

# Annual Congress on Mental Health

July 09-11, 2018 | Paris, France

## Making visible the invisible cultural scripts that inform the relational dynamics of African American women



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As a result of African American women's multiple jeopardy status, they endure a constant barrage of OD microaggression (Sue 2010). Many microaggressions contain damaging cultural norms and stereotypes that are internalized and in some cases actualized by these minority groups. These stereotypes are referred to as controlling images that examine the intersection of race, gender and class. Some of these stereotypes include welfare queen, de-sexualized mammy, the emasculating sapphire, the oversexed jezebel, and the de-humanized strong black women. Society's perpetuation of these stereotypes and the internalization of these stereotypes inform the relational dynamics of African American women. These women have devised coping strategies to endure the onslaught of these controlling images as well as the marginalization they experience. These coping strategies also inform their relational dynamics. Relational cultural theory provides a framework that examines the ways African American women learn to disengage from their own internal psychological experience. RCT not only identifies the sources and functions of such controlling images that may lead to disconnection with others and with self, but also the ways they shape an individual's experience. The study investigates African American women's perceived relational experiences and coping strategies that influence connection and disconnection in the development and maintenance of intimate, authentic, and mutually supportive relationships. The study implemented a phenomenological approach via the use of focus group discussion to capture the ways they collectively constructed meaning of their

experiences with one another. Twenty African American women were selected to participate in the study. The themes that emerged from these discussions were utilized to identify African American women's relational experiences and to construct and propose culturally sensitive and relevant therapeutic interventions to be implemented when counselling these women.

### **Biography**

Toy Lisa Mitchell is a practicing Licensed Mental Health Counsellor with a Mental Health Service Provider designation. She began her college career at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Ky. Upon graduating from WKU with a BA in Mass Communications and a minor in Business Administration she enrolled in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., to pursue religious studies as preparation for the call into ministry. During her academic studies at SBTS, she was licensed as a Minister. She was ordained as a Minister at the First Gethsemane Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky. Upon obtaining her Master of Divinity degree, she enrolled in the Doctoral program at the University of Kentucky, Lexington, Ky., where she obtained a PhD in Mass Communications. She also attended Vanderbilt University, Peabody School, where she obtained a Master of Education in Clinical Mental Health Counselling.

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