

Designing afro-emancipatory qualitative research with and for Black people

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Abstract

Since the tragic death of George Floyd in May 2020, there has been increased interest in anti-racist research. Consequently, several scholars are instigating qualitative inquiries in Black communities with limited preparation or expertise. This article presents a reflection regarding essential principles that can guide general and afro-emancipatory health and social sciences qualitative inquiries in Black diasporas. We contend that it is essential that researchers engage in reflexivity and consider Black ontologies, axiology and epistemologies. Furthermore, we propose the application of the following deontological principles to fulfil an ethical afro-emancipatory research framework: (a) include critical theories, (b) target the liberation of Afro-descendant peoples to enable their full participation as their whole selves in society; (c) ensure their leadership and meaningful involvement throughout the research process; (d) implement accountability mechanisms towards community members; (e) embrace intersectionality, an asset-based lens, and aspirational stance and; (f) foster healing, growth and joy.

Keywords

African Canadian, Black Canadian, Afrocentric theory, anti-Black racism, anti-oppressive qualitative inquiry, Black feminist theory, Critical Black theory/BlackCrit, epistemology, critical race theory, intersectionality

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Introduction

Several events,¹ particularly the death of George Floyd in May 2020 in Minneapolis (Smiles, 2021), have sparked an awareness into how anti-Black racism endangers the lives of people of African descent around the world. In parallel, some research agencies and foundations announced competitive calls for research proposals investigating race and systemic racism. In this context, several scholars are instigating qualitative research projects with Black community members with limited preparation or expertise. Considering this increased interest, with a focus on the Canadian context, our article aims to present essential principles that graduate students, community-based researchers and scholars at various career stages should ponder and weigh as they conceive and conduct research projects with Black populations. We note that there is existing scholarship that provides guidance to conduct Indigenous (Smith, 2022), anti-oppressive and anti-racist research (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Rodney et al., 2023), including some with a focus on the Canadian context (Dei & Johal, 2005; Kovach, 2021; Pidgeon, 2019; Wilson, 2008). However, few scholarly articles engage reflections and guidelines regarding the design and development of critical qualitative research with African diasporas, including Black Canadians. The absence of guidelines on conducting research with Black people not only raises ethical concerns but may also lead to harmful research practices, and ineffective interventions. While there is relevant and important scholarship accomplished in the humanities regarding this topic, our goal is to reflect primarily on qualitative inquiries conducted in the social and health sciences.

In this article, we will use the terms Black Canadians and African Canadians interchangeably to designate people of Sub-Saharan African descent, who may be from an historical Black/African Canadian community or immigrant background, who identify themselves and experience daily life as Black (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2017). This terminology reflects (1) the diversity of Black/African communities in Canada, (2) the fact that in the field of Black Studies, the expression 'African Canadian' has not been reserved to immigrants from the African continent, (3) the pillars of an afro-emancipatory approach, which support the notion that Black communities in the diaspora have the right to name themselves, notably in contrast to normalized colonial identifiers. In fact, historical Black communities in Canada have self-identified as African Canadians for centuries, and have incorporated the term 'African' into the names of their organizations. A notable example is the African United Baptist Association (AUBA) which was founded in 1854 in Nova Scotia (Backhouse 1999; Calliste, 1995; Este et al., 2017). Along the same lines, given that throughout the paper we will primarily draw on examples of research conducted with Black people in Canada and the United States to illustrate various principles, we recognize that our proposed reflections may not apply to all Black people globally and may mirror debates and concerns found primarily in diasporic Afro-descendent communities.²

Descriptive, disparity and comparative research have been conducted with Black communities for intellectual pursuits and policy purposes. These inquiries often provide an overview of a social problem, quantify outcome, or resource gaps, or infer conclusions from group comparisons with limited or no critical reflexivity. These studies tend to be unidirectional and ahistorical with little if any input from Black community members, in other words, with no reference to the historical and social-political context that

shape contemporary Black people's lives. The belief that Black Canadians do not face significant racism-related structural barriers in Canada is pervasive because of the assumption that they are worse for Black people in the United States. This belief dismisses or minimizes the legacy and contemporary implications of the history of enslavement, forced segregation and anti-Black racism on Canadian soil (Backhouse, 1999; Cooper, 2016; Nelson, 2020; Walker, 2010). Unfortunately, colour-blind, and decontextualized research can cause harm and often does not contribute to sustainable and tangible resolution of immediate and enduring social and health problems in Black Canadian communities because race often intersects with other factors. Meanwhile, research that can further the betterment of Black Canadians' well-being, development and fulfilment is needed. Thus, there is an imperative to instigate reflections around relevant, ethical and respectful research with Black communities.

Given the scarcity of articles that speak to qualitative research with Black Canadian children, youth, families and communities in English, French or bilingual contexts, this article is timely and apropos. Although we do not offer a step-by-step guide, the two parts of this article can inform the reflections of researchers from their research design to dissemination of findings. This article builds upon our combined research experiences and the work of scholars who have provided critical insights regarding principles that should guide research with Black Canadian communities (Black Health Equity Working Group, 2021; Goddard-Durant et al., 2021; Jean-Pierre & Collins, 2022; Salami, 2023; Thésée, 2021). Given that previous studies with Black Canadians did not explicitly claim to mobilize an afro-emancipatory qualitative framework, this article does not use a specific case study throughout its various sections. Yet, we draw examples from the rich scholarship of research conducted with Black Canadians to illustrate each consideration and deontological principle presented. We aim to provide a definition of afro-emancipatory qualitative research framework along with an overview of essential considerations and deontological principles underlying its design and application for various qualitative inquiry methods including interviews, focus groups, ethnography, arts-based research and participatory-action research. Considering Black people's history of enslavement, segregation and persistent anti-Black racism, they still face various forms of disenfranchisement which impede their development and well-being in many areas of life, which was the subject of discussions around the world (United Nations General Assembly, 2013), during the United Nations Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024), and in Canada (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2017). Several aspects of this article may help motivate scholars who conduct qualitative research with other historically marginalized and excluded populations with an anti-oppressive or anti-racist lens. The considerations and principles underscore the relevance of historical–political processes of minoritization, subordination and the importance of assuming and building upon the agency and strengths of participants.

