they bring in all kind of crates … baskets that collard greens and stuff come in. They empty them and we knock them down, tie them up, and put them in bundles. You have to open them [the wooden boxes] up, bend them down with your hands. I did that for about two years or a year. That was off the books because it was hard for me to get welfare. … Then when I got on welfare they sent me to WEP. I worked in the welfare center doing filing for about four months. They got rid of me very quick! They didn't need no more help and I was just getting ready to get into the computer. You know? I was like, Oh man! No they didn't send me home! You know? I haven't worked WEP since then. I'm off welfare now. I'm on SSI.

Olivia's experience suggests that the welfare system reproduces oppressive classist assumptions by presenting work "opportunities" that remain undeveloped or do not offer meaningful routes to self-sufficiency.

Sexism—Sexism consisted of unrealistic expectations of how women must behave and perform sexually. Sexism is a complex and multifaceted dimension. In addition to meeting unrealistic gender roles in the family household, participants were expected to sexually satisfy their partners, enforce condom use to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy, and not trade sex for money. Participants reported that men usually refuse to wear condoms. Brenda described how she takes responsibility for ensuring their compliance by describing her mother's struggle with HIV:

> If we get in a little too far into it and I ain't heard that little crackle, crackle, of the paper; and when they really is persistent about it, then I tell them about my mother. And after hearing that, they always have the look like, why did she tell me that? I don't want to know. But I don't feel bad about it; I love my mother. I'm not saying it to down her; but listen, you gonna use the condom, because I already got to worry about my mother, because she's got HIV. And I'm not trying to be like her. So after I say that, they really don't have too much arguing to do.

In order to make ends meet, Carmen has hustled selling crack, working in a club as a stripper, and prostituting. She described her trauma working in the club as a prostitute due to the stigma attached to prostitution:

> Well, I tried to make it something weekly, like two or three times out of a week, but that is traumatizing. Because the whole environment will kill you. It's just so much negativity. Like, you can't just get into that kind of job, if you like sentimental or something, because it's like everybody, nobody cares. It's just about the money.

The extremely low worth attached to impoverished Black females in American society was glaring in their experiences of being raped. All participants were raped multiple times throughout their lives. All of them were abused as children and therefore did not have the choice of when and how to initiate their sexual lives. Their rapists were never prosecuted, and participants were forced to live in the same neighborhoods as their aggressors. Carmen described being repeatedly raped by a man in her neighborhood. In describing the first attack, she seemed to feel the need to justify it as rape:

> I had met him and, um, this is like right after the problems happened with my mother. And this is something that I blamed on my mother, too. I had met him one day, and he said, well, come see me. I came down there one day to visit him, and I don't know how we started messing with each other. He, okay, I don't know if you can call it rape, but I call it rape. When it's like, first of all, there was a gun involved; and I was scared. Second of all, he let his friends have sex with me. And yeah, I didn't exactly just fight with him and get punched. I was dumb scared, so I just laid there, you know what I'm saying. And I blocked that out. And these are guys that I still seen, to this day, some of them, you know what I'm saying. But after he finished, he tried to make me have oral sex with him. And back then, that was really a sin, to have oral sex, you know what I'm saying, because, you know. And I had just started having sex, so I wasn't really having sex like that. But anyway, I told him, if you stick that—after going through all that, I just basically told him, if you stick your penis in my mouth—then neither one of us are gonna leave. That's that.

Participants often felt responsible for being raped. Carmen was raped several times by the same man while no one ever attempted to stop it. While telling her story, she indicates that she believes she was responsible for some of the attacks:

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

Male/female relationships were another setting where impoverished Black women endured oppression. There was a complex exchange of power between the men and the women where they both met some of their needs and exploited their partners. The men were often transient and unable to contribute financially to the family budget, though sometimes they would provide needed child care. Domestic violence seemed to be commonplace within these relationships. The women were usually the heads of the households, and they were able to kick the men out by claiming their home. Monogamy was not necessarily expected, and men enjoyed bragging about their sexual relationships to their friends.

Familism—Familism consisted of expectations mat a family is composed of a heterosexual couple and their children, where parents are married and responsible for raising and providing for their children. Participants' understanding of family was quite different than mainstream definitions. None of the participants or their parents were married or able to provide financially and sometimes emotionally for their families. In fact, the eldest children would often take on adult roles and be expected to run the household themselves while their parents were out chasing drugs. The males in the family were transient, often violent, and

usually unable to provide financially. For example, Olivia described her mother's expectations of her while growing up:

> I didn't play a lot. When we really started getting up to the fourth and fifth grade, it was like do the laundry, fold the socks, fold the clothes, get ready for dinner, and eat. After you eat, take a bath and sit your ass down and watch TV. [Laughter from both] For real! My mother was on some shit! And don't leave no clothes in the laundry when you go! Bring everything back that you took!

