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# The Impact of Generational Trauma on Black Women as a Community

by

**Kelëla Ashanti Roe**

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Honors Capstone Project Director: Dr. Susan Friedman



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Kelela Roe

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Student Name (printed)

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Kelela Roe

Dr. Susan Friedman

HON 499

9 April 2024

## The Impact of Generational Trauma on the Black Female Community

### ABSTRACT

Trauma is something that is often passed down from generation to generation. This occurs when parents pass the traumas that they once faced onto their own children. The subject of generational trauma has been studied previously, but it has been largely undervalued within the community of African American women. People are aware that these individuals experience generational trauma, but fail to understand how it impacts their way of living. In light of recent events, I wanted to bring awareness to this issue that all black women face, including myself. In doing this, I hoped to explore and emphasize the importance of diversity as well as enlighten others on the experiences that African American women frequently experience. The research I conducted reveals that these individuals often avoided discussing their problems, endured dysfunctional family dynamics, suppressed sexual trauma, distrusted non-black healthcare professionals, experienced gender differences, and carried the emotional weight of their families. Those who have an understanding of these manifestations of generational trauma showed an inclination to change the homeostasis within their relationships among themselves and others. These findings contribute to the importance of understanding experiences outside of our own.

## INTRODUCTION

Diversity is an important part of the way we live. We all have our own unique experiences based on things such as our race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as a variety of other factors. Understanding diversity allows us to put ourselves in other people's shoes, view the world through their lens, and learn more about how they navigate life. Recently, SB129 (Senate Bill 129) was passed by the Alabama House and Senate, and Governor Kay Ivey signed this law into effect. This law will undoubtedly make it harder for us to understand the diversity surrounding us. SB129 promises to: "prohibit certain public entities from maintaining diversity, equity, and inclusion offices and from sponsoring diversity, equity, and inclusion programs . . . provide prohibitions on the promotion, endorsement, and affirmation of certain divisive concepts in certain public settings," and "authorize certain penalties for violation" (Alabama Senate).

One of the most important things to understand about diversity and inclusion is the subject of intersectionality. Intersectionality, as defined by feminists Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee, is the "intersection, or coming together, of multiple identities like race, ethnicity, social class, and so forth" (Shaw and Lee 5). This concept is crucial when considering social injustice, which is guaranteed to come under scrutiny with the passing of SB129 in Alabama. Shaw and Lee have observed that intersectionality also affects "the organization of power in society and can be used as a tool of social justice" (Shaw and Lee 5). As an African American woman, I have already recognized the importance of understanding intersectionality as it pertains to myself and others in different communities. I understood this because of my enrollment in the Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies course taught at UAH. The passing of SB129 will likely change how this course is being taught in the future, so I want to reflect on some of the

insights I've learned in hopes of sharing just how important diversity and inclusion are to our society.

One intersectional topic that has recently piqued my interest is generational trauma, which is interchangeable with the term transgenerational trauma. This can be defined as the “generally subconscious transmission of traumatic experiences to subsequent generations and to society” (Medica Mondiale). To further investigate this topic, we need to understand what the criteria are for something to be considered a traumatic experience. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), trauma is "an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and has adverse effects on the individual's functioning" (SAMHSA). It's well known that African Americans have historically experienced trauma inflicted by other groups, but the fact that these individuals also face trauma inflicted by their own communities is often overlooked. Today, I will be exploring how generational trauma has been manifested in the lives of African American women.

#### ORIGINS OF RESEARCHING GENERATIONAL TRAUMA

Generational trauma was first observed by behavioral health professionals in the 1960s through their study of children of Holocaust survivors who were actively receiving psychotherapy treatment (Matz et al. 185). The most striking observation made during this period of studies was that there was a higher frequency of mood disorders, anxiety disorders, and PTSD observed in these children (Yehuda and Lehrner 244). This study helped researchers start to recognize that an individual does not have to be present at a traumatic event to experience its effects, especially if previous family members were present for the event itself. In the past, other groups have been extensively studied for the impact of generational trauma on their

communities. However, there has been very little research conducted on African Americans and their experiences with it, especially among women in this community.