Situating ourselves

In the spirit of critical research traditions, afro-emancipatory researchers are called upon to undertake a continuous self-reflexive process regarding the role of their own beliefs, experiences and social location in their research projects (Jean-Pierre & Collins, 2022). Positionality informs the research process in significant ways, and is crucial for

conducting research with Black people to ensure that we are attentive to power dynamics and how our identities (i.e., race, class and gender) shape the way we perceive, interpret and interact with Black people (Tanksley & Estrada, 2022). While the object of this paper is not our own specific research projects, we consider it relevant to provide a brief note regarding our collective positionalities and how they informed our reflections. We are four Black women from various diasporic backgrounds, including Caribbean and African immigrants and historical African Canadian communities. As professors, we conduct research with Black populations in Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario, and British Columbia and on a national scale as members of large research teams. We work in departments of sociology, social work, education and nursing respectively, and we investigate schooling experiences, postsecondary trajectories, special education, the child welfare system, juvenile justice and health in interdisciplinary teams with community partners in English, French, or both official languages. We recognize that our educational background, our socioeconomic status and respective linguistic and ethnic backgrounds influence the research process and our contributions to this article as we work with Black communities to which we belong as well as those we do not. Although we have not conducted qualitative research together as a group, our combined experiences conducting interviews, focus groups, and participatory-action research with Black Canadians from immigrant and historical Black communities inform the considerations and principles discussed in this article.

Essential considerations: Black ontologies, axiology and epistemologies

Black people constitute a heterogeneous population with a common ancestry from sub-Saharan Africa and a shared global history of struggles against social injustices such as dehumanization, enslavement, colonialism and anti-Black racism (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021). Across Afro-descendant peoples, various ontologies, axiology and epistemologies can impact the research process and its outcomes.

At the design stage of a research project with Black populations, it is important to be aware of the existence of multiple Black ontologies, different worldviews and conceptions of what constitutes existence and reality among Afro-descendant peoples. To understand Black ontologies, researchers should acknowledge that Black peoples' realities are shaped by fluctuating and diverse notions of time, space, place and transcendence. An example of such conception is *Sankofa*, a principle from West African Akan philosophical tradition that refers to the principle of drawing from past experiences in the present, in order to prosper in the future (Temple, 2010). Over the years, it has gained increased attention in diasporic Black communities, including in the United States and Canada. Scholars have found that in Black Canadian participants' narratives, the past, the present and the future are linked and intertwined rather than linear (Henry, 2006; Jean-Pierre, 2021). As such, in qualitative inquiries we note that many Black Canadians practice *Sankofa* in their narratives, which in turn influences their understanding of contemporary social problems and their visions of the future. Black spaces and historical narratives contend with racial violence and span across and beyond existing ethnic or national boundaries (McKittrick, 2011). They differ from, or contest 'official' national

histories. As demonstrated by Hunter (2018) through his study of African Americans in Philadelphia, Black folks often produce their own understandings, logics of time and history in parallel to mainstream American history. In addition to the existence of various notions of time, space and place, the belief that the spiritual world is inseparable from the material world is ingrained in many African ontologies (Hasford et al., 2020), built in Afrocentric paradigms (Bawa, 2023; Mazama, 2001), and manifests through a wide range of spiritual practices among Black Canadians (Este & Bernard, 2006; Henry, 2006). This is also observed in health research. In a study of Black elderly women living with HIV, one participant mentioned that seeking a deeper connection with her faith led to a miraculous recovery even after she had been given a terminal prognosis (Ojukwu et al., 2022). Yet, we must stress the heterogeneity of beliefs, religious and spiritual practices, including the acknowledgement of the existence of Black atheists in our midst (Howard et al., 2023). Therefore, researchers should anticipate that in the context of a research project, despite questions pointing to a specific topic or direction, Black participants' narratives will not necessarily be linear, solely about the material word, or focused on the present time and place.

Values play a role in the way participants perceive and engage with research and as a result, researchers should take into account what is meaningful to the Black populations they work with. Axiology refers to the values that inform the research process, some of which we discuss here because their significance is reflected in published articles or have been articulated by several Canadian scholars. Researchers should be aware that Black community members generally have expectations regarding an inquiry, which are informed by their values. *Ubuntu*, a southern African principle, refers to the idea that 'I am because we are' and is sometimes translated as 'humanity' (Bawa, 2023). It refers to the importance of considering responsibility to the collective, rather than only pursuing individual needs and preferences. Many research projects illustrate what enacting *Ubuntu* means through an ethics of care towards community members. Throughout history, at the micro-social level, Black Canadians acted based on an ethics of care by caring for the most vulnerable, including non-relatives (Bernard & Bonner, 2013). At the meso-social level, in their professional lives, Nina Mae as a teacher (Bonner, 2014) and Mary Ann Shadd as an editor (Dennie, 2021) have acted as agents of systemic and institutional change as they challenged racism in their respective professions. Likewise, at the macro-structural level, Black Canadians have a long history of activism, advocacy, and resistance against enslavement, forced segregation and racial discrimination (Calliste, 1995, 1996; Este et al., 2017; Flynn, 2018; Jean-Pierre & Bundy, 2023). Today, the enactment of *Ubuntu* persists as an evolving context-dependent force through diverse and multiple manifestations. It is illustrated in a qualitative inquiry of Ontario low-income Black parents organizing mentoring circles and sharing information to support each other's children in public schools (Butler, 2021). Another example can be found in a qualitative research project conducted with the largest historical Black Canadian community, African Nova Scotians, which illustrated the solidarity of Black women engaging in 'othermothering,' socializing Black youth regarding how to protect themselves when interacting with law enforcement representatives (Bundy, 2019). This ethics of care is also illustrated through advocacy for policy change to improve the welfare of imprisoned Black people, even if they are far from the public eye (Bernard & Smith, 2018). *Ubuntu* guides many Black people's ethics of care and

