‘Outsider Within’: Reflexivity and working with African Caribbean Immigrants in Qualitative Research

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Abstract: In trying to dismantle the hegemony of Western methodological frameworks, feminist and Black methodologies, which critique objectivity and value reciprocal engagement between researcher and subject, were used to explore research issues with African Caribbean subjects. In addition, using reflexivity, a process that is central to Black and feminist analytical frameworks, the authors interrogate and dispute the value of ‘inherited western techniques’ such as objectivity and the distancing of researcher from the ‘researched’.

Introduction

From the perspective of two Black immigrant women, this paper looks at how four Black feminists, who are academic and community researchers (all born in the Caribbean and raised in Canada), applied feminist and intersectional approaches in conducting research within the Black/Caribbean communities in Toronto, Ontario. The purpose of this article is three fold. The first objective is to highlight some of the lessons that the authors learned during the process of this project. The second intention is to suggest ways of working with Black men and women in research. Finally, this article demonstrates some of the challenges the researchers faced when they tried to disrupt traditional methodological concepts and practices in the recruitment and participation of African Caribbean immigrants (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999; Watts 2006).

In trying to dismantle the hegemony of Western methodological frameworks, the researchers used feminist and Black methodologies, which critiques objectivity and values reciprocal engagement between researcher and subject. In addition, using reflexivity, a process that is central to Black and feminist analytical frameworks, the authors interrogate and dispute the value of ‘inherited western
techniques’ such as objectivity and the distancing of researcher from the ‘researched’. Revisiting and questioning westernized techniques challenged and required the four researchers to shape differently, key aspects of the research process such as research design, data collection and ultimately interpretation and analysis of the data (Bowleg 2008). This interrogative and reflexive (team and self) approach challenged us to hear and listen critically to each other (and later to the participants); it determined not only what questions we asked, but what aspects of respondents comments needed further exploration, what the results meant and ultimately, it reinforced for us, the decolonizing process of research.

The use of the ‘outsider within’ position by Hill Collins (1986, 1990), Kusow (2003) and Watts (2006) was helpful in shaping the research process. The usefulness of these perspectives offered us “critical reflection on the process of designing and undertaking” qualitative research (Watts 2006, 385). It allowed us, as researchers, to raise theoretical and methodological concerns about traditional research even as it confirmed for us the situational nature of identity, which allows individuals (us) to shift between locations.

Hill Collins (1986) highlights the creative ways in which Black female intellectuals have used their marginalization in academic settings —“their ‘outsider within’” status, to create distinctive analyses of race, class and gender. With this project, the researchers acknowledged their ‘outsider within’ location in their communities (academic and ethnic), which is a product of both their ethnicity and their professional roles. Their membership within the community in which they were collecting data heightened their understanding of the power relations between the insider/outside and the subject/object, complex positions which are full of dialectical contradictions, but which was occupied simultaneously. Watts (2006) utilizes the ‘outsider within’ role to demonstrate the privilege position researchers can hold in the recruitment process. She points out that having inside knowledge within the community from which subjects are drawn can be beneficial to the researcher as it may give one easier access to potential subjects. Kusow (2003) on the other hand, examines the multidimensional nature of ‘insider/outside’ relationship in his research on Somali Immigrants in Toronto. He argues that the ‘insider/outsider’ positions are a result of the situation in which research takes place, as much as, they are about the status of the researcher. We found Kusow’s explanation to be useful in that we recognized our role as ‘researchers’ to be shifting, that is, it was just one of many ways of being in the community. We often moved back and forth between our researcher role and our subjectivity as we connected with the narratives of our subjects. We acknowledged that our ‘outsider within’ status came about, or was evoked in part, due to the subject of study as well as the participants under study.
Positionality

The project reflects a range of positionalities (St. Louis & Barton 2002; Gooden & Gastaldo 2009). It is about self as it is about conducting research with a particular population. Hence, this article is reflexive in that the authors evaluate and analyze their own actions in relation to the research (process and practice) and the research subjects. As Black women working within the Caribbean community in Toronto, we are grounded in anti-oppression and feminist frameworks while recognizing that social and cultural categories intersect to impact identity. We live and research as African Caribbean women who are feminists and are committed to combating the multiple forms of exploitation and oppression that women encounter as well as promoting gender equality between men and women. We used a reflexive approach to underscore the variability of factors influencing the research development and context. We also used reflexivity “as a team-based interpretive resource in the construction of the research” (Siltanen et al. 2008).