#### STATISTICAL DATA AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS

As of 2022, 41.57 million African American individuals live in the U.S., which is 13.6% of the entire United States population (United States Census Bureau). This is a 32% increase from the population in 2020, which was 36.2 million. Within this number, 49% of these individuals earned less than \$50,000 annually (Moslimani et al.). Only 42% have completed at most a high school education by age 25, and only 26% have a bachelor's degree by this same age (Moslimani et al.). From the years 1999 to 2020, there were 1.63 million excess deaths of African Americans in comparison to White Americans (Walker et al.). We need to now take a look at the statistics regarding African American women, specifically starting with their health. Forty-six percent of these individuals experience hypertension, which is the medical term for high blood pressure (Guerra). This is a higher percentage than for both white and Hispanic women. Another concerning statistic is that African American women make up 65% of AIDS diagnoses (Guerra). Lastly, these individuals are four times more likely to die as a result of pregnancy than any other race (Guerra). Clearly, African American women are at a disadvantage both economically and medically.

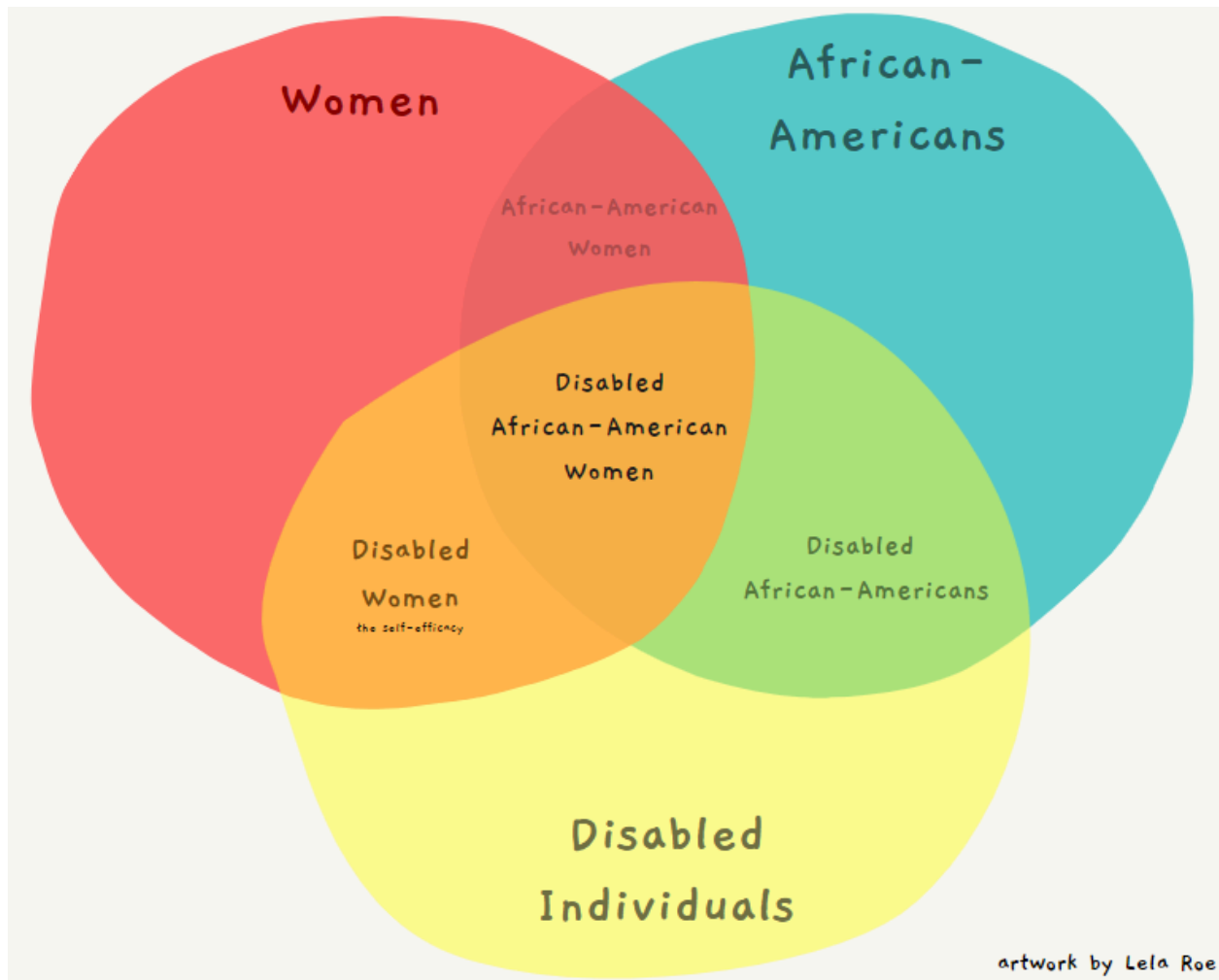
Another subject that needs to be looked at is education. Since I am a Biology major, with a minor in Chemistry, one major statistic that stood out to me was that only 2% of African American women are represented in STEM (science, math, engineering, and technology) fields (Guerra). As an African American STEM student this statistic has always been obvious to me, especially upon observation of my peers. African American women also only make up 24% of the STEM workforce (Guerra). I currently work in a pharmacy, and for the longest time I was