emphasizes the significance of collective interdependence for individual well-being and development. Nevertheless, the application and implication of *Ubuntu* should not be assumed to be homogeneous because its manifestation may vary across time, space and communities. Thus, as researchers collaborate with Black advocates and community members, it is likely that there will be insistence on ensuring that research projects yield tangible and relevant repercussions and social change for the community. The importance of the relevance of qualitative inquiries conducted with Black populations for their development and well-being cannot be overstated.

Researchers should reflect upon how their assumptions about capacity in the Black community and knowledge production influence the research process. Epistemology refers to knowledge production and how we know what we know. The point of entry into a research project and the initial conception of a social problem influence how knowledge production unfolds. Critical scholars point to the necessity of moving away from deficit assumptions that often shape the design and conduct of research, especially when it comes to historically underserved and excluded populations (Hunter, 2018; Yosso, 2005). For instance, some researchers may instigate a study with the idea that being Black is a 'risk factor' when in fact, being Black is not a risk, anti-Black racism is the risk factor that should be examined. Yosso (2005) argues that racialized and marginalized communities have community wealth, valuable cultural capital that is often overlooked in mainstream discourses. Although *Black community wealth* is often overlooked, undervalued and ignored by dominant society, we contend that it is comprised of developed, learned and shared cultural capital that is acquired through interaction and social action across generations within Black communities. Regardless of Black community members' socio-economic status, mastery of a national language, citizenship status, or even educational credentials, researchers should avoid deficit-oriented assumptions and learn to draw from the community's learned and shared cultural capital. In fact, they should initiate a project with the assumption that prospective Black participants hold critical and valuable insights. Thus, knowledge production in health and social science qualitative research should build upon *Black community wealth* to result in social change that benefits Afro-descended peoples.

Deontological principles

Building upon the consideration for Black ontologies, axiology and epistemologies, the principles delineated in this section aim to provide guidance on *how* to conduct afro-emancipatory research and other types of qualitative research with Black communities. We provide deontological principles for conducting research for the purpose of reflecting upon an afro-emancipatory qualitative research framework that furthers social justice, well-being and development of Afro-descendant peoples. Grounded in the ontologies, axiology and epistemologies of Black people discussed above, we propose the following definition which include deontological principles. An afro-emancipatory qualitative research framework: (a) is informed and guided by critical theory, (b) targets the liberation of Afro-descendant peoples whereby they can fully participate in society as their whole selves; (c) is driven and conducted by Black people with their meaningful involvement across the research

process from design to dissemination; (d) is accountable to Black community members; (e) is intrinsically intersectional, asset-oriented and aspirational and; (f) provides opportunities for healing, growth and joy.

Research that is informed and guided by critical theory

In alignment with many Black colleagues who have expressed concern in conducting research in their own communities (Coles & Powell, 2020; Collins, 2022; Williams, 2005), our collective research experiences have incited a critical examination of how to capture the specificity of 'being Black' in our research activities, while ensuring respectful, responsible and transformative endeavours that value Black knowledge and life. To date, there has been a tendency in research conducted in Canada to situate Black communities within large categories such as 'immigrants', 'visible minorities', or 'ethno-cultural minorities', 'people of colour' and more recently, 'racialized groups'. While this practice may provide relevant analytical substance, we suggest that without a focus on how various deprivations associated to 'being Black' impact experiences, it remains, at best, partial. Similarly, as researchers who have been trained in universities with colonial legacies, we are aware of how some practices that may appear ethical or neutral, are susceptible to invisibilizing and harming historically excluded and underserved communities.

The tradition of critical theory seeks to understand and challenge dominant ideologies and the power structures that create and uphold them, while promoting awareness, emancipation and justice (Bronner, 2011). Numerous critical scholars interested in race have elaborated and drawn upon critical theories with an intentional focus on *blackness* such as critical race theory (CRT) (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 2011), Black queer theory (Johnson, 2008), or afro-pessimism (Wilderson, 2017), to name a few. Given the vast repertoire of such theories in conjunction with the significant diversity among Black populations, we have chosen to highlight some key intersectional and decolonial theories that foreground Black peoples' lives. Namely, Afrocentric Theory, Black Feminism and Critical Black Theory (BlackCrit).

Afrocentric theory. Afrocentric theory aims to promote 'an understanding and rapprochement by accepting the agency of the African person as the basic unit of analysis of social situations involving Afro-descendant people' (Asante, 2000: 50). This theory suggests that Black communities' self-determination and self-governance should incorporate African and Black diasporas' theories and philosophies. There are four important dimensions of Afrocentricity: (i) the acknowledgement of the interconnection between all beings, nature and the cosmos, (ii) spirituality, (iii) the centrality of collective identity and responsibility and (iv) the value of the affective dimensions of lived experience (Este & Bernard, 2003). Mazama (2001) argues that Black people must exercise their agency by directing and piloting the solutions that are implemented on current political, social and economic problems. Afrocentric theory therefore offers foundations that restore and value the knowledge of historically delegitimized Black communities, while focusing on plural and non-oppressive practices.

