Innovation, resiliency and transformation: leveraging the strength of older marginalised women

Pamela R. Kennebrew
Lincoln University,
1000 Wilde Avenue Drexel Hill,
PA 19026, USA
Email: pkennebrew@lincoln.edu
Email: pkennebrew@email.fielding.edu

Abstract: Despite being gainfully employed, many older marginalised women experience economic oppression. Nevertheless, women survive economic oppression through innovation, resistance and resiliency. In order to explore the survival phenomena, a critical, multidimensional research study was conducted combining critical participatory action research (CPAR) and the African-centred, Black feminist autoethnographic methodologies. Utilising Yosso’s community wealth theory to analyse data, the findings suggest that older, financially vulnerable women have unique life experiences related to racialised and gendered poverty via the ‘strong woman’ schema and other coping behaviours. The co-researchers (participants in participatory action research are called co-researchers) discussed ways to re-claim their inner strength and collectively overcome financial vulnerability and promote financially functional aging through what the author describes as mindful strength consciousness (MSC) theory. The author hopes the MSC framework will expand the current discourse surrounding marginalised women and will provide a foundation for personal agency and societal transformation for older women as they transcend the effects of financial vulnerability.

Keywords: aging; culture; society; social justice; diversity; mindful strength consciousness; MSC; economic insecurity; gendered financial vulnerability.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Kennebrew, P.R. (2017) ‘Innovation, resiliency and transformation: leveraging the strength of older marginalised women’, Int. J. Human Resources Development and Management, Vol. 17, Nos. 1/2, pp.113–128.

Biographical notes: Pamela Kennebrew is a Professor and International Social Justice Scholar and strategist. Considered as a scholar activist with more than 20 years of professional experience in the areas of education and social justice, she assists individuals and organisations to develop and implement their social justice strategies.

This paper is a revised and expanded version of a paper entitled ‘Innovation, resiliency and transformation: older women respond to economic injustice using mindful strength consciousness’ presented at ICMC, Greater Noida, India, 4 December 2015.
1 Introduction

The review of relevant literature reveals that most of the research addressing economic insecurity is based on models that utilise a single-axis analysis or generally ignore race, class, and gender as contributing factors that impact financial security. During the present study, an intersectional approach is used. Intersectionality can be a critical lens for bringing awareness to those concerned with social justice in order to expand social justice interventions. In this study the author critically examined the socio-structural causes rendering women of colour economically insecure during midlife. She also identified, through these women, the strategies and methods they use to address and progress in spite of these constraints. Using the critical race theory (CRT) to guide the exploration, she discussed how enduring inequality based on race culminates in financially insecure aging. In addition, the author utilised Yosso’s theory of community wealth to explain how older women of colour, as a community, possess capital usually not validated in the customary income-only dimension of wealth. Finally, she expanded the discussion of the plight of older, economically oppressed women by exploring the ways in which older African-American women specifically have overcome the anxiety of economic insecurity by utilising creative struggle, oppositional, and innovative strategies to not only survive economic insecurity and financial oppression, but to transform their lives.

One of the major tenets of CRT is that of the counter-narrative. In this critical participatory action research (CPAR) study, the voices of selected women confront the current deficit-based epistemology that ignores the cultural capital, history of resistance to economic oppression, and strength possessed by older African-American women to address the question, what do self-identified strong Black women (SBW), 50 years old and older indicate as sources of strength, and what resources have been utilised to transcend the effects of economic insecurity and financial oppression. The voices of the women in the study serve as a source of knowledge. This life knowledge will be added to the current literature and can be utilised to shape policy and programmes aimed at assisting older, economically vulnerable women.

Through the present study the author hoped that older women of colour would begin to examine their own behaviour, both individually and collectively through reflective inquiry and move toward conscientisation. Friere (1970) defined conscientisation as “the process in which (wo)men, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform reality”. This connection of knowledge with action conscientism can result in a more secure and emancipatory future despite the challenges of economic insecurity, financial vulnerability, and oppression.