one of the only African American technicians present in my work environment, and that just now changed within the past year. There is clear evidence of inequalities and disproportionality that exist among the African American community, especially among its women, and it raises some questions regarding the contribution of generational trauma to these statistics.

#### INTERSECTIONALITY OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN RACE AND GENDER IDENTITY

Analysis of the impact of generational trauma on African American women requires an intersectional approach. This means using a multidimensional thought process as opposed to thinking about merely one aspect of a person's identity. One can approach the concept of intersectionality through the image of a Venn diagram. Each circle in the Venn diagram represents a different group. Most people are concerned with the overlaps of the Venn diagram. However, by focusing too much on these overlaps, we ignore the experiences of each group within their respective circle. **Figure 1** below shows how narrow-minded we can be when we focus on just the individuals at the center, which in this case are African American women with a disability.





**Figure 1.** Venn Diagram showing the intersectionality of African American women with a disability.

There are a few critical points to remember when taking an intersectional approach. Marginality is the concept of individuals existing outside of the accepted societal normality, and this results in their exclusion from society. However, marginality must be redefined as a “potential source of strength” rather than a weakness (May 70). Another thing we must do is shift our mindset towards a more complex understanding of marginality. According to feminist scholar Chela Sandoval, doing this “denies any *one* perspective as the only answer, but instead posits a shifting tactical and strategic subjectivity that has the capacity to be recentered,

depending on the forms of oppression to be confronted” (May 67). It’s also important to avoid using similarity as a basis for solidarity. As feminist poet Audre Lorde once said, “You do not have to be me in order for us to fight alongside each other” (May 71). Finally, we must address the coexistence of privilege and oppression. For example, an African American man can be misogynistic and contribute to the marginalization of members of the Black community, even though he is within that group himself. An intersectional analysis of his marginalized African American identity and his privileged male identity reveals that a person who is also part of an oppressed group can have an “arrogant perception” of their fellow members due, to some extent, to the privilege they possess (May 71).

#### MANIFESTATIONS OF GENERATIONAL TRAUMA IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN

*Together, But Separate.* A huge part of collectivistic culture is “prioritizing the needs of the group over the needs of individual group members and relying heavily on the interconnectedness of individuals to function efficiently as a whole” (Petion et al. 75). This is accompanied by the urge to isolate oneself from family members, which results in a lack of “emotional/relational closeness” (Petion et al. 75). I’ve noticed this behavior in both myself and my grandmother, as well. We often felt the need to deal with things on our own rather than discuss our problems with the rest of our family. In Petition et al.’s study, conducted in 2022, participants Monique and Tamara remarked that conversations with their families were mainly about “surface-level things” like “how’s work going?” and “how’s school going?” (Petion et al. 75). Further, participant Deonna noticed a “pattern of intimate partner violence against women in her family, including her mother, grandmother, great aunt, and herself” (Petion et al. 75). Something that I’ve noticed so far within this study is that younger generations, mainly Gen Z’ers (ages 12 to 27), are

becoming far more aware of these unhealthy patterns, unlike their older Baby Boomers (ages 60 to 78) and Gen X (ages 44 to 59) counterparts.