Black feminist theory. Black feminist theory provides an alternative feminist stance to Eurocentric feminist theories that minimize the relevance of Black women's unique

experiences while marginalizing and devaluing their knowledge and voices. In a broad sense, Black feminist theory is concerned with gender inequality within Black communities and Black women's collective knowledge and actions (Collins, 2022). Black feminists engage in intersectionality to grasp the social stratification of Black women because multiple axes of social difference are intertwined in their lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1993). Black feminists also emphasize the value of examining society from Black women's perspectives and their essential role in fostering societal change through advocacy and social movements (Lawson, 2023).

Critical Black theory or BlackCrit. Critical Black theory or BlackCrit is a subfield of critical race studies that addresses the concern that *blackness* is insufficiently examined within existing theoretical frameworks regarding race and racism (Dumas & Ross, 2016). As an interdisciplinary approach, critical race theorists advance a race-conscious analysis of social issues, with a focus on institutional racism and its historical underpinnings, as well as how white norms, disguised as neutral, affect people of colour (Crenshaw, 2011). There are six tenets at the heart of CRT: (1) the persistence and ordinariness of racism, (2) the proprietary nature of whiteness, (3) the significance of storytelling and counter-storytelling as forms of resistance, (4) interest convergence among dominant racial groups, (5) a critique of liberalism and (6) the importance of intersectionality (Capper, 2015; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Whereas CRT theorizes racism and advances a critique of White supremacy as it relates to all racialized groups, critical Black theory provides tools to refine analyses pertaining to Black people and their lived experiences.

Afrocentric theory, Black feminist theory and critical Black theory all are united in their approach to research that adopts a multifaceted, multilayered and intersectional understanding of Black life. These critical frameworks serve as guiding principles, leading researchers to delve deeply into the historical and political processes that have marginalized and dehumanized Afro-descended peoples. They shed light on the diversity and humanity within Black communities, challenging the erasure of Black people's voices and contributions from dominant national narratives. Moreover, these theories critically analyze the structural barriers faced by Black people while acknowledging their agency and strengths in navigating these challenges. Researchers utilizing these frameworks also engage with both tragic events and joyful moments, recognizing the full spectrum of Black experiences. By embracing this multifaceted perspective, Afrocentric theory, Black feminist theory and critical Black theory contribute significantly to research by steering it away from simplistic, deficit-oriented and one-dimensional interpretations of Black peoples' lives, and towards fostering a richer, more nuanced understanding of their experiences.

Ultimately, researchers should be open to build upon and expand their theoretical framework to make sense of the data when unexpected findings and outcomes emerge in a qualitative inquiry. When research findings do not fit the theoretical framework selected initially, researchers should incorporate concepts that encompass Black voices. Beyond a specific research question, we are proposing that researchers engage in a dynamic research process where Black peoples' agency supersedes structural and institutional logics that can even involve rethinking theoretical assumptions and tenets to account for Black community wealth.

Research aims to seek the liberation of Black peoples whereby they can fully participate in society as their whole selves

How can research be used for liberation? We have already discussed how much of what we know about Black people has been deficit-oriented through the adoption of race rather than anti-Black racism as a risk factor for the study of social and health outcomes. Likewise, in their review of Black liberatory research, Stewart and Haynes (2019) state that researchers should name the different forms of deprivation Black people are subjected to, and not Black people, as the problem. Furthermore, afro-emancipatory research must counter the pathologizing of *blackness*, which refers to the 'social ills' attributed to Black people, through engagement with critical research paradigms that focus on Black consciousness-raising. Within feminist thought, consciousness-raising is the process of raising critical awareness on personal and social injustices (Sowards & Renegar, 2004). Black consciousness-raising involves Black individuals' consciousness of everyday life various forms of oppression rather than indifference (Collins, 2022). This oppression is experienced through anti-Black racist stereotypes, pathologizing and exclusionary institutional norms and procedures, and the various mechanisms through which stakeholders and policymakers enact state deprivation and human rights violations against Black people. Because of the colonization of Africa, the transatlantic slave trade, Apartheid, forced segregation, and anti-Black racism in various parts of the world, afro-descendent people continue to contend with urgent and critical structural barriers while they also challenge persistent prejudice and stereotypes. Many racist stereotypes are insidious and have ramifications that cannot be relegated to symbolic and cultural domains. For instance, insidious and in appearance neutral, healthcare exclusionary procedures can have an impact on the quality of care experienced by Afro-descended peoples. Scholars found that many medical students and residents held false beliefs regarding Black people's biology, which in turn influenced how they treated Black patients for pain within clinical spaces (Hoffman et al., 2016). False beliefs such as 'Blacks' skin is thicker than Whites' or 'Blacks' nerve endings are less sensitive than whites' resulted in tangible disparities in health outcomes and were found among medical students and residents and lay people alike (Hoffman et al., 2016). We suggest that some key critical theories that specifically pertain to Black communities can inform researchers' analysis of the specific deprivations that affect Black populations.

Through the acknowledgement and incorporation of historical and macro-structural barriers combined with Black consciousness-raising, liberatory research holds the potential for transformation and change. Such research also moves beyond naming the various forms of deprivation that Black populations experience to seeking emancipatory policies and practices. Researchers can accomplish this goal by embedding research questions within the inquiry that tackle systems and institutional policies that continue to perpetuate racial inequality and reinforce white supremacy. Thus, afro-emancipatory qualitative research centres liberation to achieve the ability of Black people to participate in society as their whole selves.

