The Multidimensional Model of Black Identity and Nigrescence Theory: A Philosophical Comparison

by

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Abstract

This paper addresses the philosophical underpinnings of two prominent racial identity models in research, Nigrescence Theory and the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity, and suggests that by including the historical and cultural contexts in which each emerged, one can begin to understand the philosophical positionality of each model in relation to larger trends in African American identity research. Hence, this information provides direction to new researchers aiming to better understand the phenomenon of African American identity development, and purports that several necessary steps will help researchers align their inquiries with models that are best positioned to accommodate their basic assumptions about the nature of knowledge and being as it pertains to African American identity. Furthermore, the researcher in this context must take time to understand the nuanced and politically charged history of African American identity, and also understand positionality to best align with a model for research inquiry referencing African American identity.

Keywords: African American, identity, race, philosophy, theory

African American identity models and theories have shaped a politically charged national dialogue about what it means to be Black in the United States. Our understanding of race, ethnicity and identity has evolved significantly since the early writings of Booker T. Washington in the 19th century. Since that time, researchers have made several distinctions between race and ethnicity, mainstream and underground social psychologies of prejudice, and types of racial identity models.

The prolific body of research about African American identity provides nuanced philosophical considerations embedded in a larger national discourse that has maintained for over a century. Though this attention has produced a variety of theories and models, each trying to capture the essence of the African American experience, a researcher can feel lost and overwhelmed when emerging into this field for the first time. The purpose of this paper is to propose a method to clarify one's understanding of African American identity models. First, a discussion on epistemology, ontology and theory allows the reader to define her or his own positionality and research question in regard to racial identity. Next, a description of the philosophical underpinnings of two racial identity models, Cross' Nigrescence theory and Sellers' Multidimensional Model of Racial identity (MMRI), gives the reader a starting point in aligning her or his own philosophy with that of a model that best helps accomplish the research goals. Sellers' Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity and Cross' Nigrescence theory offer perspectives in both underground and mainstream schools of thought, which will be discussed in detail, as well as both multidimensional and stage models of African-American identity. These models are just two of many with which a researcher may best align her or his own positionality. However, the diversity found in these two examples in terms of philosophy and school of thought will guide the reader towards a better organized direction in which to continue her or his work in the often confounding realm of African-American identity development.

The first point of clarity in this discussion is the pervasive conflation of some relevant terms. Though the terms race and ethnicity, Black and African-American can have different connotations based on the socio-cultural and political contexts in which they are used, many studies use them interchangeably (Johnston-Guerrero, 2016). According to Cornell & Hartman, race refers to the physical characteristics that distinguish a group of people in larger social systems while ethnicity refers more to cultural practices and beliefs that unite a group of people, of which race can play a significant role or not (2007). Though culture is mentioned here in the review of the history of racial identity development, this paper discusses race as a social construct that identifies African-Americans.

Several perspectives inform this continuing narrative about race. One example dichotomizes social psychology research of prejudice as belonging to either the category of mainstream or underground schools of thought (Gaines & Reed, 1994). This distinction first emerged with the publications of G.W. Allport in the 1950's. This social psychologist wrote about socially constructed racial groups, just as W.E.B. DuBois had done fifty years earlier. However, Allport was unfamiliar with the work of DuBois and failed to credit DuBois in any of his published work. This exclusionary trend marks what Gaines and Reed call *mainstream* social psychology of prejudice. Though not the only distinction, research that cites Allport as the first contributor to this field falls into this mainstream school while those works citing DuBois instead comprise the underground school of thought. In fact, Gaines and Reed note that the 3rd edition of the *Handbook of Social Psychology* published in 1985 removed an original chapter on Black identity that cited DuBois, solidifying this distinction.