African Americans are often isolated from other members of their community outside of their families. Colorism is another issue that needs to be addressed, and this occurs when members of a racial group discriminate amongst themselves based on differences in skin color. The research conducted by Moore et. al. reveals that there is “little evidence for light-skin disadvantage” in society and that dark-skinned individuals are vulnerable to socioeconomic, health, and psychosocial traumas (Moore et al. 1002). This phenomenon likely occurs as a result of ancestral trauma from slavery. Historically, white Americans were more accepting of light-skinned African Americans than their dark-skinned counterparts. Naturally, this led to both groups discriminating against dark-skinned individuals because they were not “white enough.” Conversely, light-skinned individuals had to face discrimination from both dark-skinned individuals as well as white individuals due to them being simultaneously too white and not black enough. This resulted in health and psychosocial trauma through “having a mental health diagnosis and experiencing racism as a child” (Moore et al. 1008). These white oppressors taught African Americans to discriminate against themselves based on skin color.

*Avoidance.* At a young age, I was taught by my parents that “what happens in this house stays in this house” and to “stay out of grown folks' business.” Participant Deonna from Petion et. al.'s study had a similar experience to mine, saying that she was “taught at a young age that you're not supposed to say anything, and we don't talk about it” (Petion et al. 75). Avoidance is all about a lack of healthy communication within a household, which includes things like repressing traumatic events and only talking about surface-level topics (Petion et al. 75). Older family members also have a higher tendency to avoid seeking professional counseling than younger

ones. Participant Aaliyah from the same study reported that she never heard her “parents talking about counseling or going to see someone or a therapist or anything like that” (Petion et al. 75).

Avoidance is something that is taught across the span of many generations. In Leslie et.al.’s study, it was revealed that “higher levels of caregiver ACE (adverse childhood experience) exposure are associated with their child’s PTSD symptoms” (877). The more trauma a parent experiences during their childhood, the more likely they are to inflict these same traumas onto their children. For example, one of my African American friends explained that her father was never present during her childhood years. She said that during his childhood, his father wasn’t present either. His failure to recognize and face his trauma resulted in him inadvertently giving his daughter the same trauma that he disliked experiencing in his childhood. Now that my friend recognizes this ACE that was passed down to her, she can begin to address it so that she may prevent this from being inflicted on her children in the future.

*Dysfunctional Functionality.* African American families tend to try to make their household dynamic seem perfect to outside viewers, almost as if they’re wrapping it in an ornate gift box. Once we unwrap this gift, it’s clear to see that there is dysfunction present within these households. Interactions with family members are often “tense, negative, and discouraging,” resulting in “distant and/or broken relationships” (Petion et al. 75). The participants in Petion et al.’s study reported that they felt like they were trying to merely survive in their households. They dealt with things like massive “falling outs” with days of no communication, “family members pitting the others against one another,” and “physical and verbal conflict” (Petion et al. 76). When I was growing up, my grandmother and my mother (who both worked together to raise me) frequently had these “falling outs” with one another. My father often referred to me as the “glue” between them, implying that it was my responsibility to bridge the gap between my

mother and her mother. This manifested into unhealthy habits in my adulthood, as I often felt that it was my sole responsibility to solve every problem. Participant Wendy from the same study reported having a similar experience, and “developed coping mechanisms in the form of ‘burying feelings’ instead of addressing issues in a more constructive way” due to a disconnected family dynamic becoming normalized for her (Petion et al. 76).