Prior studies offer solutions that place the burden on women to improve their economic situation through individual efforts such as financial planning, financial literacy, improved money management, and increased savings and retirement planning. Arguably, these are valid recommendations. However, economic security is influenced by both personal and socio-structural determinants. Consequently, both must be considered in finding solutions to the problem of economic insecurity and to overcome financial oppression. The study utilised CRT to situate economic insecurity within the broader context of social and structural inequality, and examine the deeper socio-structural forces that serve as potential barriers to successful aging for women of colour.
Prior studies utilise data to define the successful aging and retirement for older women of colour in terms of their deficit standing in relationship to White middle-class males. When people reason from unquestioned White male, middle-class models, and other hegemonic analyses, the suggestion is that there is something pathological about the experiences of those perceived as ‘other’. Yet, by expanding the definition of economic security to include non-monetary and non-material dimensions, the author constructed an argument that calls into question the logic of the financial insecurity and successful aging constructs as they relate to older women of colour.

Financial security and successful aging for women of colour is best examined through a prism that highlights all the dimensions of older women. In community wealth theory, Yosso (2006) identifies six forms of capital found in communities of colour that often go unrecognised or devalued by the dominant culture. These forms of capital can be useful in transforming the retirement experience of women of colour. Rendon’s (1994) validation theory provides a framework for marginalised groups that gives them agency, affirmation, self-worth, and liberation from past invalidation. Finally, Davis (2015) posits a developing theoretical framework called the strong Black woman collective (SBWC). The SBWC posits that Black women draw strength through communication with other Black women. The SBWC offers a differing view of the SBW schema than that which has traditionally been used as a marker for strength and resiliency in African-American women.

The objective of the present study was to utilise the findings to help encourage older women to draw upon their internal strength and leverage past experiences to create a more powerful future. The author, through the findings, hoped to help women see their life experience as a valuable knowledge base upon which they can build a future that can change their community and society as a whole. This knowledge base will be grounded in a ‘realistic, commonsense, rational view of their relationship to the dominant society’ (Joseph, 1995), rather than imagery and mythology with roots based on capitalism, consumerism, and commodified images of wealth, value, and strength.

2 Contributions of this research study

In the study the author did not solve the larger contextual and societal problem of gendered financial racism that serves as one of the root causes of the problem of economic insecurity in older women of colour. Nevertheless, she recognised how economically vulnerable Black women’s experiences of ‘making a way out of no way’ in the face of financial oppression can become internalised and result in feelings of powerlessness despite the SBW facade. This facade maintains oppression by serving as a barrier to action and change.

In this study, the co-researchers were able to begin to reconstruct and reframe the SBW caricature and other controlling images, and develop a sense of agency through the collective wisdom found in their own voices. By reclaiming the negative images and symbols of oppression within a system of race, class, gender, and age oppression, the women emerged from a position of powerless to a position of powerful change agents. To accomplish these results, emancipatory feminist methodologies were utilised to accurately hear, translate, and access the voices of the co-researchers in this study.
3 Review of literature

The literature reviewed in this study is a critical engagement of contemporary and historical scholarship organised in a comprehensive fashion that reflects an overview of the intersection of race, gender, age, and class on the economic security of older women of colour. The theoretical framework and the methodological approaches of the literature review are graphically represented by Figure 1.

The review begins with the bleak and dire economic status of older women of colour. Selected literature that addressed economic insecurity in African-American women, the socio-structural causes of economic insecurity, and ways in which women of colour have transcended economic insecurity, as well as literature reflecting current research regarding successful aging, life knowledge, and the SBW archetype were reviewed.

Black women were also cited, along with suggestions for improving their retirement experiences. The paper examines the literature through the lens of CRT and African-American feminist, and Africana womanist theory.

The review of the literature revealed gaps in the current research that allowed the author to construct an argument for the problem of economic insecurity in women during middle age, and review the ways in which Black women have transcended the challenges of economic oppression. The literature review reflects four over-arching goals:

1. to examine what is currently known about the financial situation of older women of colour
2. to explore gaps, controversies, non-hegemonic approaches to research, and the limitation of ‘master narratives’ in the literature
to identify the author’s point of departure relative to the deficit-based research currently dominating the current discourse about older women of colour and financial insecurity.