As such, it was important for us to reflect upon the ways that we as researchers construct knowledge from the research process and how these factors are revealed in the research process (Guillemin & Gillam 2004). As researchers we recognized that our personal experiences would influence the text that would be produced, as well as the analysis of the text. Throughout the research process we took time to reflect individually and collectively about each interview or conversation/meeting with team members. Initially, notes were taken at each team meeting (face to face and/or using peer-to-peer technology). In our efforts to be reflexive, some of our field notes considered how we responded to our subjects, to each other and to the research in general (Siltanen et al. 2008).

Born in three different Caribbean countries, the project partners arrived in Toronto, Ontario between the ages of 3 and 11. As migrants who are female and Black, our circumstances varied due to family arrangements, sexual orientation and/or socio-economic status. Not surprisingly then, we researched and reflected as Black women who encountered and experienced the Canadian nation state in similar and different ways. As such, the project bares our own deep, and sometimes painful, personal experiences as African Canadians. Written with a particular research and political interest that is inclusive and that allows for intersectionality, the project and this article in essence is about us, as it is about our participants.

In designing the project we used an interlocking approach that reflects “our social and political values of inclusion and socially relevant knowledge production rather than reifying hierarchies and divisions between those who think, those who do, and those who live the problem” (Gooden & Gastaldo 2009, 71). Interlocking oppressions, as noted by Patricia Hill Collins (2009), recognizes that Black women and men can articulate their own realities within
the matrix of power dynamics among and between themselves. The researchers recognized that the search for real social change offers a privileged opportunity to understand the psycho-social and economic forces that reproduce a status quo that excludes people of color in Canada. This then gave rise to our intersectional understanding of Black life in Canada and ultimately to this paper which suggests that different ‘approaches and processes’ are needed for working with Black men and women from the Caribbean. Ultimately, what we shaped is an intersectional methodology that acknowledges our positionality (and ultimately the position of all researchers) as well as privilege the experiences of subjects (in this case Black immigrant men and women from the Caribbean,) by putting them at the center of the research and treating them as experts on their own migration experience. Our positionality was the point of departure as we searched for the political in everyday life.

Accordingly, the study was therefore as much an exploration of how identity was constructed by African Canadian immigrants as much as it was on how to conduct research within the African Caribbean immigrant population in Canada. What follows is first a brief description of the project background and partnership as well as the methodology used for the study. We then discuss principles that the researchers feel must guide participation of Black immigrant populations in research, and also address some of the challenges we experienced. Given that we deliberately situated and positioned ourselves in the research project, this article also reflects on our methodological approach and our positionality in conducting research. As such, our discussion concludes with a reflection on our experiences as researchers within our own community.

**General Background**

**Research and African Caribbean People**

Research on the life experiences of African Caribbean people in Canada is an important priority. People of African descent have diversified the Canadian work force and have infused the city with cultural, literary, political and artistic diversity; in essence, they have changed the social and cultural landscape of the Greater Toronto Area, making it one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world. However, they are poorly understood outside their role as workers because there is a scarcity of studies regarding the fullness of their lived experiences. According to Immigration and Citizenship Canada, African Caribbean people make up approximately 350,000 of the population in Toronto, Ontario making the city the Canadian metropolis with the largest Black and African Caribbean population of any metropolitan area in Canada. Within North America, only two other metropolitan areas possess African Caribbean populations larger or similar to Toronto; these are New York and Florida (African Caribbean migrants are heavily concentrated in the major cities of New York and Miami). Black Canadians comprise approximately 2.5% of the Canadian population, of that
number, African Caribbean people make up more than 50% (Stats Canada 2006).