Research is driven and conducted by Black people with their meaningful involvement across the research process

Afro-emancipatory research is driven by Black people. This consideration generated much discussion within our group- namely around the role of White and other

non-Black researchers in qualitative inquiries *for* and *with* Black people. We suggest that researchers who are not Black and who are conducting equity-based research with a large proportion or primarily Black participants should reflect upon the motivations that underlie their involvement. They should also contemplate the possibility of working with fellow Black scholars as co-investigators (rather than just collaborators or community partners) on an equal footing with similar academic status (not only with Black graduate students or postdoctoral researchers). Moreover, these researchers should reflect upon the importance of decentring themselves, their beliefs, and career goals to actively listen to and act according to Black researchers and community members' voices.

In research, the White saviour complex is detrimental because it posits the researcher as a humanistic missionary with good intentions who heroically solve social problems while racialized peoples' agency, autonomy, capacities, strengths and knowledges are decentred, underestimated, or dismissed (Straubhaar, 2015). Even when White and other non-Black researchers are aware of and understand the White saviour complex, they should ask themselves the sensible question of why they are conducting a research project with Black communities regarding a particular topic. Researchers have stakes both in conducting research and in its impact for society: failure to acknowledge this is misleading and deceptive (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995; Reviere, 2001). Critical engagement with the research process encourages visions of 'I' to 'other as self' to conduct research that is socially just through a better understanding of the participants' perspectives (Alexander, 2005).

In addition to considering the White saviour complex, we encourage researchers to avoid health-equity research tourism with Black communities (Lett et al., 2022). Health equity tourism refers to 'the process of previously unengaged investigators pivoting into health equity research without developing the necessary scientific expertise for high-quality work' (Lett et al., 2022: 2). Health-based qualitative researchers should stray from trial and error or health equity tourism because Black communities face urgent and immediate challenges that require the best scientific expertise regarding anti-Black racism and health equity. Health-equity oriented qualitative research *with* and *for* Black communities must seek to respectfully, and meaningfully engage Afro-descendant peoples as core research team members. Afro-emancipatory qualitative research must be conscientious and driven by an intrinsic desire to celebrate and amplify Black voices in ways that support and promote their humanity, rather than for the purposes of merely addressing a research gap or fulfilling an institutional equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) requirement. Otherwise, health researchers' careers and qualitative inquiries can be perceived as inadvertently capitalizing upon and benefiting from Black people's deprivation and suffering.

Having an in-depth reflection upon one's positionality is critical to the execution of research design, data collection, analysis and dissemination for non-Black researchers and Black researchers alike. At every step of the inquiry, a reflexive process should lead to examining how who we are, and existing power dynamics within the research team and between the researcher and participants impact the research process. The fact that researchers hold advanced degrees, are affiliated with universities, and may or may not be from the same community as the individuals they conduct research with must be contended through reflexivity (Goddard-Durant et al. 2021; Jean-Pierre & Collins, 2022). Black researchers can even discuss how conducting qualitative research

with a Black population from an ethnic, linguistic, or religious background different from themselves affects the way they navigate the research process. Reflexivity is valuable because researchers' actions and decisions can knowingly and unknowingly both inhibit or facilitate Black peoples' agency. Thus, researchers should engage in reflexivity to ensure that afro-emancipatory research reinforces Afro-descendant peoples' agency and draws upon Black community wealth.

Meaningful involvement across the research process requires that we recognize the expertise of Black people in matters involving them. Afro-emancipatory qualitative research ensures that Black people can authentically contribute to the overall goals of the research project and decisions made, while providing opportunities for their contribution through processes of engagement that are transparent and reciprocal. This implies long-term relationships with community partners and requires flexibility and responsiveness to the evolving process of engagement and stages of the research process. The contribution of Black community members in the research process should be formally recognized through wages, honorarium, references, official attestation letters, or co-authorship on documents to which they contribute. By formally recognizing Afro-descendant peoples' contributions, we legitimize and strengthen their involvement, allowing for more meaningful and sustainable contributions.

Research that promotes accountability towards Black peoples

Accountability towards Black peoples allows them to drive the research process and be fully informed about the inquiry's findings and implications so they may collectively conceive a vision, engage in decision-making and strategic planning (Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2022). The premise that data must be returned to Afro-descendant communities to work towards their objectives, solutions and planning is at the forefront of researchers' accountability towards Black populations. In an Afrocentric paradigm, the role of the community's agency is central to the research process to bring about transformation within society (Mazama, 2001). In seeking accountability, researchers provide an opportunity for Black communities to name circumstances of oppression, define social issues, build capacity and operationalize strategies for change. Accountability reflects an acknowledgement of the historical harm and misrepresentation of Black populations in research and ensures that research will be used in creative social interventions beyond policy recommendations for empowerment, as defined by community members (Kim, 2011; Kelley et al., 2013). By enabling community-led initiatives of empowerment and innovative social interventions, accountability processes enable Black communities to enact *Ubuntu* based on research findings.