4 to transition from ‘information about’ Black women to ‘knowledge from’ Black women.

The Senior Financial Stability Index (SFSI) was developed by Demos to measure the long-term economic security of senior households throughout their senior years. The SFSI measured five key factors that impact senior economic security – retirement assets, household budget, healthcare expenses, home equity, and housing cost. The SFSI offers a comprehensive measure to assess the strengths and vulnerabilities of economic security among older Americans over their life-course. Utilising this measure, a household is deemed secure if it meets the threshold for the asset factor (retirement assets) and two of the four additional factors. Conversely, the household is insecure if it is lacking in the asset factor as well as two other factors. The hardest hit populations were found to be households of colour and single women with 50% of single women and households of colour deemed economically insecure.

Economic insecurity can be described as the anxiety produced by the exposure to adverse events and the inability to recover from them. Variations in income and past adverse events contribute to economic insecurity. The researchers did not address systematic inequalities experienced by African American women that contribute to not only the causes of economic insecurity, but the inability to recover from financially adverse events. Recovery from an adverse event is closely linked to the inequality that produced the event. In other words, in the absence of an examination of economic oppression, financial literacy alone as a solution to economic insecurity is rendered impotent.

Research highlighting the economic challenges facing older women has emerged over the past 15 years. As baby boomers begin to face retirement various theories of retirement emerged as well. One study found that men and women differ in their retirement planning with women falling into traditional gender role ideology. In other words, married women tended to leave the planning up to their husbands. This lack of planning has an adverse impact on retirement satisfaction and economic security for women as they age.

Social scientists have been studying class, race, and gender inequality in employment income for decades and retirement income for over a decade. However, little is known about the retirement experiences of African American women. Retirement is usually examined based on three theoretical perspectives: continuity theory, the life course perspective, and role theory. However, African American women generally have multiple roles throughout their lives. Consequently, social context, culture, family, and a history of income volatility shape the retirement experiences of African American women.

Current research trends in poverty studies include viewing the ‘life knowledge’ of people living in poverty (Krumer-Nevo, 2005a). Life knowledge challenges the discourse surrounding the lives of people in poverty and is often categorised as listening to the ‘voices of the poor’. However, very few studies include the life perspectives of African American women.
The accumulation and disaccumulation of wealth and property is an important part of the discussion of financial insecurity. The accumulation of wealth and property is achieved through investments and possessions. Disaccumulation can best be described as economic disadvantages that can compound over time. An example of disaccumulation can be found in the labour trajectory of African American women. The impact of a lifetime of low wages can multiply exponentially over time and the collateral effects endure and often impact other areas of a woman’s life. Another significant factor is that the wealth of White males continues to accumulate vis-à-vis White male privilege.

White wealth began for White men during slavery through the accumulation of enslaved African women as property. Absent from most studies of poverty is the stratification of enslaved African women as property and the exploitation of their bodies and their labour which served as the genesis for what I called ‘gendered racialised poverty’ in Black women today. Gendered racialised poverty has its roots in patriarchal ideology and practices. Enslaved African women were not enslaved because of their race or sex, but because of the economic needs of Africa and the Americas. Economic subordination can be analysed by looking into the initial causes as well as by studying the factors that support and perpetuate the economic oppression of Black women.

Property ownership by White men contributed to their accumulation of assets at the expense and oppression of those considered ‘other’ and continues via the intersections of race, class and gender.

The reasons for lack of wealth for African American women are manifold and interrelated and include lower wages and life-time earnings. They also suggested the lack of access to ‘wealth escalators’ such as company-sponsored retirement and pension plans and historical and structural discrimination as possible factors. Most wealth is acquired through gifts and inheritance. If your family is unable to provide you with an inheritance it is unlikely that you will be able to take advantage of wealth escalators regardless of your income earning capacity.

Most studies involving an analysis of the economic challenges of African American women cite the behaviour of women themselves as the cause of the struggle. However, the literature provides evidence of the disparities in lifetime earnings and subsequent economic insecurity in African American women over 55 years of age. How these disparities will impact the retirement experiences of Black women was not addressed. In addition, the literature does not address the strategies historically used by Black women to transcend these inequities.