Various authors have made significant contributions to the study of people of African descent in Canada. Much of the experience of Black Canada has been examined through the lens of African Caribbean migration, as such, the scholarly literature mirrors this particular experience. Various scholars have studied the relationship between race and racism and the Black Canadian experience in the areas of employment, education, immigration, and the criminal justice system (James 1990; Henry 1994; Calliste 1995; Dei 1997, 2000; Plaza 1998; Plaza and Simmons 1999; Galabuzi 2001; Brown 2009). Others such as Silvera (1989), Bristow et. al (1994), Flynn (2004), Bobb-Smith (2003) and Crawford (2010) have theorized the intersection of gender, race and social class to explore the trajectory of Black lives. Other important published works including Anderson (1987, 1993), Richmond (1989), Carty 1994, Plaza (2007, 2008), and Flynn (2004; 2011) examine Caribbean immigrants and the Caribbean Diaspora in Canada. The above research has primarily been important in establishing the social demographic context of Caribbean migratory patterns to Canada and the role of Caribbean people as workers in the Canadian nation state, particularly Toronto post-1965. This focus is not surprising given the centrality of the African Caribbean as migrant ‘workers’ (e.g. foreign domestics, nurses, farm workers, etc.). However, there is a general failure in current research to address the experiences of African Caribbean migrants from a transnational and gendered perspective.

Scholars such as Walcott (2001; 2003), Crawford (2003; 2010), Trotz (2006; 2007) and Flynn (2011) have begun to fill the gap by teasing out some of the particularities of the African Caribbean transnational experience. Crawford (2010) for example “problematic(s) the intersectional relationship between female migrant labour, transnationality, and motherhood within the rubric of globalized gender, race and class relations”(3). However, the studies are few, and except for Crawford (2003; 2010), Trotz (2007) and Flynn (2004; 2011), the consideration of gender within the context of migration is rare. Specifically then, there is a lack of empirical research that explores the intersections of gender, identity and immigration within a transnational and Canadian context.3 Having an understanding of a transnational framework that does not rely only on a home and host country approach can have far reaching implications not only on how one understands identity, but also on how research is designed in its aim to understand identity.

Although there is increased and valuable research on immigrants in Canada, the use of general and intangible terms such as visible minorities and racialized groups in such research are inadequate in exploring or evaluating specific populations since they fuse heterogeneous groups together (Rodney & Copeland 2009). This amalgamation fails to capture important
differences. Merging groups of people together overlooks the historical and socio-political experiences of a group, as well, it ignores racial and class struggles of the people to which such terms are assigned (Rodney & Copeland 2009). This tendency to merge diverse groups has resulted in research that looks at “racialized” groups as a whole, but which does not provide specific data on individual ethnic groups such as Black Canadians who are faced with double-digit income gaps (Galabuzi 2002), higher poverty rates than the general population (M’Baye, Gooden & Wilson-Fall 2009; Galabuzi 2001) high unemployment/underemployment and social exclusion (Galabuzi 2001); high drop out rates for youth (Brown 2009); and other socio-economic challenges (United Way 2004).

Research on the life experiences of Black Canadians, with clear research outcomes must be an important priority for all scholars and community stakeholders particularly as this population continues to face numerous challenges. Social scientists need to stress a Canadian research agenda that clearly highlights and details the lived experiences of African Caribbean people, separate from, and not tied to the experiences of other groups of immigrants and/or other people of colour. Although information gained from looking at the similarities that this population faces with other immigrants is helpful in understanding the immigrant experience in general, the homogeneous approach, which focuses on collapsing differences, makes it difficult to highlight and understand the unique experiences of the African Caribbean population (Rodney & Copeland 2009).

**Project Background**

**Partnerships**

Plans for this project started in 2006 when the authors met to discuss the possibility of conducting research on the experiences of Caribbean immigrants living in Canada. The project partners were motivated to undertake this research because of the paucity of information on African Caribbean experience and identity within the Canadian nation state and because of their own research interest. The partners met over brunch in Spring 2007 at a restaurant in downtown Toronto, Ontario. From the beginning, it became clear that all project partners were committed to designing a project that affirmed who we were, while also detailing the experiences of African Caribbean immigrants, some of whose lives, we would find out later, mirrored our own. We wanted to have a sense of belonging and connection with each other, with the project and with the outcomes.