Another feature distinct to mainstream social psychologies is a deficit approach when investigating African-American group membership, focusing only on negative outcomes. In contrast, underground research acknowledges these negative aspects while highlighting the strengths associated with African-American group membership – such as strong community support systems and an oral tradition of passing on history. Further, mainstream research does not include any Afrocentric principles such as "a sociocultural emphasis on collectivism rather than individualism, cooperation rather than competition" (Gaines & Reed, 1994, p. 13). Mainstream research also wholly ignores the role of culture when investigating racial phenomena in society. It moves away from researching prejudice as a unique, cultural and racial phenomenon and focuses, instead, on attribution errors in human cognition. This move lumps issues of race in the United States together with other global issues of prejudice such as the holocaust and the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda, ignoring the associated political and cultural contexts. In contrast, what Gaines and Reed (1994) refer to as the underground social psychology of prejudice begins with DuBois' publication, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Subsequent research in this school acknowledges that the psychological trauma experienced by African-Americans not only exists but also influences their identities. However, this research focuses on the strength of the people to overcome these obstacles and achieve in the face of adversity. This body of work has been adopted in the larger, multidisciplinary field of Black Psychology. One example cited by Gaines and Reed (1994) was conducted by Langer, Bashner and Chanowitz (1985). Though this study refers to prejudice as it pertains to individuals with disabilities, the paper gives race as an example through which the principles of what they call *mindfulness* can be applied. Langer et al argue that instead of avoiding characteristics that distinguish a particular group (i.e., race or physical disability), we should practice *mindfulness*. Through mindfulness, individuals and society focus on distinguishing characteristics instead of overlooking them, thereby challenging automated and discriminatory thought processes. In this manner, they train their minds to acknowledge race and better understand it as a meaningful aspect of a group's identity. This view of race as a multifaceted, complex social phenomenon that has value is an example of what distinguishes underground from mainstream psychology.

Beyond mainstream and underground categories lies a deeper philosophy informing the way a research question conceptualizes a construct like racial identity. Epistemology, ontology and theoretical perspective make up a significant portion of this philosophy. As a whole, these layers offer a structured approach to understanding what an inquiry assumes about the basis of reality, where and how this reality is formed and how it shapes the approach to the subject of interest (Crotty, 1998). Epistemology is a conglomerate of the basic assumptions about what constitutes knowledge—how knowledge is created, constructed, and exchanged. Alongside epistemology lies ontology, the science of being that focuses on a subject and her or his interpretation of how epistemological assumptions manifest. Finally, theory describes the philosophical lens through which one examines a phenomenon (Crotty, 1998). Figure 1 represents the relationship between epistemology, ontology, theoretical perspective and philosophy. The following section unpacks these layers of philosophy to serve as the foreground on which to conceptualize the positionalities of both Cross' Nigrescence theory and Sellers' MMRI.

Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned mainly with knowledge – its limits, range, and potential. It also concerns itself with ensuring that the limits of knowledge suffice in addressing a particular inquiry (Crotty, 1998; Hamlyn, 1995; Maynard, 1994). Crotty delineates four main epistemologies including positivism, objectivism, subjectivism and constructionism. Positivism and objectivism share a basic assumption that there is only one truth in inquiry and the scientific method allows researchers to pinpoint this truth. Subjectivism and constructionism, in contrast, operate under the assumption that there can exist as many truths as there are individual perspectives (1998). A nebulous construct as racial identity evades a universally accepted operational definition. Cornell & Hartmann (2007) cite several studies in which researchers have "dismissed the idea of race as a meaningful biological category that can be applied to separate groups of human beings" (p. 24) including King (1981) and Gould (1994) among others. Even so, rational human beings continue to operate under the influence of race as though it truly exists. In this manner, race becomes a socially constructed concept. One definition says that "race is a group of human beings socially defined on the basis of physical characteristics" (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007; p. 25). However, these physical characteristics are not only chosen by people but change over time and space and are often contended. Further, one's positionality informs her or his definition of race, further exemplifying that more than one definition exists. For example, LatinX often appears in a list of options for race, though many shades of skin and hair textures comprise this ethnic group (Johnson-Guerrero, 2016). Examining such a nebulous construct as race with many definitions – or truths – guides a budding researcher in this field towards epistemologies which accommodate for such contradictions. As mentioned earlier, subjectivism and constructionism both conceptualize a knowledge making process that can have more than one understanding or definition of a construct based on one's perspective. The difference between the two centers around the source of knowledge, whether it comes from local knowledge emerging from social interaction – constructionism – or comes from the notions and assumptions imposed by the researcher – subjectivism (Brancho, 2009).