Accountability to Black people also involves a close examination of their representation during the phases of dissemination, when we share the main findings, and knowledge translation, when we examine a research project's implications for decision-making processes and policy. Researchers should assess the extent to which stereotypes, misrepresentation, or sensationalism are inadvertently influencing their writing and presentation of the outcomes of their inquiry. In his discussion regarding misrepresentation in ethnography, Small (2015) invites sociologists to examine the ethical implications of the representations of poor racialized minorities in urban spaces. A researcher can mistakenly believe that they act as a sympathetic ethnographer who 'humanizes' the population

observed when in fact, they are providing a simplified, narrow and unidimensional portrayal of the participants (Small, 2015). On the other hand, when a researcher sensationalizes and exoticizes the danger of the location of a study in such a way that they represent themselves as courageous observers in the face of horrific crime and violence in the ghetto, they are enacting the 'jungle-book trope' or 'cowboy ethnography' (Small, 2015: 355). Scholars engaged in afro-emancipatory qualitative research should avoid negating Black populations' agency by representing them as powerless so as to gain sympathy from the reading audience. Researchers who adopt an afro-emancipatory qualitative research framework should avoid sensationalizing or exaggerating the deprivation of Black peoples or their daily social conditions as is often the case with the 'cowboy ethnography'. Accountability is better achieved through ethical representation with complex, accurate, multilayered and nuanced portrayal of Black communities reflecting their humanity.

Given that data and dissemination of findings are critical to accountability, researchers should carefully consider the various academic and non-academic avenues for dissemination and include them in their initial research budgets. In academia, publishing our scholarly articles in open access journals broadens access to research conducted in Black communities to all Afro-descendant peoples who have access to the internet. Newspapers, community libraries, workshops within targeted organizations and religious groups can also be beneficial for knowledge dissemination in Black communities, particularly when some individuals may lack easy access to electronic sources of information such as smart phones, computers, internet, television, or radio.

Research that is intrinsically intersectional, asset-based oriented and aspirational

Research for emancipation is humanizing and recognizes that Black peoples' lives cannot be reduced to a single story. An afro-emancipatory qualitative mode of inquiry necessitates that researchers contend with the heterogeneity of Black populations and move beyond comparative research on racial disparity. It recognizes that race and racism operate at the intersection of other forms of oppression (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 2011).

Like continental and other diasporan Africans, there are 'various Black identities' in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2019) based on ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, spirituality, sex, gender, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, social class or immigration status. Some Canadian studies' samples incorporate Black immigrants, but narrowly define the scope of analysis with concepts such as acculturation or integration that do not capture how race impacts their experiences (Thésée & Carr, 2016). African Canadian existence can be influenced by recent immigration processes and by second or third generation immigration status. However, researchers often neglect to recognize that Black Canadian existence can also be shaped by belonging to an historical Black community with a presence on Canadian soil of four generations or more, as is the case for African Nova Scotians.

Black existence is defined by various circumstances with the intersection of multiple axes of difference that shape life chances and opportunities. At the research design phase, researchers should consider that Black people's lives are 'shaped by their multiple and

overlapping identities, including their age, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, immigration status, country of origin, socioeconomic status and racialized identity' (Crichlow et al., 2021: 191) making it critical to understand how their multiple identities 'compound and complicate levels of disenfranchisement' (Mullings et al., 2021: 6). For instance, the intersection of race and gender influences the types of and responses to racist prejudice and stereotypes. Scholars found that Black Canadian boys and young men use a range of strategies in response to the stigmatizing attitudes, stereotypes and interventions that hinder their educational trajectories (Briggs, 2018; James, 2019). Etowa et al. (2022) found that heterosexual Black men in their study were aware of gendered stereotypes about them, and sought to contest the racist assumptions about Black masculinity. On the other hand, George (2020) argues that researchers and policy makers in education should resist the tendency to omit experiences and outcomes specific to Black female students in studies declaring that Black female students are 'doing fine' despite the specific barriers they face. Likewise, proactive gender-based violence policies and interventions in schools should consider Black Canadian girls' perspectives to create inclusive cultures of safety that address their needs (Litchmore, 2022). An example of how race can intersect with gender and migration status to shape racial discrimination experiences can be found in a study uncovering 15-year trends of racial discrimination within British Columbia schools. In fact, African Canadian girls and immigrants were more likely than African Canadian boys and Canadian-born adolescents to report experiences of racial discrimination (Okoye & Saewyc, 2021). Furthermore, the intersectionality of race, migration status, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation can affect educational trajectories of Black youth. Munroe et al. (2020) suggest that teachers, administrators and school counsellors should consider the circumstances and voices of young newcomer Queer and trans-Black women to create pathways that facilitate their transition to postsecondary education. Another axis of difference that can affect Black people's everyday life in the Canadian context is whether they belong to an official language minority community, meaning if they speak English in the province of Quebec or French in other provinces and territories. Several studies indicate that Black Francophone immigrants are disadvantaged in the labour market by the nexus of anti-Black racism, migration status and linguisticism which precludes their full inclusion and integration in Francophone minority communities (Madibbo, 2020; Sall, 2021). These studies illustrate that an intersectional lens highlights the heterogeneity of Black communities while allowing for in-depth analyses of intersecting axes of inequality and different ways of being Black without essentializing Black Canadians.

Like Hunter (2018), we contend that an asset-based lens is essential and facilitates the understanding of Black people's knowledge of the historical and socio-political context that circumscribes their agency and their voice. Similarly, Tabi and Gosine (2018) suggest that young Black male students' narratives should be valued and approached as pedagogically relevant to the learning process in the school system. It is imperative that Black lives are not only studied as a product of the structural and historical barriers encountered, but also through their strength and resistance. Although important research can focus on contemporaneous challenges such as gun violence-related trauma (Edwards et al., 2021) or police brutality aftereffects (Waldron, 2021), research with Black communities cannot focus exclusively on suffering or pain. Therefore, scholars should consider embracing an aspirational ethical stance as they conceive research questions that provide

space for imagining, aspiring and achieving a thriving future. This stance may include envisioning anti-racist futures (Jean-Pierre & Carter, 2023) or even educational spaces that challenge anti-Black racism and affirm Blackness (Howard & James, 2019). Even when participants reveal painful experiences, these can be discussed in nuanced ways. For example, Lawson (2018) revealed how after painfully and tragically losing a child, Black mothers' grief metabolized into activism.