Public opinion that support the notion that older Black women and other women of colour are financially vulnerable because poor choices has roots in the personal-pathology paradigm that began during the 1960s in the USA with the work of Moynihan being the most notable. According to Gunewardena (2002), the personal-pathology paradigm is embedded in many of the social policies, as well as in the psyches of professionals who are charged with assisting the poor. These deficit-based theories are rooted in the myth of meritocracy and support the notion of personal deficiency as the reason for poverty. The CRT is a useful lens to challenge the notion of meritocracy, neutrality, and colour blindness reflected in the neo-liberal call for improvement of self-reliance and other theories rooted in the myth of meritocracy.
Farmer (2005) coined the term ‘structural violence’ to refer to the inequities produced and sustained through structures, policies, and systems of power. In his view, structural violence refers to the social and economic conditions evident in extreme poverty. While useful in moving the dialogue past that of personal pathology and other deficit-based analyses, Farmer’s analysis does not address the ‘low-grade’, ‘under the radar’ economic insecurity prevalent in older women of colour. In order to explore the issue of economic insecurity in women of colour over 55 years of age, a theoretical framework that offers insight into the socio-structural causes of economic insecurity, as well as one that explains how women of colour have endured this inequality is needed.

In order to counter the individual deficiency theory by drawing upon the ‘theoretical framework of ‘intersectional discrimination’ to illustrate the confluence of gender, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic discrimination as an explanatory device for understanding the concentration of poverty among women of colour.’ Missing from Gunewardena’s powerful analysis of intersectional discrimination is the confluence of age.

An additional example of a challenge to the deficit theory can be found in the work of Nembhard (2014). Nembhard offers insight into what she posits to be a ‘continuous and hidden history of economic defence and collective well-being’. Nembhard offers that the history of African-American resistance in the face of economic oppression can be found in the early cooperative movements. As a form of resistance, the cooperative movement continued to grow even during the Great Depression. Nembhard’s (2014) comprehensive work highlights the history of African-American cooperative economic thought and practice. In her research on African-American-owned cooperatives, Nembhard found that Black women played a significant part in the cooperative movement. Black women’s participation in the US cooperative movement began in the 1700s, a time in American history when the prescribed role for African-American women was that of property. Nevertheless, Black women actively engaged in a powerful economic movement. The participation of African-American women in the cooperative movement serves as a powerful counter-narrative to the prevailing discourse regarding women of colour. However, Nembhard’s work does not offer any insight into the innate qualities possessed by the women who led the movement. As such, women of colour today have no blueprint to replicate their success.

CRT as a theoretical framework offers an emancipatory or transformative response to racial, gender, and class oppression. The CRT is a useful methodology for analysing structural inequalities in our society. It focuses on the effects of race and racism, and throws light on the fallacy of merit-based systems and structures. There is an activist aspect of CRT, the goal of which is to implement social justice. However, to the author’s knowledge, CRT has not been used in a study of poverty and economic insecurity among older women of colour.

One key aspect of critical race methodology is the concept of counter-storytelling. Counter-storytelling is a method of telling a story that aims to debunk commonly accepted myths held by the dominant culture. Counter-storytelling “helps us understand what life is like for others, and invites the reader into a new and unfamiliar world”. The author agrees with the importance of counter-storytelling, but in order to fully utilise the emancipatory nature of counter-storytelling, critical researchers must
address the power dynamic inherent in the us versus others relationship

place the others in the centre of the analysis.

Weber (1998) suggests that people’s lives rarely, if ever, fit into the boundaries created by academic disciplines. As such, no one theoretical framework can be used to study the multilayered lives of older women of colour who are financially insecure. However, Weber offers a conceptual framework for the study of race, class, gender, and sexuality by exploring the commonality in all of these dimensions. Weber posits that race, class, gender, and sexuality contain socially constructed power relationships that operate at both the macro (societal) and micro (individual) levels. She also identified six common themes in race, gender, class, and sexuality scholarship. One theme that was particularly salient for this study is what Weber describes as ‘systems of power relationships’. Race, gender, and class are power hierarchies where one group exercises control over another, thereby securing positions of dominance and control over the material and non-material resources such as income and access. By utilising Weber’s theory, when the power relationship behind the issue of economic insecurity in older women of colour is examined, economic insecurity as a form of oppression rather than merely the lack of money or income can be seen.

