

## **Soul Sista, Bold Sista: An Exploration & Celebration of Black Joy Using Arts Based Research (ABR) Methods**

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**[Abstract]** The purpose of this article is to explore Arts Based Research (ABR), specifically Music as Method, Poetry Inquiry, along with Dance and Movement as an inquiry method to inspire others to take an unconventional route through the world of research to reach desired goal(s). Rather than assimilate, ABR provides a way to innovate and stand out with a fresh, relevant qualitative research approach. By sharing someone's story in this way, this article illustrates how to elevate Black women in a society which normally denigrates them, and how ABR this inquiry honors, values, and delineates their contributions through ABR discovery and discussion.

**[Keywords]** social justice, black woman, entrepreneurship, arts-based research, music as method, poetry inquiry, dance and movement

### **Purpose**

This is a description of the multimodal inquiry method of ABR, which harnesses a bevy of art forms, and aims to highlight the participant's emotions, perceptions, and experiences. With the completion of this authentic inquiry, I find encouragement in the realization that a story can be told through ABR methods without losing the integrity of the actual story. This article explores the life experiences of a Black woman as an entrepreneur, small business owner, dancer, and other roles she portrays on a daily basis. The inquiry includes a presentation from the participant that provides visual, verbal, written, and physical dynamics to illustrate the value and appropriateness of ABR a one qualitative research method.

### **Rationale and Context for the Inquiry**

My goal for this inquiry is to provide a fresh, relevant approach to document how to honor and treat women in all aspects of society. I aim to honor this woman through discovery of what she perceives has made her complete/incomplete as a Black woman in current society. The participant is passionate about the arts, and this research approach gives voice, the space, and freedom to express herself, which is critical for authentic qualitative research purposes.

The study took place in the participant's gym and dance studio, which she co-owns with another colleague, exploring the following research questions:

1. How does one successful Black woman explain and/or portray her daily experiences based on business ventures, interpersonal relationships, and everyday interactions?
2. In what ways do Arts Based Research (ABR) methods assist in highlighting this woman's daily experiences?

### What Are Arts Based Research (ABR)?

Arts Based Research exposes diverse knowledge to broader audiences, regardless of discipline and/or background. It is a qualitative research method that uses the arts for data collection, analysis, and/or dissemination (Johnson, 2022; Leavy, 2008). ABR is a playful and helpful measuring tool for understanding diverse learners, audiences, and populations. In particular, ABR is meaningful for audiences whose voices are historically and deliberately excluded from critical conversations, as it can serve as a means of individual, community, and societal empowerment. ABR connects dots that are often left undiscovered and builds bridges that would otherwise be dilapidated and unsafe to cross.

### Methodology

The inquiry uses various ABR methods, including Poetic Inquiry, Dance and Movement as Inquiry, and Music as Method. In addition to these methods, it is critical to note the essence of reflexivity in ABR, as it allows us to be transparent with the truths we bring to the research table (Cardwell, 2025). ABR is fun and engaging for researchers and participants, yet transparency must be the foundation of the research from start to finish, ensuring a finished product that is handled with humility and care.

**Poetic Inquiry:** The participant created her own spoken word piece, which was used during the video presentation, as part of the finished product. She spoke on her experiences as a Black woman, a small business owner, artist, community advocate, and more. Using this ABR method gives the participant and researcher an opportunity to create, collect, analyze, and present data to aid in understanding the process of data collection for ABR.

**Dance and Movement as Inquiry:** Another method the participant selected to tell her story was dance. Her background as a trained dancer spans over four decades, and she has been a background dancer for artists such as Janet Jackson. She is passionate about this artform, which is illustrated in her choreography, community work with future dancers, and collaborative efforts with other artists in the field. Choosing her passion of dance was also a means of resistance and social justice on her part, using one's gifts to speak to social justice issues.

**Music as Method:** The participant selected a song entitled *Soul Sista*, by an artist named Bilal. She used this song, including its lyrics, to create choreography. Additionally, she used the music to comprise a poem that was used for the final video product.

ABR provides space and freedom to make these choices during the research process, making a strong case for its versatility and necessity in qualitative research discussions.

### Theoretical Perspectives

This ABR exhibits the perspective of Multiple Meanings, which means “to reach a wider and more complete vision of reality that not only opens up to new questions and ways of knowing, but further allows a new kind of communication with stakeholders and all actors involved in the research process” (Pentassuglia, 2017, p. 4). By using various methods of ABR, a broader discussion can

take place inside and outside of the classroom for qualitative research purposes about societal issues.