One major issue that often goes unnoticed in African American families is the suppression of sexual trauma, specifically among young girls. Singh et. al’s study revealed that individuals felt that “they could not disclose their abuse to others for fear of ‘getting someone in the family in trouble’” (Singh et. al. 1105). Women being sexually abused in these families is unfortunately more common than one might imagine. Quite a few of my family members have experienced sexual trauma, and each reported this abuse being inflicted by another family member. Women in Singh et. al’s study also reported not wanting to report their abuse by a family member because they feared that they would be contributing to the oppression of black men (1106), who already struggle to fight against the current system built by their white suppressors.

*Differences Between Gender.* This is where intersectionality comes into play. The experiences of African American women are different from African American men, and Petion et al.’s study unmasked “similar themes regarding GT in families” (2022). The women of these households are heavily relied on for everything by the other family members. Participant Janiyah from this study stated “we’re supposed to take care of everything and be strong and just keep it pushing”; similarly, Shanice shared that her mom “is like the glue of the family. Everything falls on her” (Petion et al. 76). Additionally, Tamara shared that her mom is “basically the central

communicator because me and my dad aren't that close, me and my brother aren't that close, my brother and my dad aren't that close, but we're all close to my mom" (Petion et al. 76).

In addition to all the household tasks that are pushed upon these moms, such as taking care of their children, cleaning, cooking, and grocery shopping, they also must bear the task of carrying everyone's emotional weight. In Women's and Gender Studies discourse, the term for this additional unpaid labor is "care work." The fathers of these households, if present, often leave maintaining relationships and carrying emotional burdens for the mother to deal with. According to Fast et al. caregivers are significantly more likely to be women than men and women spend significantly more time on care per week than men. Thus, "women contribute a higher proportion of hours of care work in the family unit" (243). This behavior is then unintentionally passed on to their daughters. I've noticed that both my mother, as well as her mother, have carried the weight of our family on their shoulders. In addition to the "unfortunately prevalent gendered racism, misogyny and misogynoir, and gender-based violence that many African American women are subjected to," they also help keep our households glued together, despite the toll it takes on them (Petion et al. 76). My mother and my grandmother both fit the role of peacemaker perfectly, and I often feel immense pressure to do just the same.

*Desire To Change Homeostasis.* Homeostasis is described by scientists as "what happens in relationships when they are maintained through behavioral patterns, for better or for worse" (Petion et al. 76). The current generation of daughters in African American families have often felt the urge to change the family's homeostasis to undo the damage that GT has done. The participants reported that they want to normalize talking about their emotions and mental health, and want to overcome their trauma (Petion et al., 76). Participant Janiyah shared the following: "I already know I want something different between me and my kids, I want them to talk to me

about how they feel” (Petion et al. 76). Some of the participants who have children themselves have already adopted healthier parenting styles. Deonna shared how she has developed healthier communication with her daughter: “I’ve been trying to communicate with my daughter instead of just trying to shut her up or hit her because I noticed that I don’t communicate with my mother to this day because I don’t know how” (Petion et al., 76). Unfortunately, oftentimes African American parents decide to communicate with their children after they have already physically abused or verbally berated them. At that point, communication does nothing because the child is likely to be unresponsive, and they instead learn to repress their emotions in the future. Although these new mothers are trying to break the patterns of GT in their families, there’s an apparent gap in “the self-efficacy and/or relational skills necessary to facilitate that type of family healing” (Petion et al. 77).

## CONCLUSION

Diversity is crucial to understanding the experiences of others, such as how generational trauma has had a huge impact on the way African American women navigate their lives. By taking an intersectional approach, we can better understand how this trauma plays a role in their racial and gender identities. Generational trauma within these individuals manifests as avoidance of their problems, dysfunctional family dynamics, the suppression of sexual trauma, distrust in healthcare, gender differences, carrying the emotional weight of their families, as well as a variety of other effects. Recognition of these manifestations often results in a desire to change homeostasis within their relationships among themselves and others. The passing of Bill SB129 will undoubtedly prevent older and newer generations from understanding these experiences that are well outside of their own, which is why standing up for diversity is now more important than ever before.

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