Our initial meeting lasted about 2 ½ hours; during this preliminary discussion we took pictures and each talked about our vision of the project, what aspect of migration we felt was important for us to include, as well as what we each wanted professionally and personally out of the project. In agreement with Hill (2009) we stressed that we wanted to maintain our visibility in that we did not want to give up any
part of who we were as Black women in order to conduct research in African Caribbean communities. Yet, we recognized the need to avoid imposing our own experiences and categories (for example, race, sexual orientation and class) on the participants. Agreement to this partnership included the values that exploitation of anyone was not an option for any reason, especially in the name of research; thus, ethical concerns were discussed.

Speer (2002) points us to Schegloff’s (1997) work which emphasises that it is the “orientations, meanings, interpretations, understandings of the participants’ and not those of the analyst that should be privileged” (785). As a result, although we had emphasised class, race, gender and sexual orientation as variables that we wanted to highlight, during the data collection and early analysis phase of the project, we recognized that for many of our participants these variables were not identifiable in their day-to-day experience. For example, when we asked about how they were perceived in relation to their gender and ethnicity in society, participants often spoke only about their gender or their ethnicity, rendering the other invisible. Their inability to articulate their social roles as an intersection of multiple social variables was not understood as a lack of understanding on their part, but suggests that as researchers we had to ‘orient’ ourselves to the participants experience of their lives, while recognizing that our “analyses and our politics would ‘map onto’ and be fully tractable within our data” (Speer 2002, 785).

This then called us to pay particular attention to how we understand and then present (interpret) the participants’ life narratives. How would we analyse our subjects’ lives and experiences given our epistemological understanding of oppression as interlocking and the subjects complex social interrelationships? The role of researchers is not merely to explain the narratives of the subjects, but to map their experiences and extend an understanding of the subject lives (Nadorajah 2007). Using feminist and Black subjective theories, we grounded the subjects lived experiences in our epistemological understandings of them as Black men and women who are immigrants. This then allowed us, as the researchers, to engage with and document emerging patterns in the data, without erasing their subjective experiences and knowledge.

The collaborative group process was interactive and participatory. As an example, both negotiation and compromise among or between the researchers were critical in the selection of the target population, the age of participants at migration and the inclusion of women and men from the English speaking Caribbean. We negotiated where and how often to meet, who would conduct the interviews and focus groups, as well as levels of participation and disseminations. Intertwined in our conversations were also the circumstances of our own migration experiences, our perceptions and memories (some more painful than others). We engaged each other with our life experiences of migration to build
trust, but also to challenge each other to think diversely and critically about migration. As we talked extensively about our personal and familial experiences, we realized that the particular ways in which one experiences migration creates only a partial, yet valuable knowledge of the process. The breadth and depth of our experiences reinforced the situated knowledge embodied in the research team (Siltanent al. 2008).

It was important that we gave each other the space and the time needed to participate, but also to learn and grow. Some of us were more experienced at researching than others. Yet we intuitively understood that every aspect of the work had to yield a positive outcome for everyone involved from start to finish. These were not just ideals but important ways of working with each other that also had to be applicable to all the participants. In the beginning, organizing meetings involved international travel and the use of technology that did not always provide us with a sense of connection. However, the normalcy of having to communicate across borders and over long periods of time is reflected in both our cultural histories as well as our experiences of migration.

**Community Partnership**

We wanted to have, and ultimately choose, a partnership with an agency that served the needs of people from the Caribbean consciously and directly, not just by convenience. In Toronto, Parkdale is an area that reflects the diversity of the immigrants living in the city and where many people from the Caribbean make their homes. The Parkdale Community Health Centre was chosen as a preferred agency partner because of its history and reputation of providing excellent accessible health services while utilizing culturally sensitive models of care (Parkdale Community Health Centre 2011). This partnership with Parkdale Community Health Centre offered a fully accessible location not only by public transportation but also in its services and the use of its physical spaces. Additionally, it provided a sense of safety and trust to everyone involved because one of the researchers was the Executive Director at the time of study and she acted as a broker for both the research team and Parkdale Community Centre.