Drugs played a significant role in overloading the children with adult responsibilities. Carmen explained how her mother changed after she became addicted to crack and heroin:

> And you go from my mother cooking every night to I got to stand outside in front of the building and wait for you to get home; because I don't got no key to get in the house. Talk about dinner, and I'll tell you to go to a friend's house if I wasn't home? Yeah, but I ain't know you meant if you spent the night out, because you ain't never did that before. So we literally jumped from me, from sugar to shit, literally. But you know, it probably was an ongoing process with her; but I was a child. I didn't know that I didn't know it was that bad.

Participants were ultimately responsible for providing for their families. Their male partners sometimes provided child care; however, their contribution was not reliable due to their transience. While parents are usually expected to protect and care for their children, this was unrealistic for many of participants' parents because of their drug addiction, poverty, and lack of voice in society. As Olivia and Brenda explain, their family struggled with domestic violence after their mother moved in with their stepfather:

> Well when she got with this last man she was bug head I mean my mother wasn't really mean but she when she started chasing that coke cocaine behind this man … she thought that she could whip. … You know what I mean she thought that she could really work earn and all the time she was getting beat up herself by these men.

Though all participants reported witnessing their parents engage in violence, drug use, and crime at young ages, they loved their parents and were willing to withstand great hardships to maintain their families intact. When Carmen's mother became dependent on drugs, her relatives suggested she move south to live with them. She would have had her basic needs met if she had accepted. However, at age 12, she chose to stay with her mother:

> Yeah, but you asking a person that was, like I said—you went from neglect to nothing; but when it was going through that process, you asking me to give away, to leave my mother. And this was before, how am I supposed to know that I'm gonna be starving every day? I—this problem just now occurred; and soon as the problem occur, you want me to jump up and leave my mother, while everybody, it seemed to me, is whispering bad things about my mother. I don't want to hear that. And I don't want to be with you, if you gonna sit there and talk about my mother.

Carmen's account suggests she is aware that as a child she internalized the familistic assumption that her mother would care for her and resented relatives' claims that she would not.

Racism—Racism consisted of expectations that governmental agencies will not serve and protect all people independently of their racial background. This dimension was mostly salient in participants' interaction with law enforcement. The mainstream expectation that the police would serve and protect their well-being was not shared by the Black community. Many participants did not believe that the police would protect them, and they did not trust

police officers. In fact, the only time Brenda reported being raped to the police, nothing happened. Brenda blamed herself for the outcome and sought justice herself:

> We got up there and he flipped on me and tried to make his friend have sex with me. He said, go ahead; take your pants off. And I was scared, because he was saying, I'm gonna throw you off the roof, you know. So I was scared. So I pull them down and his friend had sex. Then he told the girl. And then he said, okay, it's your turn. And then I jumped up. But she never got to do it, because when he said that, I said, no. He said, well, we gonna throw you off the roof. And I just jumped up some kinda way, pulled on my pants and jerked away and ran down to the next flight and banged on people's doors. They wouldn't let me in, but this lady called the cops for me. When me cops came, I just told them his name. But I didn't really know where he lived at, because he was living here and there and everything. So they just took me to die train and I went home. But I got die girl. My friend, I was with a friend, and I tore her up. I kicked her butt.

Whereas Brenda sought help from the police, unsuccessfully, after being sexually assaulted, Carmen avoided contacting law enforcement, even after the third time she had been raped by the same man:

> And after that, I just avoided mat block. I was scared. I didn't know to call the cops. Black people—and back then, my mother didn't sit there to let me know if somebody did somedthing, call the cops. And as for young people, cops was a no-no; because they don't care. I'm—and then when the cops come, where's your mother? So that would have been in the subject. Even though they might have arrested him, okay, let's take you home. Okay, when you go home, or go to the precinct, your mother don't come for five days. Oh, you're going to a foster home. I wasn't trying to call no police.

Theoretically, there is the social expectation that the police will be called when there is violence. Participants witnessed and experienced a lot of violence but seldom contacted the police. There was an unspoken understanding that participants must defend themselves. Police officers were seen as the enemy and were seldom involved in these violent disputes. History of police racism is oppressive in that it leaves Black people vulnerable to victimization because they see no reason to expect protection. Another expression of racism in this context is targeting of Black men for arrest and prosecution; the women in the study give voice to a less obvious form of racism as a dimension of oppression.