In this study I did not solve the larger contextual and societal problem of gendered financial racism that serves as the root causes of the problem of economic insecurity in older women of colour. However, the co-researchers were able to begin to develop a sense of agency through the collective wisdom found in their own voices. By reclaiming the negative images and symbols of oppression within a system of race, class, gender, and age oppression the women emerged from a position of powerless to a position of powerful change agents. To accomplish these results, emancipatory feminist methodologies were utilised to accurately hear, translate, and access the voices of the co-researchers in this study.

3 Methodology

“What do African American women over age 50 indicate as the sources and resources they utilise to address and transcend economic insecurity and oppression?” This question was addressed by utilising a critical mixed methods approach that allowed the voices of the women themselves to emerge as the authoritative source of the data and insight. The overview of the research design is graphically represented in Figure 2.

This was a qualitative CPAR study. According to Glassman and Erdem (2014), PAR can be a method of empowerment for individuals who have been marginalised within their own socio-cultural environments to overcome burdens placed on them by male-dominated structures, policies, and ideologies. Torre (2014, p.1) refers to PAR as an “epistemology that engages research design, methods, analyses, and products through a lens of democratic participation and collective action”. Believing this to be true I designed the study to be as participatory as possible. However, the study did not strictly adhere to CPAR methods. Nevertheless, I agree with Chataway (2001) who posits that CPAR is not necessarily a methodology but rather an attitude or an epistemology.
The study utilised a mixed methodological approach. I sought to utilise the approach and methodology that would best enable me to hear the voices of the co-researchers and to generate knowledge from their voice (Krumer-Nevo, 2009). While this methodological approach presented a unique way to obtain knowledge, it is not considered to be universal for all studies involving all women of colour. However, this approach offered the best methodology for a close relationship with the older African American women in this study and to obtain cultural knowledge.

I utilised those methodologies that would produce cultural-based knowledge so that I could reinforce the concept of community cultural capital (Yosso, 2006). I also wanted to maximise the wisdom and inner strengths of the participants. Using this approach was also helpful in eliciting knowledge and to provide the tools that co-researchers could use in their individual and collective efforts to build on their shared strengths and resiliency. In this way resiliency is transformed into an act of resistance.

African-centred methodologies produce cultural-based knowledge that places emphasis on the past, present, and future realities of African American people – this concept applied to the participants in this study. In addition, other researchers argued that scholars utilising African-centred methodologies must first epistemologically reorient their viewpoints in order to discover our own methodologies and methods of doing research.

I support the position that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”. Consequently, as an African womanist scholar, care had to be taken to select a methodological approach (tool) that serves to dismantle oppression rather than reinforce or recreate power inequities that contribute to oppression in an attempt to dismantle that oppression.

The research process was a cycle of continuous exploration, reflection, and understanding. Borrowing from the model developed by Glassman and Erdem (2014), the process was one of action as praxis, research as conscientisation, and reflection leading to
transformation of praxis, within the context of my own lived experience [Glassman and Erdem, (2014), p.215]. Concurrently, I had to be able to explore reality from my perspective and recognise that my lived experience and perspective was my own and may not be that of others.

Phenomenology is one of the aspects of mindful inquiry. The primary focus of phenomenology is to help us deal with things we take for granted about ourselves and our world through a process called bracketing (Husserl, 1962, as reported in Bentz and Shapiro, 1998). Bracketing allows the researcher to set aside aspects of a situation in order to focus her attention on other aspects of that situation. As a mindful inquirer, I had to bracket my experience in order to listen to the voices of the co-researchers.