### Data Collection and Exhibits of the Themes

In this study, ABR-collected data is authentic data, i.e., the poetry and dance and movement, presented by the participant and observed by the researcher. The findings are then essentially extricated by the interpretation of voiced text (the poem) and movement (the dance performance) by the researcher. As I analyzed my impressions in response to the shared narrative and performance, I reflected on my thoughts and feelings and what I could categorize as a theme emerging from this kind of meaning-making.

### Exhibits of Data and Interpretation

#### *Exhibit 1: Poetry Inquiry*

*Original Poem & Words by M. Dreama Davidson-Sanders*

*Soul Sista... Soul Sista...*

What does that mean to me? Who is she?

How does she move... through space?

I was told I wasn't good enough to live out my dreams as a professional dancer... from amateurs

I was made fun of for many years, because my hair and hips didn't fit the mold

I was looked over for several major projects, because in my eyes.... God was applying his final touches

Years have passed, and my inner being now reflects my outer

As growth continues to find me in awe, each day I wait, anticipation of new discoveries, to complete who I really am

I move in a way that allows me to show you my world, my heart

My steps most days fall in line with the energy to succeed

So when you do meet me, I will greet you with my soul, a soul designed to win

Soul Sista... BOLD Sista...

A queen designed for greatness, moving through life unapologetically... proud of who I've become

#### *Exhibit 2: Dance and Movement Inquiry*

*(Soul Sista <https://youtu.be/T7WcVGOc8II>)*

In conventional qualitative research methodologies, the collection of data about research participants' experiences via collecting spoken narrative, for example, is often labelled as the phenomenological approach (e.g., Poth & Cresswell, 2023). As such, it seeks to explore the lived experience and human consciousness as told by research participants and for the researcher to deduce meaning from such narrative. Through analysis of such narratives then, the researcher is

tasked to identify common themes or patterns to further extract the essence of an experience of the participant.

Of concern, at least within the context of the undergirding philosophy that allegedly led to what is now called phenomenological research, is that the researchers' aim to analyze from these collected stories what *they* find to be the essential, universal themes of human experience. It is beyond the scope of this article to delve deeply into the ongoing debate in our education field about the veracity of such claimed phenomenology-based research being phenomenological. A good start to explore the crisis and issues with our 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century phenomenology-based research methodology, however, can be found in)'s work (Derrida. & Lawlor, 2010), Derida, (1967), Öhlén and Friberg (2023), and Urcia (2021).

Moving beyond individual stories to collect, analyze for themes, and share in thematic order in researcher-perceived patterns, a deeper understanding, however, can be experienced by the researchers when they are recipients of the voiced/performed and analyzed data, as interpreted *by* the participants. ABR provides such authenticity in data collection and analysis *by* and *with* the researcher and the researched. This is a benefit for participants, researchers, and professionals interested in such topics as this study addressed. This benefit can be seen in the following findings extracted from the data, which authenticity reverberates in others.

This contrasts with the conventional research intent of generalizing from a study's findings with recommended action for addressing an issue versus providing authentic *raw* data with which others can engage in reflection to arrive at, perhaps universal, *essential* structures of lived experience. In this ABR study, the following emerged for me:

**Strength:** Through her movement, words, and song selection, the participant displays her calm resilience despite the daily circumstances she encounters.

**Courage:** The visual presentation represents her confidence in being seen by others she has never had physical contact with.

**Wisdom:** The participant offers her personal nugget(s) for being seen and heard in the game of life as a Black woman, and presents a perspective filled with authentically lived experiences for women/people in general.

### Implications

A woman discovering her purpose through her passion creates a sense of determination that would not normally exist if self-realization did not occur. It is vital for the participant to understand who she is as a Black woman, woman in general, and overall human being, to navigate through society based on matters, circumstances, and situations. Such a study, utilizing the self-expressed and shared experiences and insights, expressed by means of ABR methods, brings value to the learning and generalizability of findings to all involved – participant, researcher, and readers.

### Limitations Of the Inquiry

Nonetheless, limitations still prevail which a researcher must acknowledge, including:

- Individuals might interpret my discoveries differently than I because of differences in world views and life experiences.

- My biases must also be considered since this woman is a friend that I admire and help contribute to her successes.
- As a Black man, there could be a bias present in how I desire the information to appear to the audience(s).

### Conclusion

With the completion of this authentic inquiry, I find encouragement in the realization that a story can be told through ABR methods without losing the integrity of the actual story. My sincere hope is that this brief description of the ABR project will provide inspiration to others to take an unconventional route through the world of research to reach their desired goal(s). We all do not have to assimilate to the *standard*, when we could easily stand out for the better. Taking ABR and mixing it with other research methods should not be seen as risky, but exciting for qualitative research conversations. The anti-oppressive stance of ABR creates an environment that embraces diverse perspectives and engages the audience in a creative and relational space that is often discarded (Colacchio et al., 2026).

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