**Method, Theory and Focus**

From the very beginning all project partners agreed that a qualitative approach should be used to explore the subjective experiences of the men and women who would participate in the study. Twenty-six men and women (20 women and 6 men) who self-identified as Black Caribbeans, were interviewed for this project with all participants arriving in Southwestern Ontario between the ages of 3 and 29. Originally designed to be conducted over 16-month period (between November 2008 –
February 2010), the data collection took longer than expected (data collected was not completed until late 2010). The length of the data collection phase was due in large part to the distance of project partners who were located between the Caribbean, the United States and Canada.

The project focused on examining the concept of identity as it relates to Black Caribbean men and women. Carried out in the Greater Toronto Area, the points of contact for this project included various events and businesses that are frequented by people from the Caribbean. Participants were recruited using flyers through the use of snowball technique. Flyers were posted at Parkdale Community Health Centre, churches, Caribbean grocery stores, restaurants, hair salons, and barbershops to achieve a diverse sample. In addition, flyers were sent to numerous community centres and community health centres in the Greater Toronto Area by the Parkdale Community Health Centre staff.

The sample was further broken down into three categories; those who arrived at age 12 and under, those who arrived between the ages of 13-17 and those who arrived at 18 years of age or older. The age categories were created because the researchers raised questions about the potential variations of memory, socialization and adjustment that might occur between and among immigrants from different age groups. As such, we wanted to highlight age as an important variable in the lived experiences of immigrants. Additional demographic info was collected using a questionnaire format. Individual interviews were conducted for approximately one hour, as well, one 2 1/2-hour focus group was held. Maximum diversity strategy was used for the recruitment of participants in relation to the following criteria: age, gender, educational background, nationality, sexual orientation and class. Participants were assured confidentiality and each was paid for their participation. Initially participants received $30 honorarium, however, the project partners increased the honorarium to $40 in recognition of the value of the participants time.

Reflexivity and articulation theory-method were built into the methodology (Gastaldo, Khanlou, Massaquoi, and Curling 2001). Articulation, a central concept for studies on culture and identity (Hall 1980), allows us to understand method and theory as it emerges in relation to epistemological and political positions (Slack 1996). At the epistemological and political levels, articulation challenges established theories about the individuals and/or groups under study (Gastaldo, et. al). It allows for an intersection between theory and method by creating a voice (participant and researcher) that decolonizes methodologies and produces transgressive and transitional knowledge (Gastaldo et al 2001; Tuhiwai-Smith 1999).

Since reflexivity is a process that values both experiential and scientific knowledge, the research team employed a process of individual and collective reflexivity to operationalise the ideals discussed above (Gastaldo et al 2001).
The research was not only focused on epistemological aspects, but valued the process and practice of research, the research context, the participants and the researcher. (Guillemin & Gillam 2004). The relationship with each other and with the participants was based on this reflexive process where similarities and differences between and among us were explored when necessary.

For example, as a starting point, and to build trust and rapport, during the initial collaborative meeting the researchers reflected on their own experiences as African Caribbean women and as immigrants to establish a relationship with each other. During the data collection phase, this technique was used at times to contextualise the research, reduce the participant-researcher power relationship, to decrease the extent by which we would be seen as outsiders, and also when participants questioned the reason and process of the research.

Certainly disclosure about one’s immigrant status does not automatically mean that one is ‘accepted’ as an insider, however, we were conscious of the unspoken discourse that although we were the same, we were different. As African Caribbean researchers we may share the commonalities of race and culture, but the barriers of class, gender, sexual orientation and nationality for example, were negotiated with participants throughout the research process (Few, Stephen, Rouse-Arnett 2003). A case in point, the second author has participated in social justice activism professionally as a counsellor and lived in multiple Black communities. Her lived experiences of particular and overlapping relationships impacted the levels of personal and professional risks faced in conducting research with Black communities. For researchers in general, but researchers of colour in particular, the refusal or an ability to disclose information about self may jeopardize an established trust relationship (Few, Stephens, Rouse-Arnett 2003).