While I believe transparency is important, I did not want my persona as a strong Black woman nor my power position to hinder or in any way influence the conversations that would occur with the co-researchers or my analysis of the data. I felt I could relate to the experiences of the women culturally and socially and I was anxious to share my feelings of ‘victory consciousness’, but I was concerned that I would become so enmeshed in the conversations that I might inhibit others from opening up and sharing their thoughts. In many cases, researchers exploit and marginalise the people they choose to ‘study’.

The interview consisted of exploratory questions within four dimensions of community capital (Yosso, 2006): economic security, aspirational capital, social capital, and resistance capital.

People living in poverty are generally regarded as lacking normative or any other positive knowledge (Krumer-Nevo, 2005a, 2005b); therefore the voices of people who are poor are regarded as mere noise, with no meaningful significance, or provide evidence of what is considered to be distorted, unsophisticated, or irrelevant perceptions. However, in this study, the voices of the women who participated are considered valuable.

The primary research question was addressed by drawing upon the life story narratives, phenomenological experiences, and innate wisdom of the participant/researchers. I utilised open-ended questions to stimulate dialogue and to encourage the participants to speak freely. The women’s own voices and constructions of their own experiences were the focus. It was from the data generated from the interviews and the focus group that counter-storytelling began to emerge. The discussion during the focus group centred around the themes of innovation, resiliency, and transformation.

Conversations with and among the co-researchers were the primary sources of data for this study. Encouraging participants to tell their individual and collective stories is a major approach in African-centred, Black feminist/womanist methodologies. The dialogue during the focus group and the interviews spoke to how African American women have overcome financial insecurity by utilising creative struggle, oppositional and innovative strategies to not only survive economic insecurity and financial oppression but to transform their lives.

African-centred data collection involves total cultural immersion in the culture of the people being studied. As an Africana woman over 55 years of age, having experienced financial challenges and having at one time identified with the SBW schema, the women in the study and I had a shared culture and in many cases a historical shared way of life. My life world was like that of the participants. I was able to follow the flow of the conversation, pick up on nonverbal clues, and identify some of communication propositions of the SBWC (Davis, 2015) including the communication of strength; the
innovation, resiliency and transformation

assembly of Black women communicating strength; participation by reinforcing each
others’ strength; communication patterns are a way to resistance to oppressive structures.

I used introspective and retrospective notes, data from the interviews and focus
groups, field notes taken during the interviews, and historical data. I also spoke with
other women of colour outside of the realm of the study as well as researchers who study
SBW, CRT and other related topics. These discussions offered credibility and validation
to my study and served as a method of data triangulation. I also met with two women
who are younger than the women in the study who were interested in participating in the
study and although they were unable to formally do so, much of the data they provided
paralleled that found in the study. Member checks were done throughout the analysis
process to help establish validity and establish credibility (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Table 1 Community wealth capital thematic analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Exemplars and key words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aspirational capital</td>
<td>Maintaining hope for the future in the face of real and perceived barriers.</td>
<td>Key words: faith, hope, God, destiny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Key exemplars: Alice, Jenny, Mary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic capital</td>
<td>Intellectual and social skills attained in communicating in more than one language or style.</td>
<td>Key Exemplars: Mary, Jenny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familial capital</td>
<td>Cultural knowledge inherent among families.</td>
<td>Key exemplars: Alice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social capital</td>
<td>Networks of people and community resources.</td>
<td>Key words: networking; cooperative; community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigational capital</td>
<td>Skills of manoeuvring through institutions that were not created with communities of colour in mind.</td>
<td>Key words: creativity;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Key exemplars: Rita, Alice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistant capital</td>
<td>Knowledge and skill fostered through oppositional behaviour.</td>
<td>Key exemplars: Alice, Mary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yosso’s (2006) community wealth theory includes six forms of capital: social capital,
linguistic capital, aspirational capital, familial capital, navigational capital, and resistance
capital. These six forms of capital were used as themes when analysing the data.