Specifically, subjectivism distinguishes itself from other epistemologies in that it creates knowledge outside of the lived experiences or realities of the subjects of its inquiry This process does not intentionally involve the subject or social interaction in creating this knowledge. In essence, knowledge is imposed by the researcher about the constructs, subjects of inquiry and contexts in which these objects are situated (Crotty, 1998). Constructionists, on the other hand, do *not* impose knowledge. Instead, they use the existing societal knowledge occurring through social interaction as the tools to construct, not *create*, new knowledge through research inquiry. Further, there exists an intentionality between subject and object, an interdependence by which meaning is also constructed (Crotty, 1998).

Ontology

Epistemology concerns itself with the nature of knowledge while ontology comprises the science of being or reality as it is understood by the human consciousness. Researchers, however, often conflate ontology with epistemology (Crotty, 1998; Brancho, 2009). Two ontological perspectives described by Crotty are realism and constructivism – not to be confused with the epistemology of constructionism. Realism asserts that "meaning exists in objects independently of any consciousness [and] is often taken to imply objectivism" (p. 10). Given that race does not exist outside of the society that constructs it, it cannot exist without a human consciousness. Without people to choose the physical characteristics that define a biologically devoid concept of race, this concept would not exist. In contrast, Crotty explains that constructivism operates under the assumption that only the mind can manifest meaning (1998). Without a mind or consciousness to contemplate the physical world, that world would be devoid of meaning. That is not to say that a world without a conscious mind to conceive it is inconceivable—it would just be devoid of meaning. Branco defines constructivism as the "taking into account the range of possibilities of human cognition" (2009, p. 352). Therefore, constructivism may or may not exist as an ontological perspective in research inquiry. This existence depends on the degree to which the research inquiry focuses on the perspective of the individual. Ontology simply designates the focus of the research on the individual's understanding of the phenomenon of study. In this manner, budding researchers studying race and focusing solely on the subject's understanding of this construct can align themselves with a constructivist ontology. However, if their research questions do not consider the individual's understanding of race, the research would not propose to utilize any ontology. However, one thing certain is that racial identity research cannot align itself with the ontology of realism for one main reason – without a conscious mind to give it meaning, race would not exist.

Theoretical Orientation

A third component of philosophy is theoretical orientation. In essence, a theoretical orientation describes a lens through which to view not just a phenomenon but also the larger socio-political context in which it sits. Though all research is informed by a theoretical perspective, a researcher's awareness of her or his theoretical perspective provides a framework with which to investigate research questions more cohesively within a study and within the larger body of research around the phenomenon of interest (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007). Countless theoretical perspectives exist in research. However, one group encompasses research questions that address inherent inequalities in society from various approaches. Examples include feminism, postmodernism, critical race theory (CRT) and critical theory. The following sections make the argument that both the MMRI and Nigrescence theory subscribe wholly to both CRT and critical theory.

Bogdan and Biklin (2007) write that Critical Race Theory contains two basic tenants. The first is an acknowledgment that racism does not occur in isolated incidents. Instead, it weaves itself into the fabric of society as a normal part of social interaction. The second emphasizes the need for counter narratives from African American voices that challenge the racist narratives written by members of the majority about members of the African American racial group. Both the MMRI and Nigrescence theory emerged as responses to the pervasive racism inherent in society. They investigate racial identity in an effort to better understand how members of the African American racial group experience and respond to the consequential mental and physical trauma. By providing a theoretical framework, both models act as tools by which counter narratives are constructed to help normalize authentic experiences written by members of the Black racial group (Cross, 1991; Sellers, 1998).