Research that provides opportunities for healing, growth and joy

The individual and collective trauma resulting from the historical and ongoing pervasiveness of anti-Black racism inevitably makes healing, growth and joy essential focal aspects of afro-emancipatory research. Healing through research is rendered possible when structural barriers that perpetuate Black peoples' deprivation are explicitly named, when Eurocentric and deficit views are challenged, and when Black people's agency and transformative resistance are foregrounded (Ginwright, 2016). Afro-descendant scholars such as Bethune (1938), Du Bois (1920) and Fanon (1961) have provided critical grounding for understanding how anti-Black racism has contributed to perpetuating and exacerbating anxiety and suffering among its victims, as well as the possibilities of liberation from it. As such, undertaking processes of liberation and healing are intrinsically related.

Growth can accompany healing through macro-therapeutic interventions. In social work, Ferguson et al. (2018) refer to macro-therapeutic intervention as the instance where the research practice and process aim to achieve social justice through social and political actions. Ferguson et al. (2018) argue that this form of research *practice* holds clinical benefits for individual and community well-being. They also argue that the therapeutic benefits experienced by individuals who engage in macro-therapeutic intervention are not a result of conventional clinical work but rather a direct result of the social and political actions undertaken. They found that clients experience positive individual and clinical benefits to their mental health, self-efficacy and well-being through transformative social and political actions (Ferguson et al., 2018). Similarly, afro-emancipatory research holds great potential for Black community members to experience healing when the research process involves engagement in macro-therapeutic interventions to bring about structural change in communities, organizations, systems and policies. In addition to macro-therapeutic interventions, which involves intentional social and political actions to improve peoples' daily social conditions, an afro-emancipatory research framework should involve Black joy.

Black joy expands the focus of research projects beyond Black pain and suffering in mainstream research. While joy fundamentally connotes happiness, King (2020) outlines how Black joy widely exceeds that boundary to encompass:

...Black people's resolve in the face of oppression that grief need not be the dominant attitude or disposition. Black joy is the love, collegiality, and collectiveness that Black people have exhibited throughout history. Black joy resists the notion that Black people are unworthy and sub-human...Without Black joy, we cannot define Black humanity (p. 336).

In education, scholars have mobilized Black joy frameworks to challenge prevalent deficit narratives of Black students, and to make healing possible in consideration of

harmful environments and interactions these children and youth sometimes face in schools (Collins, 2024). In Ontario, for example, Williams (2022) has demonstrated the pedagogical benefits of Black affirming reggae music on fostering Black joy in early childhood instruction. In the United States, Tichavakunda (2021) describes the individual and collective experiences of joy of Black university students, notably as it relates to their achievement and challenges in predominantly white postsecondary institutions. In sum, an afro-emancipatory research framework embeds healing, growth and joy from research design to dissemination.

Thoughts regarding the institutional circumstances of qualitative inquiries with Black people

Although we contend that the deontological principles highlighted should underlie afro-emancipatory qualitative research in health and social sciences, we are aware of the institutional contexts that circumscribe our inquiries. For instance, not all research projects conducted with Black communities are afro-emancipatory in nature. Qualitative research can be conducted in the context of a program evaluation, an exploratory study, or a phenomenological study. Yet, even with different aims, we suggest that Black ontologies, axiology and epistemologies along with the deontological principles discussed can inform researchers' reflections and research design.

In the case of Black graduate students who intend to conduct interviews, focus groups or an ethnography with Black participants in the context of their thesis or dissertation to obtain a master's or a doctoral degree, we want to impress upon the reader that the principles outlined here should be adapted to the scale of their project, their circumstances and institutional requirements. We recognize that graduate students, postdoctoral fellows and junior faculty often face time and budgetary constraints that may impact whether and how qualitative research is conducted. For instance, an afro-emancipatory research framework involves the development of long-term relationships with Black communities, which often necessitates time and long-term funding. Establishing long-term relationships may not always be possible within the constraints of a graduate programme or a postdoctoral fellowship. Therefore, graduate students and postdoctoral fellows must realistically consider what is feasible if they choose to conduct a qualitative study given their limited time and financial resources.

Researchers can initiate an afro-emancipatory inquiry, but based on our experiences, we observe that in many instances, the undertaking of this type of research stems from an invitation from community members who seek to address an urgent social issue. Because the conditions of these invitations and their goals vary, afro-emancipatory research is context-dependent and will differ from one research project to another. Moreover, some not-for-profit community-based organizations have limited personnel and funding that result in unanticipated and unexpected requests to researchers during the course of a study. For instance, community organizations may require that researchers attend frequent in-person or virtual meetings, produce a plain-language research brief or report, deliver a public workshop, and participate or volunteer in collective events. To develop a common and clear understanding of possible outputs with community organizations, we suggest that researchers consider the feasibility of different forms of engagement given potential time, budgetary and university policy constraints.

Researchers should maintain a record of the rationale informing all the actions undertaken throughout the different phases of a research project with the community to circumscribe the outcomes of the study and deepen reflexivity at the end of the project. We do not wish to cause researchers despair when they face limited institutional resources and support, rather, we hope that the proposed afro-emancipatory framework considerations and deontological principles will empower scholars in their reflections and decision-making as they adapt them based on the context of their own qualitative inquiries.