Aspirational capital

“What are some of my thoughts regarding retirement? I’m not secure about
social security. The money isn’t there. I had to take another job, it’s part-time. I
want to go back to school, I want to age gracefully and enjoy my time on the
planet.” Rita

“I can dream. But every dream has numbers behind it. Some people have lost
the ability to dream because of lack of finances. We have to put in the resources
including money in order to achieve our dreams. You may not have money, but
you still have to be able to dream. Dreaming is important. In order to survive;
never loose your dream or the desire to do better.” Mary
Linguistic capital

“We have to eliminate the premise or the notion of the Strong Black Woman. I’m a woman, period.” Jenny

“The strong black woman myth is comforting to others but is ultimately hurting us.” Mary

4 Findings

Co-researchers found it difficult to relinquish the SBW controlling image, even when they were able to admit the image the accompanying behaviour often brought less than positive results. Strength was synonymous with suffering and enduring rather than fighting against the systems of power. The resistance or challenge to oppression was not evidenced by fighting against the systems and structures that contributed to oppression, but rather by being strong enough to endure oppression and survive. Resistance is one of the ways Black women have responded to racism. However, resistance was not always a conscious purposeful action, but rather a reaction.

Because African American women have been able to exercise resiliency and strive as well as thrive in the face of oppression, the myth of the ‘strong Black woman’ has allowed many in the social justice community to ignore the seriousness of this issue.

As a result, economic justice for Black women has taken a back seat to other social justice issues, thus the cost of economic oppression has taken a toll on the financial security of older Black women.

The co-researchers were able to begin to reconstruct and reframe the SBW caricature and other controlling images and develop a sense of agency through the collective wisdom found in their own voices. By reclaiming the negative images and symbols of oppression within a system of race, class, gender and age oppression the women emerged from a position of powerless to a position of powerful change agents.

We discovered how economically vulnerable Black women’s experiences of ‘making a way out of no way’ in the face of financial oppression can become internalised and result in feelings on powerlessness despite the SBW façade. This façade maintains oppression by serving as a barrier to action and change. One way that Black women can transform this narrative is to disconnect the controlling imagery of strength from the master narrative.

Based on the data, I utilised community cultural wealth theory (Yosso, 2006), and Laura Rendon’s validation theory (Rendon, 1994) and the SBW collective framework (Davis 2015) to develop my own theoretical framework, mindful strength consciousness (MSC). MSC is a developing standpoint framework that can be a useful strategy for African American women to overcome economic insecurity and to construct a counter narrative to the deficit-based analyses that currently dominate the discourse surrounding the financial security of older women of color including that of the strong Black woman. In a similar fashion, Jayawardene (2013) discovered how the Siddi people of India with limited options have utilised victory consciousness and prevailed in the face of oppression.

It is my hope that the MSC framework will offer a new typology of courage and strength that expands the strong Black woman narrative prevalent in the current discourse surrounding Africana women throughout the diaspora. This new theory utilises a
functional Black woman’s point of view (Joseph, 1995) and a validation of life knowledge that may help to explain the ways in which women of colour have transcended the effects of economic insecurity and oppression. The MSC theory promotes a mindful and conscious use of the attribute of strength. MSC can provide a foundation for agency, transformation, and liberation for women of colour as they transcend the effects of economic oppression.

The theoretical development of MSC is graphically represented in Figure 3.

**Figure 3** Theoretical development of MSC

5 Conclusions

Can women of colour write new economic scripts that are both practical and empowering within the confines of a commodity-driven, capitalist economic structure? Can women of colour access the liberatory aspects of strength vis-à-vis MSC to inform and inspire change in the community? Can women of colour serve as a source of wisdom, strength, and guidance for communities without sacrificing “self” in the process? I say yes.

The years between 50–75 years of age are potentially a time for personal growth and fulfilment. Financial insecurity and economic vulnerability stifle this potential. Collins (2000) asserts that women of colour are oppressed systematically through economic exploitation. This systematic economic exploitation results in a putrid pot of poverty from which older women of colour are forced to partake that provides little sustenance to contribute to the principles of successful aging.