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) present critical theory as a framework that addresses the systematic privilege in society that favors specific groups over others. Critical theorists operate under the assumption that research cannot divorce itself from ethics and always acts politically to favor one group over another. Because power differentials often exist around race, this often becomes the topic of interest for critical theorists. The ethical implications inherent in this lens lends itself to research aiming to investigate a phenomenon in favor of disenfranchised groups— which is just what the MMRI and Nigrescence models accomplish. In fact, both mainstream and underground racial identity research acknowledge the pervasive and deleterious influence of racism on society and each serve as a means by which to alleviate the stress felt by members of the Black racial group. They only differ in regards to their focus on either the inevitable trauma felt by this marginalized population or the ways in which members of this group construct mechanisms by which to process and overcome this trauma in a way that leads to a healthy sense of self (Sellers, 1998).

Cross' Niegrescence Theory

Cross' Nigrescence Theory first emerged in 1971 as a theory delineating five stages of African American identity development.

- The Pre-Encounter stage marks a time when an African American individual views the world through Euro-centric values. Outwardly, the individual shows signs of assimilating into White culture through hairstyles and dress. For individuals in this stage, there is no group cohesiveness with other members of the Black racial group.

- The encounter stage of the model more aptly describes "a verbal or visual event" (Cross, 1971, p.17) than a stage or experience. This event then challenges all the previously held Euro-centric values resulting in an emotion fueled response of guilt and anger as well as "a search for Black identity" (18).

- The immersion-emersion stage of this theory begins with a period of activism where the individual seeks out outward expressions of her or his African heritage through attendance of cultural events and perhaps even changing one's clothes, hair and diet. This stage ends with a move away from this dichotomous thinking about being African American and the start of a deeper evaluation and incorporation of sustainable African American values.

- The internalization stage can unfold in one of three ways depending on whether the previous stage was frustrating or positive. If the previous stage was negative, an individual will either become a hopeless misanthrope or become fixated on the previous stage marked by a hatred towards all White people. The third option, internalization, describes a time of inner peace and confidence in regard to racial identity. Though the individual may still maintain some outwardly expression of African heritage, the negative emotions do not accompany this expression.

- The Commitment stage is marked with the same inner peace as the internalized individual. The difference is marked by planned action to dismantle systems of oppression in society.

As mentioned earlier, epistemology speaks directly to the sources of knowledge in research, whether knowledge comes from local knowledge or ideas imposed by the researcher – the former describing constructionism and the latter subjectivism. Cross' original theory does not define African American identity and shows no intentionality in constructing a definition through interaction between subject and object. Instead, the theory described the effects of racism on individuals of this marginalized group from Cross' own experiences and observations. Though the stages of development describe the *effects* of interacting with an inherently racist system, the interactions do not play a role in the construction of knowledge within this theoretical framework. Instead, Cross imposes knowledge that he creates himself. These tenants describe a subjectivist epistemology where "'subjectivism' no more refers to the realms of subjectivity" (Branco, 2009; p 352). Subjectivists do not construct knowledge using existing realities in the lived experiences of subjects. Instead, they create knowledge using notions rooted outside of the shared reality of the subjects of inquiry. As Branco describes it, "the subject (or individual)…completely disappears within the network of social interactions and relationships which [researchers] consider as the only object worthy of analysis" (p. 351).

As previously described, ontology describes a philosophical perspective marked by the focus on the subject's understanding, or lack thereof. Cross in his original theory does not focus on the subject's understanding of these racial identity stages. In fact, Cross does not mention that the subject would even be aware of her or his own progression through the described identity stages.

Instead, he takes an outside perspective looking in at the phenomenon of African American identity development and describes the behavior of the subject, not her or his understanding. In turn, it can be concluded that this theory does not subscribe to an ontological orientation.