Cooper (1994) and Flynn (2011) suggest that when researching African Caribbean people, one has to make use of alternative sources to flesh out their experiences and uncover their history. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) further note that researchers who use the qualitative approach are interested in the ways people make sense of their lives. They suggest that qualitative researchers "seek to grasp the process by which people construct meaning and to describe what those meanings are" (48). For instance, on top of using various reflexive techniques, cultural brokers, and other approaches, we still had to build trust relationships with participants, which at times required numerous conversations to secure an interview. As researchers, we acknowledged the ways that these participants made sense of research and the way it has been historically conducted in Black communities. As such, in addition to the reflexive techniques used above, cultural brokers were also used to establish rapport and trust. Family members, friends and colleagues paved the way for interviews to occur. There was also a way in which all project partners were cultural brokers.
because we also had the experience of migration, which facilitated our “insider” position. Our experience of migration gave us access to other immigrants from the community since we were already a part of the community and part of this particular migratory experience. Although this can be viewed as a limitation, we interrogated the particularities of our experiences by challenging each other in an ongoing self/team reflexive practice. The lengthy interactions/conversations before interviews and our occupation of what Nadarajah (2007) refers to as the “in-between” place of research, the site where the intersubjectivities of both researcher and subject is balanced were also some of the reminders of our ‘outsider’ status (Nadarajah 2007; Kusow 2003).

Watts (2006) and Harding (1991) reminds us that theoretical and methodological choices are important in the ways that research is designed, how it is conducted, the questions that are asked and fundamentally the information that is gathered and analyzed. Despite the difficulty of acquiring participants, a qualitative method was particularly useful in this study not only because of the dearth of information on African Caribbean participants in qualitative research, but also because qualitative research allows for narrative descriptions in the process, procedures, and the summary of the results (Fraenkel & Wallen 1996). In addition, a qualitative approach supports an emancipatory methodology (Kershaw 1992), which argues for the voice of the people to be included in the research results, especially those people who have been marginalized.

Watts (2006) and Tuhiwai Smith (1999) suggest that methodological and theoretical approaches in research need to be interrogated to protect participants from oppressive practices that can do harm. While ethical guidelines to conducting research is not new, for First Nations people (Schnarch 2002) and people of color generally, hegemonic research practices (see for example the Tuskegee Experiment, The Immortal Life of Herritta Lacks (2010) and the Nicaragua experiments) have been linked and implicated in the physical and emotional harm of these populations. In this particular instance, anti-oppression researchers such as Schnarch (2002), Watts (2006), Kershaw (1992) and Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) have paid specific attention to the ethics of care model that highlight anti-oppression framework. This juncture between theory and method acknowledges the agency of participants; the participants as experts of their own experience, and an “openness about research aims that has mutuality inherent within the process” (Watts 2006, 387). As such, our research project challenged Western methodology by establishing a direct connection between the theory, method, researcher and participants. In doing so, it broke down the “artificial object/subject split between the researcher and the researched” (Edwards 1990, 479). It is important to note that not only has dominant or hegemonic methodology been Western-centric or European but also androcentric and male dominated.
Women’s knowledge and expertise has been rendered secondary to men’s.

Our theoretical framework of feminism and intersectionality delineated a methodology that revealed the depth and breath of the participant’s perspective by capturing their stories and narratives around issues of migration and identity. As Byrne (2001) suggests, "the strength of qualitative research is that the modes of inquiry are holistic and contextual" (p. 3). This theory-method approach allowed for multiple truths from people who seldom get a chance to tell their stories. Our feminist and intersectional approach recognize that men and women may perceive themselves and each other differently, and that unequal power relations may operate to reinforce gender stereotyping, male privilege and women’s subordination. In addition, our method also welcomed difference as part of the social complexity of the African Caribbean Canadian experience even as it affirmed that our scholarship (the way we think about research) situated the voices of the men and women who shared their stories as paramount in the research process.