Drugism—Drugism consisted of expectations that those addicted to drugs should be able to function and take responsibility for themselves and their families as healthy people. Participants seemed to have strong negative perceptions of cocaine use. They seemed to struggle between blaming their parents for what their addiction made them do and defending their behavior. Generally, participants felt that those who use crack were weak and responsible for their addiction. Brenda discusses her views about her mother's addiction:

> Okay, my mother, well, I always drought she was just weak. She was so nice and stuff. I mean, at first she was strong; she was going to school, vibrant, happy. And then when things started, like when her husband left her, she was using drugs then, but I didn't know. She was smoking crack; she wasn't a crackhead back then, you know, because there is a difference. And it was alright then, but after she started abusing the drugs, and you know, things went down. My sister to me, she was always like a troubled child. And then she was smart, but then she went and started smoking crack. So how smart? I mean, I think I was actually the strongest one, because they was weakened so easily, well, my sister. Because how could you grow up knowing, you know, what's going on, and then go and do the same thing?

> It's like, don't be ridiculous. Even though I might be falling into that cycle, but I mean, she was smoking crack. But I'm looking at it differently. I never did that, so, in my opinion, you know. But she was a very smart person. It's just that I think she just got hurt so much in life that—it's like she just lives on a high or something.

This expectation of functional behavior on the part of drug addicts was also evident in their interactions with a methadone clinic. Clients were expected to show up at the methadone clinic within a small time frame to take their methadone dose. If they missed that window, they did not get their dose. This was not realistic for this population, considering the chaotic environments in which they lived. Yet they had to cope with these expectations, as illustrated by Carmen's mother's experience:

> Cooking, getting up in—only thing I ever heard her complain about was going to a methadone clinic. You know, if she was missing it. That's the only thing I really heard her complain. Oh, I don't want to miss my clinic. Or if she missed it, it was like she was annoyed; but other than that, I really never heard her complain.

The quotation above illustrates limitations of current drug use polices based on a punitive perspective associated with beliefs that drug use is an issue of deficient moral behavior. While the government recognizes methadone as an appropriate method to treat drug addiction, it imposes multiple controls to change patients' behavior and to punish them when they are unable to meet such expectations (Conrad & Schneider, 1992).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify multiple dimensions of oppression experienced by impoverished Black women who use drugs in New York by examining several settings in which participants experience oppression. Analysis revealed five dimensions of oppression occurring within eight distinct settings. Dimensions of oppression included classism, sexism, familism, racism, and drugism. Settings included the school system, correctional system, welfare system, housing and neighborhood, relationship with men, family, experiences with drug use, and employment. Dimensions of oppression are embedded in the rules governing the achievement of success in every setting, taking the form of unrealistic assumptions and expectations.

Findings demonstrate the unprecedented disadvantages that this population faces in their daily lives. From childhood to adulthood these disadvantages accumulate, having a snowball effect that makes it impossible for participants to realize economically and emotionally stable lives. They were born into impoverished families where the head of the household was addicted to crack and other drugs. Their homes and neighborhoods exposed them to drugs, violence, and sexual behavior at extremely young ages. Their childhood was stripped from them by the need to step into their parents' role and provide for themselves and their families. These adverse conditions made it impossible for them to attend school and graduate, reducing their ability to secure employment in mainstream society. Thus, in order to survive they engaged in street hustles selling drugs and/or their bodies or engaging in odd jobs whenever possible. These hustles exposed them even further to state controls such as welfare and law enforcement that often resulted in an arrest and/or the removal of their children from their homes. Their financial struggle and the only role models available in their lives motivated participants to apply for welfare, only to once again encounter further state controls and meager financial aid.

Mainstream society aggravates and perpetuates participants' struggles by imposing on them Eurocentric and patriarchic assumptions that blame participants for their own plights and justify society's lack of support for those in need. This becomes clearer when considering the impact of U.S. slavery, emancipation, and oppression history in the lives of Black

women (Leary, 2005; Shapiro, 2004). Specifically, the trauma of slavery and its impact may be passed down as the family legacy even to children born after the trauma. Consequently, many Black women end up fulfilling the roles assigned to them by society (Boyd-Franklin, 1993; Leary, 2005).

Other research has demonstrated how White privilege has contributed to contemporary racial disparities in the form of accumulated wealth, punitive policies that are based on stereotypical images of different racial groups, and preferential treatment due to covert prejudice (Edin & Lein, 1997; Hays, 2003; Shapiro, 2004). For instance, Shapiro (2004) demonstrated how, historically, privilege allowed White immigrants to accumulate wealth while making social ascension difficult for African Americans. Whites owned the land and profited from African slave work that was never compensated. After emancipation, policies such as the GI Bill allowed White Americans to purchase their own homes while indirectly excluding African Americans. The current study builds on this research by demonstrating how dimensions of oppression have contributed to participants' inability to compete for success in contemporary American society.

Acknowledgments

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