In 1991, Cross revised his original theory. The empirical research utilizing the original theory showed that individuals can have pro-White sentiments that do not automatically equate to anti-Black sentiments. As a result, two pre-encounter identities were identified as assimilationist and anti-Black. There also exists an important theoretical shift in this revision away from labeling a particular internalized identity as healthier over another. Further, the three immersion identities now included Black nationalist (having one salient Black identity), biculturalism (having two salient identities), and multiculturalism (having more than two salient identities). The changes that ensued in this theory occurred because a scale was developed to measure these stages.

Cross again revised his theory at the turn of the century (Vandiver, 2001). Though the original stages remained in the same sequence (pre-encounter, encounter, emersion/immersion, internalization and commitment), the revision collapsed the last two stages into one. Changes were also made to the pre-encounter and internalization stages including a measure of racial salience and valance and re-conceptualizing Black nationalism as a positive expression of the internalization stage. The revision then separated the pro Black and anti White Immersion identities as well as stratified the internalized stage into three identities: nationalist, biculturalist and multiculturalist.

According to Worrell, Cross & Vandiver (2001), the original scale of the Nigrescence model, the Black Racial Identity Attitude Scale (CRIS), experienced low reliability – partly spurring the theory's continued revisions. These authors call for a constant revision process of the theory and scale, though evidence of validity and reliability exist in the current version of the CRIS. For example, a multicultural internalized identity did not produce a subscale and was, therefore, removed from the theory. Also, inter-item correlations yielded low internal consistency for pre-encounter identities. Worrell et al then identified the self-hatred and miseducation clusters as a result and adjusted the theory accordingly.

The data collection, validity evaluations and subsequent scale/theory adjustments mark a significant shift in the philosophical underpinnings of Nigrescence theory. The statistical process of operationalizing these identities acted reciprocally as operationalizing the identities also helped shape the new model. This interaction with the subject demonstrates this theory's "ability to engage in reflexivity" (Branco, 2009, p. 354), a characteristic that distinguishes a subjectivist epistemology from that of a constructionist. The subject, through the results of continued inquiry, now has a voice in the construction of knowledge within this theoretical framework, another wholly constructionist distinction.

Members of the African American racial group, then, have a means of writing a critical counter narrative about what it means to be African American in the United States, marking a theoretical lens – critical race theory and critical theory – through which Cross views the phenomenon of African American identity.

Sellers' Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity

The MMRI is a racial identity model that differs from Nigrescence theory in that it does not conceptualize racial identity development as a linear progression of stages. Instead, the MMRI measures the state of one's African-American identity in a particular moment. This model identifies with both the underground and mainstream schools of thought. As in much of mainstream work on racial identity, the MMRI offers a single definition of African American racial identity. However, it is the content of this definition that then incorporates cultural elements associated with underground research. This model defines racial identity as "the significance and qualitative meaning that individuals attribute to their membership within the Black racial group within their self-concepts" (Nguyen, Scottham & Sellers, 1998). The content of the definition speaks to the meaning attributed by individuals belonging to a Black racial group, accommodating the socio-political history of race in this theory's understanding of identity.

This model follows four basic assumptions that comprise its framework when investigating racial identity.

- Racial identity has both trait and state properties, emphasizing the dynamism of race within and outside of the individual.

- Race exists within a larger context of identities for an individual, which all fall in hierarchical order according to the qualitative definitions the individual ascribes to each of these identities.

- An individual's self-report vis a vis the meaning and importance of her or his association with the Black racial group carries the most significance in identifying, evaluating and correlating racial identity to measurable outcomes. Further, one racial identity subscription holds no lower or higher value or healthy/detrimental distinction.

- Though the meaning and importance of race shifts throughout an individual's life, the MMRI measures her or his status in a single moment and does not subscribe to a linear progression of stage racial development.