As we write about considerations to conduct qualitative research with Black population by adopting an afro-emancipatory research framework, we are mindful of the health and well-being of scholars who work in precarious conditions and those who face a mounting workload. The institutional context in which minoritized and racialized scholars evolve professionally must be highlighted. Racialized faculty are often expected to join university equity-related initiatives while their community-engaged work is often undervalued and overlooked (Henry & Tator, 2012). Furthermore, such equity service work accomplished at the university is often minimized during tenure and promotion processes. Administrators or colleagues' pressures to join university equity-related initiatives often disregard racialized faculty individual stance and preferences, generate undue stress, and result often in increased unrecognised workload. Furthermore, when it comes to Black female faculty specifically, their ability to secure time to conduct research can be further compromised. Given the mediated stereotype of the Black 'nanny' common in the social science disciplines, faculty and students often expect that Black female faculty will engage in caretaking roles that are not expected from their colleagues (Daniel 2019; Henry, 2015). In other words, we are aware that for minoritized and racialized faculty, there are several institutional barriers that can hinder a qualitative inquiry with an afro-emancipatory research framework.

If the goal of a researcher is to conduct afro-emancipatory qualitative research with an asset-based lens and an aspirational stance that taps into Black community wealth, there are different strategies that can be mobilized to ensure that Afro-descendant community members are involved in a feasible and adapted research project without compromising a researcher's health and well-being within a specific institutional context.

Conclusion

The goal of this article is to initiate a reflection regarding afro-emancipatory qualitative research in African diasporas, especially in the Canadian context where few articles have discussed research with Black Canadian communities specifically. As the authors of this article, through reflections, we begin by first positioning ourselves in relation to this subject matter. Qualitative researchers should be aware that there are multiple Black ontologies, worldviews and conceptions of what constitutes existence and reality among Afro-descendant peoples which can impact the research process, outputs and outcomes. Black populations' axiology may result in community partners emphasizing certain values such as *Ubuntu* and a context-dependent ethics of care as an output of a qualitative inquiry.

We propose deontological principles to implement an afro-emancipatory qualitative research framework. We emphasize the importance of critical theories to highlight the agency of Afro-descendent peoples while ensuring that afro-emancipatory research is

intersectional, asset-based and aspirational. While there are cultural ties stemming from a shared ancestry and history of struggle, there are also differences that foster heterogeneity among Afro-descendant peoples. In conducting research with Black communities, researchers should recognize that Black people constitute a diverse social group. Afro-emancipatory qualitative research with Black communities foregrounds an asset-based lens and ethical aspirational stance that tap into Black community wealth and centres their agency.

We posit that afro-emancipatory research aims the liberation of Black peoples to achieve their ability to live and flourish as their whole selves. Deficit-oriented research perpetuates the idea that Black people have no good *in* or *about* them and reinforces racist stereotypes and prejudices. Thus, qualitative inquiries should clearly underline that the risk factor in Black peoples' lives is anti-Black racism, not being Black. Research involving Black populations should be *with* and *for* them and not *about* or *on* Black people with the incorporation of Black community wealth. We emphasize the meaningful participation of Black peoples in research projects as core research team members engaging on an equal footing throughout the phases of inquiry. Afro-emancipatory research involves accountability towards Black communities with various dissemination mechanisms through academic and non-academic channels, and meaningful outputs that can support community-led decision-making and action plans to address social issues. Ultimately, when all these principles are applied, afro-emancipatory research should promote healing, joy and growth within Black communities.

The principles discussed aim to foster reflections and thoughtful conversations among scholars, community-based researchers and graduate students who aspire to engage in relevant and ethical research projects with Black populations. They do not encompass all guidelines surrounding ethical qualitative inquiry with Black people or afro-emancipatory research. We simply aspire to expand the scholarship regarding anti-racist, decolonizing and anti-oppressive research by discussing afro-emancipatory qualitative research essential considerations and deontological principles. We also hope that other scholars will contribute further to discussions pertaining to ethical, theoretically informed, and methodologically innovative qualitative research to strengthen afro-emancipatory and overall qualitative research practices in social and health sciences with Black populations.

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Notes

1. The images of George Floyd's agonizing death on 25 May 2020, with a police officer's knee on his neck for over 8 min, had a tremendous impact in the United States and globally. In Canada, the deaths of Black Canadians such as D'Andre Campbell (6 April 2020) and Regis Korchinski-Paquet (27 May 2020) after an encounter with law enforcement also provoked reactions and protests.
2. Our article echoes several themes and questions found in Black Studies and the study of Black diasporas, more than concerns that pertain to African Studies and the study of the continent of Africa. However, given that African Studies and Black Studies research questions often overlap and intertwine, some principles discussed in this article will certainly speak to researchers who work with Indigenous African populations.

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Tya Collins’ research and pedagogy draw from over two decades of experience in teaching, administration, and collaboration with children, youth and families, and emphasize an interdisciplinary approach drawing from the fields of education, sociology, critical youth studies, Black studies and disability studies. She conducts research in English and French and mobilizes Black radical traditions and decolonial theories and methodologies to expose systemic barriers in student educational pathways, to challenge social, political and cultural norms, to position youth as knowledge generators, as well as to foster creative imaginings of schooling and society which centre healing, safety, joy and care.

Emmanuela Ojukwu’s research intersects through major aspects of health including: racial and gender health disparities, minority health, maternal-infant health, sexual health, social determinants of health, sexually-transmitted and blood borne infections (i.e., HIV/AIDS), health promotion for marginalized communities, among others. She is proficient in quantitative, qualitative, mixed analytical research methods, literature reviews, concept analyses and psychometric analyses having developed a measure of HIV treatment engagement (HTE), piloted for minority older women living with HIV in South Florida, USA. Ojukwu often takes a socio-ecologic approach to exploring health problems and some of her guiding frameworks include the socio-ecological model, intersectionality, Black feminist and the social determinants of health frameworks.