The SBW schema and other coping behaviours have been a defence mechanism to help Black women endure economic oppression and exploitation. However, the economic oppression experienced by older women of colour is not merely the result of personal failure and financial shortcomings, but is symptomatic of economic injustice. Successful aging requires older women to do more than merely endure economic oppression and exploitation; we have to fight to achieve economic justice.
Many interventions aimed at helping women achieve financial security perpetuate inequality and ignore the unjust economic systems of oppression. An intersectional approach toward economic justice for older women of colour is needed. This intersectional vision of economic justice has to go beyond window dressing that serves to recreate the same systems of injustice. The systems of economic oppression as well as the institutions and policies that support the economic oppression of older women must be examined in order for financially functioning aging to take place.

This culture often includes collective scripting and socially constructed behaviours. Likewise, Drewal’s (2004) observations which are supported by Jayawardene (2013), demonstrate how the Siddis have continued to achieve and thrive. I support the notion that the resiliency and adaptability of the Siddi people is reflective of their victory consciousness in a way that is linked to the collective victory consciousness of Africana people across the globe, including the women in my study. As such, MSC may be a useful topology for women throughout the Diaspora, including those in India.

Scripting was evident in most of the dialogue among the co-researchers. The participants often spoke of doing ‘what they had to do’. One of the descriptors of being a strong Black woman included ‘doing what has to be done’. Scripting can be described as a metaphor for conceptualising the production of behaviour within social settings or social life. Scripts direct behaviour and in order for behaviour manifest, scripting must occur on three levels: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts and intrapsychic scripts.

Cultural scenarios are the instructional guides that exist at the level of collective life. Edwards (2013) describes this as internalised collective consciousness. Behaviour must directly or indirectly reflect appropriate cultural scenarios. For many of the women in the study, of the many cultural scenarios that dominated their life the most central was that of caretaker/mothering. The cultural expectation was to take care of family at all costs and to work hard. Working hard does not inoculate women of colour from economic insecurity.

Patriarchy, racism, racialised sexism, and gendered financial vulnerability was evident in the lives of the co-researchers either directly or indirectly. Not only was there not enough money to support the needs of everyone in the family, there also existed a lack of personal agency, leading to incongruence between the wishes and expectation of others and the current financial reality. As one participant in the study queried, when does our obligation to others end? When there is a lack of congruence between how one would like to things to be and the current reality, individuals create interpersonal scripts. For women of colour these scripts are racialised and gendered. When incongruency becomes internalised or ingrained at the level of social life (cultural scenarios), a greater demand is placed on the individual than can be met by interpersonal scripts alone. Intra-psychic scripting allows an individual to create a fantasy world based on how she believes the world should be. Intra-psychic scripting is defined as the symbolic reorganisation of reality in ways that allow an individual to fully realise her ‘many layered and multi-voiced’ wishes. The strong Black woman schema has been a type of intra-psychic scripting utilised as a way to deal with dehumanising stereotypes and community and familial expectations. Black women must be willing to abandon the position of defaulting to intra-psychic scripting. The SBW schema is a micro-response to daily micro-aggressions. The SBW schema and other micro-responses and intra-psychic scriptings erode self-confidence, self-worth, and self-efficacy.

Critical thinking, like critical consciousness, usually requires external circumstances or stimuli in order for individuals to become more critically reflective about their lives.
I believe that participation in this study provided the stimuli for the women in the study. Although they were aware of their financial situation, the data appear to suggest that the co-researchers were not immediately conscious of the economic injustices that contributed to their financial insecurity. Through dialogue with other women, financially vulnerable women were able to reflect on their own lives and to identify the type of action needed to bring about the changes that might lead to successful aging while becoming aware of the structural and systemic barriers that they still have to face. The co-researchers were able to identify changes they would like to see and reflect on ‘new revolutionary ideals’ that might influence policy for our communities.

The process of critical thinking includes affective, cognitive, and behavioural components and, like critical consciousness, emphasises many of the same characteristics, particularly welcoming divergent views and encouraging critical dialogue.

MSC is a step toward developing critical consciousness and critical thinking. Marginalised communities in general and Africana women specifically have a unique way of being. This way of being has been misunderstood by the dominant society and within the Black community as well.

For organisations and agencies looking to assist marginalised women throughout the Diaspora, MSC is a way to purposefully access the strength and resiliency necessary to facilitate empowerment among Africana women in conscious and mindful ways.

References