These assumptions act as the canvas on which Sellers et al impose the four dimensions of the theory. The first dimension, salience, attends to situational contexts and answers the question, "How important is race to me in this moment?" It can depend on the individual and change across space and time. Racial salience follows tenants of Markus and Nurius' theory of possible selves. This theory describes the difference between a working self and a core self. The conceptions of identity within the working self are presently active in thought and memory *and* determined by two forces: the core self and the immediate environment (1986). Analogously, then, racial salience represents the working self, influenced both by context and the core self.

In this same analogy above, the second dimension of centrality represents what Markus and Nurius identify as the core self. Centrality describes the place race holds in the hierarchy of identities an individual possesses and answers the question, "How important is race to me in my life?" This dimension – the most frequently cited in underground racial identity research – remains stable through different situations and contexts.

Next, Sellers et al identify the dimension of regard and assign it two sub-constructs – private and public. Private regard describes an individual's feelings towards the racial group to which she or he ascribes. Public regard explains her or his perceptions about others' feelings towards this same group. The measurement of this dimension utilizes a spectrum type framework that extends from negative to positive. Public regard in particular has been adopted into both mainstream and underground racial identity research. Mainstream thought emphasizes the negative regard society has on the development of African American identity and the ensuing deleterious consequences. Underground thought acknowledges racism in the same manner, yet focuses on the Black cultural characteristics that mediate this influence – resulting in a healthier self-concept for members of this racial group.

Finally, the MMRI dimension of ideology identifies four characterizations – each describing a way that an individual thinks and believes members of her or his racial group should behave.

- The *nationalist* takes a political and economic stance that emphasizes the necessity of the independence of the African American racial group as a whole. She or he posits that membership in this group entails a unique experience not shared by members of other racial groups. Sellers et al (1998) offer the example of individuals who believe that African Americans should purchase goods and services from Black-owned businesses as much as possible.

- The *oppressed minority* takes a cultural and social stand, emphasizing the need for collaboration with other minority groups based on similar experiences in order to overcome societal oppression.

- The *assimilationist* focuses on intergroup relationships, emphasizing the importance of assimilating into larger society in order to affect change from inside the system. This individual focuses on the similarities between African American group membership and larger group memberships shared by all people in the United States – like American.

- The *humanist* adopts a color-blind approach to humanity, accepting the scientific definition of race – as in the human race – instead of subscribing to ideas of race as defined in the humanities. This individual sees oppression as a human phenomenon and focuses on issues that affect all people, like the environment.

These assumptions and dimensions supply researchers with the philosophical alignment of the MMRI with which to investigate whether a research question fits into this framework. Particularly, the third assumption of this theory speaks directly to the philosophy of this model:

- An individual's self-report vis a vis the meaning and importance of her or his association with the African American racial group carries the most significance in identifying, evaluating and correlating racial identity to measurable outcomes. Further, one racial identity subscription holds no lower or higher value or healthy/detrimental distinction.

Sellers et al (1998) first overtly mention the philosophical underpinnings in the MMRI when they acknowledge that "there is no singular definition of African American culture" (p. 297), an epistemological characteristic of both constructionists and subjectivists. They further clarify which of these two epistemologies this theory subscribes to when they purport that this theory's "emphasis is clearly on the individual's construction of his or her identity [taking] a phenomenological approach toward studying racial identity" (p. 23). Crotty writes that "constructionism and phenomenology are so intertwined that one could hardly be phenomenological while espousing either an objectivist or a subjectivist epistemology" (1998, p. 13). It is this acknowledgement of multiple truths and intentionality towards the individual's understanding of race through social interaction, as opposed to imposing a definition created outside of this context, that aligns this model's epistemology squarely within the realm of constructionism.

Next, an investigation of ontology considers the degree to which the MMRI focuses on the perspective of the individual in regards to racial identity. Again, constructivism is the ontological philosophy that ascribes to qualitative research in that it allows for many truths in the understanding of a construct. It exists when research investigates a phenomenon through the lens of the individual experiencing it.