Within and Outside

Qualitative methodologies demand the involvement of the self in research projects. In trying to disrupt the false dichotomy between the researcher and the participant, the researchers were not detached and objective, indeed, we were embedded in the subjective process as much as we were committed to the individuals being researched. From the point of contact (before interview) we were bound up with the project, with each of our experiences and then later with each participant in ways that were very poignant and complex (Gooden & Gastaldo 2009). For example, both authors could not escape the complex negotiations of power involved throughout the project especially in terms of class, sexual orientation, gender and place of birth. Gooden for instance experienced interviews where she felt remiss in having to disclose where she was born since Jamaicans make up the majority of the African Caribbean population in Canada. The author felt the need to assert and affirm that the study would try to capture the diverse experiences of people from the English speaking Caribbean, particularly because Black Caribbean people in Canada are often negatively portrayed in the media as Jamaicans. For Hackett, it was sexual orientation that had the potential to change the content and context of the interview, both in terms of increased access and restriction to participants sharing of life narratives. But, as stated earlier, both researchers recognize that variables such as sexual orientation and nationality must be continually negotiated.

The project recognized that each “researcher’s relationship with the project functioned along a continuum that involves mutuality, negotiation and re-negotiation of boundaries with participants” (Watts 2006, 385). There was, for example, an awareness of the different relation to the production of knowledge between researcher and
subjects, the centering of the participants’ viewpoints and the aim of using the research to improve and understand the lives of African Caribbean men and women. In addition, “the extent to which inside knowledge by the researcher gives rise to shared understandings and ‘a common language’, and the ways this creates empathy between the participant and the researcher across political, theoretical” and socio-cultural divide are important to acknowledge (Watt 2006, 385). Our access to and how we accessed potential research participants is an example of how this happened. We had the social capital (i.e. language, history, social network) of a shared lived experience that allowed us as researchers to simultaneously challenge the status quo and offer alternative relationships to self and others within the context of doing research. We had to meet the criteria of the participants that included, for example, having a long-term relationship with, and in, the various African Caribbean communities drawn along the lines of gender, race, class and sexual orientation.

Recruitment of Participants

Although numerous community-based protocols could be applied to the African Caribbean population, it was difficult for the researchers to find information that examines the specific barriers in the recruitment of African Caribbean individuals as study participants. Henry (1998), Heinz (2002) and Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) have pointed out that the recruitment of people of colour, and immigrants in general, as study participants is difficult. Flynn (2004) addresses issues of research design when working with Black Canadians in qualitative research, however, much of the literature focuses on racial and ethnic dynamics in conducting and interpreting interviews rather than on the “initial stages of research,” when recruitment is a critical issue (Neufeld, Harrison, Hughes, Spitzer and Stewart 2001).

Hatchett, Holmes, Duran and Davis (2000) provides a detailed discussion of recruitment in their study examining changes in thought, feelings and emotions throughout the life span of African Americans. In their study, traditional techniques of recruiting, which included telephone contact, heightened issues of trust and transmission of cultural attitudes around race and were thus largely ineffective. The authors suggest that when working with Black subjects, the preparatory stage of research is vital for recruitment considerations. This initial stage is essential for research on the subjects under study, as well, it is the stage to make significant contact with people in the local community (cultural brokers, etc).

Neufeld et al. (2001) and Hatchett et al. (2000) discussion of the general gap in the Canadian research literature on using people of African descent in qualitative research suggests that there is a great deal of work to be done when considering issues of recruitment and participation of Black subjects and other people of colour. Essential pre-data collection steps must
be taken to ensure greater diversity in research populations.

As indicated earlier, the process of recruiting participants was lengthy and raised a series of complex issues. We found it very difficult to solicit participants. Difficulty arose around a number of issues including; the distance of two of the four researchers to the geographical data collection area; they were working and living outside of Canada. In addition, the use of traditional technique of flyers proved ineffective with the Caribbean population without the use of key contacts. As such, contact was made with a range of organizations and business over a period of twelve months. They included, restaurants, grocery stores, churches, hair salons/barbershops, community health centers and community centers within the Greater Toronto Area. When possible, the researchers met with key members of the organizations or businesses who helped identify individuals who met the eligibility criteria outlined earlier.

