I AM My Sista: introducing Sista Circles to Qualitative Inquiry

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“If we are to talk about spirit and spirituality, what is important to know first and foremost about people we call [Black] today is: we are Black on purpose for a purpose… A truth that embraces the need to push and resist. A call that requires us to agitate and move toward (re)membering our way and the freedom that brings. We are Black on purpose for a purpose” (Dillard, 2022, no pagination).
The Whiteness in Qualitative Inquiry

Texts, journals, and keynote speakers at qualitative research events continue to overrepresent white sensibilities or perspectives as the normative standard for qualitative research (McClish-Boyd and Bhattacharya, 2020).

As such, this space leaves little room for culturally situated inquiry especially that which is derived from Black women’s perspectives (ibid.).

In response to this, my methods and methodology are, therefore, a deliberate attempt to challenge or as bell hooks (1989) would say ‘talk back’, to the whiteness that continues to underpin the field of qualitative research.
Existing literature on Black Feminist Qualitative Research

*Endarkened Feminist Epistemology (EFE) (Dillard, 2016)*

Dillard (2016) introduces this concept to articulate how our knowledge of reality is strengthened when situated within the historical roots of global Black feminism.

More specifically, she reveals how an African-American female teacher’s engagement with African feminist epistemologies enabled her to adapt her teaching in culturally relevant ways when teaching Black children in Ghana.
Introducing literature on Black Feminist Qualitative Research

Daughtering (Evans-Winters, 2019)

Evans-Winters (2019) introduces “daughtering” as a methodological approach that is specifically centred on Black women’s experiences. ‘Daughtering’ is characterised by the following aspects:

1. It is both an epistemological and a social view of the world in which Black women are uniquely situated to engage in;

2. As a qualitative methodology, “daughtering” acknowledges how the intersectionality of Black women’s ‘race’ and gender have shaped their material realities throughout history.

3. Daughtering examines how white supremacist structures continue to inform knowledge-production, and seeks to destabilise universal truths by acknowledging diverse forms of data representation

4. Finally, daughtering not only seeks to amplify the voices of groups who have been marginalised but also recognises how research has been historically oppressive and, thereby, looks at how research can be placed on a path towards liberation.
Introducing Sista Circles

Defining the term and spelling of ‘Sista’?

• “Sista” is a term of address in Black Languages rooted in the legacy of plantation slavery and that is central to the Black female experience (Davis-Maye et al., 2022).
• The term establishes a sense of solidarity and connection among Black women; the kinship term denotes the shared experiences which Black women have (ibid.).
• Importantly, I have replaced the “er” in sister with an “a” to centre the Black vernacular spelling of sista and to, thereby, honour the colloquial term of a space for women part of the African diaspora (Dunmeyer et al., 2022).
As a methodology, sista circles are group discussions and conversations between Black women that a researcher chooses to centre to obtain insight into a specific issue that impacts Black women from the standpoint of Black women themselves (Dunmeyer et al., 2020).

As a method, sista circles are built on an equal relationship between the researcher and the participants whereby the aim is that both come to and see each other as knowledgeable equals (Lavalleé, 2009).

Methodically, sista circles are committed to enhancing what Neal-Barnett et al. (2011, p. 2) refer to as “culturally relevant, gender-specific” research methodologies that are appropriate for understanding Black women’s ways of being.
Focus Groups vs Sista Circles

Focus Groups

• Based on rigid boundaries between the researcher and the research participants, whereby the researcher is confined to a facilitating and listening role.

• As such, the researcher is the only one taking whilst the research participants are the only ones giving (Johnson, 2015).

Sista Circles

• The researcher is invited to be a participant whereby the aim is to remove power dynamics, which have traditionally existed between the researcher and participants—all are sharing, giving, and taking from the research process.

• In dialogues, anyone can shift or steer the discussion. The researcher also shares with participants her life experiences. It is true reciprocity in research (Johnson, 2015).
“We are not broken”: the use of Sista Circles in previous research

“Black Girls”

• Kamaria, a middle school Language Arts teacher, employs sista circles as a space for middle school Black girls to share their experiences concerning how they perceive the way they are positioned within academic spaces.

• Key amongst Kamaria’s findings is that the sista circles proffered a space for the Black girls in her study to associate their Black girlhood with freedom and liberation.

• Kamaria shows how the girls challenged gendered racist stereotypes placed on them by White supremacist practices, actualised through the racial composition of their classes, whereby there is a high concentration of Black students in the bottom sets.

• Throughout the sista circle, the Black girls resisted the stereotypes associated with the bottom sets as dumb, and the students in higher, predominantly white, sets as smart. They did this by removing themselves from identifying with sets, using third-person pronouns even for sets they were in. By contrast, when discussing Black girls, they utilised collective pronouns such as “us” and “we” which reveals how they identify with Black girls as their community due to shared experiences irrespective of set assignment.
“We are not broken”: the use of Sista Circles in previous research

“Black Women”

• Adrian, a high school English Literature and Composition teacher engages in sista circles via kitchen table conversations with Black women.
• Within the conversations, Black women critically discussed and re-examined their everyday experiences in schools and analysed the intersecting oppressions of racism, classism, and sexism within schools, which construct master narratives about who Black women are (e.g., the loud-speaking sapphire) and how we should behave in institutionalised spaces (Dunmeyer et al., 2020).
How I will use Sista Circles in my research

I will be inviting Black women from a range of UK universities, who are engaged in their university’s diversity and decolonising networks to take part in sista circle discussions, and together we will be discussing UK Higher Education diversity and decolonising agendas.

More specifically, the sista circle discussions will be guided by the following themes: current decolonising and diversity policies in UK Higher Education Institutions and futuristic directions for decolonising and diversity policies in UK Higher Education.

Through using sista circles, I aim to create a safe space that fosters critical consciousness of university policies, which Mirza (1999) argues is centred around a white and male agenda, and a space that encourages a re-imagining of university decolonising and diversity policies.
thank you
References