The MMRI subscribes to this ontological perspective because the third assumption of the model explicitly acknowledges a focus on the subject's construction of the phenomenon of interest, African American identity. Further, its unique definition of racial identity defines the meaning people ascribe to the membership in this racial group, as opposed to creating a definition outside of the lived experiences of the research subjects.

Conclusion

As a budding researcher in the realm of African American identity research, one can now align herself or himself to a philosophical stance by asking very pointed questions about the research inquiry itself. First, to determine which school of research one's research subscribes to, one should ask the questions:

- Does this inquiry focus on the negative impact of racism on members of the African American racial group (mainstream)?

- Does this inquiry focus on mechanisms constructed within this racial group to overcome the associated challenges of racism (underground)?

From there an epistemological stance can be identified by asking the questions:

- Does this inquiry impose definitions of race and African American identity on to the subject (subjectivism)?

- Does this inquiry aim to construct meaning about race and Black identity with the subject through some type of interaction (constructionism)?

Since ontology refers to the focus on a particular medium through which to investigate epistemology, it may or may not exist in a particular research study. Therefore, one can ask the following question to determine whether or not her research question contains an ontology.

- Does this inquiry focus on the subject's understanding of the phenomenon in question?

Next, in order to identify whether one's research views the phenomenon in question from a critical race theoretical lens, the following questions should be asked:

- Does this inquiry offer a method whereby narratives will emerge that are written by members of the African American racial group?

- Does this inquiry operate under the assumption that racism exists as a normal part of society?

Finally, the following questions will help identify whether a research inquiry also adopts a critical theoretical lens:

- Does this inquiry work to disrupt systems of oppression in favor of a disenfranchised population?

- Does this inquiry operate under an ethical obligation to criticize systems of privilege that favor specific groups over others?

These guiding questions offer direction for a new researcher aiming to investigate African American identity. The preceding discussion disabuses common misconceptions about the philosophical underpinnings of two predominant models of African American identity. Situating these models in a cultural and historical context offers a deeper understanding of the complexities and contradictions inherent in research on this topic. One thing this paper does not offer is the positionality of the reader's own stance in approaching this topic through research. It does not aim to identify the assumptions and experiences that shape her or his approach to understanding African American racial identity and the context in which this construct is situated. However, through a deeper understanding of the organization of knowledge, being, and subjectivity one will find confidence to begin the journey into her or himself and, subsequently, the outer journey into the nebulous concept of African American identity.
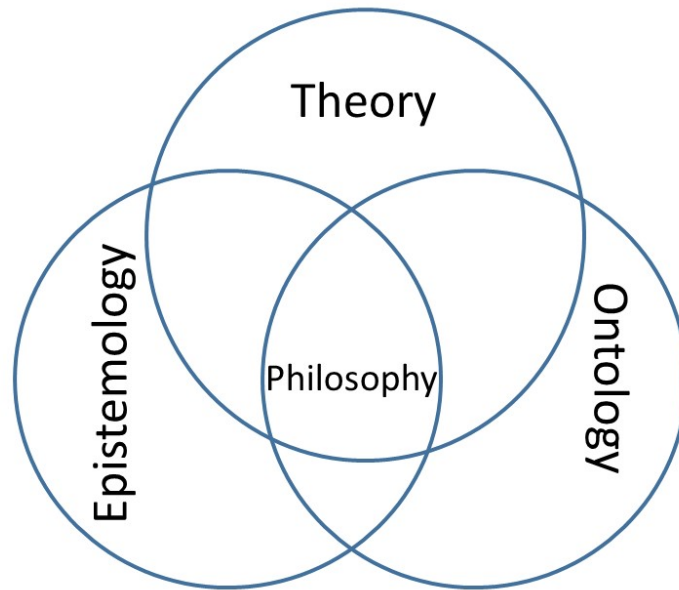
Figure 1. Components of a research philosophy. This figure shows how epistemology, ontology and theory are separate concepts that overlap to comprise a philosophical stance in research.

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