Case in point, a key contact was instrumental in organizing the focus group. However, as indicated earlier, even with the use of key contacts, at times the researchers had to use their own social capital to solicit full participation; one researcher in particular attended social events and informal gathering to solicit participation. At other times she used patois or her own experience of migration to “break the ice” in the interview process. 5

The diversity of people from the Caribbean, the variations in English and Patois spoken and understood as well as the skill of the researchers in accessing particular ethno-cultural groups were barriers to recruitment. The variation in languages proved later to be a barrier in the transcription process. It also appears that to a degree, the varying level of social participation, and the level of identification with the Canadian nation state impacted recruitment. Additionally, how the relationship was formed between the participants and the researcher proved to be a factor in the recruitment process. The need to build trust over time could not be shortened, and participants required both the social capital of previous knowledge of someone in the community; as well, they also required knowledge of the researchers history and their commitment to work in the community for the betterment of the community. As part of the recruitment, we built in a component of giving back to the community. This meant that the process from first contact with potential participants included sharing knowledge and information about immigration in general and specifically. It also meant raising the value of the stories of immigration as a counter narrative in the community and offering it back to participants verbatim. Participants were always offered a digital copy of the interview. This practice is consistent with the interest and need to record narratives that are often experienced as prohibitive because of a lack of time and resources.

In addition to these particular standards when working with
communities of Black people, there is the issue of time. Specifically, carving out time for the researchers to meet, to recruit participants and to collect data required flexibility. Time is a fiercely contested commodity and as such it took approximately 6 months before this project could be started. However, time also enabled us to build trust with potential participants and to be more reflexive with the shared narratives and particular reflections within the participant’s stories. Arranging interview times proved to be a lengthy process. Often it required that the researcher be available to conduct interviews in the evenings, on weekends, and in two cases, over the phone. Without this flexibility the recruitment process would have been more difficult.

In addition, environmental factors such as SARS made it difficult at times to set up interviews at Parkdale Community Health Centre. There were two ways in which epidemics (or pandemic) such as SARS affect research: In our case, the general apprehension and concerns about the disease, and its transmission meant that strict precautions were implemented in health care settings. Parkdale was no exception and it was necessary to follow specific health measures when entering and exiting the centre. The most challenging factor in terms of recruitment was the time interviews were being organized and conducted because evenings and weekends with a skeleton staff meant navigating unknown factors such as unfamiliar staff, change in hours and knowledge of the project researchers.

Conclusion
Our feminist and Black subjective critiques of traditional and hegemonic frameworks and approaches to conducting research with Black Caribbean people was designed to raise methodological and theoretical questions about the neutrality of frameworks within which researchers often work. We have demonstrated that utilizing feminist, Black subjective and intersectional approaches to conducting research within Black communities is an important step in the right direction. Any project that includes African Caribbean participant’s need to use a methodological approach that is consistent with an epistemological knowledge base of African Caribbean communities. It is essential that such an approach be attuned to or recognize the complexities of the participant’s lives, and their agency.

As researchers we reflected on the range of circumstances in our lives that inform the methodological and epistemological approach with each other and the participants. As Black feminist and intersectional researchers, our approach included holding each other accountable and expanding our practice and expression of it. The above discussion also offered possibilities with the ‘insider outsider’ position that recognizes and values the fluidity of the researcher position as well as that of the subject.
References


Bristow, Peggy, et al. 1994. We’re Rooted Here and They Can’t Pull Us Up: Essays in African Canadian Women’s History. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.


**Endnotes**

1 The terms Black Caribbean and African Caribbean are used interchangeably in this article. Intersectionality in this paper is understood as the way in which individual lives simultaneously intersect multiple social positions (etc. gender, race, social class, sexuality).

2 We are referencing Collins’ (2009) concept of interlocking oppression where she details how systems of oppression interconnect with one another rather than add on to each other.

3 In this research, transnationalism refers to the continued connection through communication (telephone and internet), travel, export of goods and people that immigrants have with their place of origin and with other Caribbean communities around the world. This continued contact allows them to live or experience multiple places almost simultaneously.


5 English/African based language

6 SARS is Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, also known as Avian Flu.