Teaching and Learning Color Consciousness in Black Families: Exploring Family Processes and Women's Experiences With Colorism

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Abstract

Family is regarded as a powerful force in the lives of Black Americans. Often-times, families function as an agent of socialization that counters racism. At the same time, however, Black families can perpetuate skin tone conscious-ness and bias, or *colorism*. Although there is an extensive body of revisionist literature on Black families and a growing body of scholarship on the contemporary nature of colorism, there is a dearth of literature addressing the role of Black families in relation to colorism. This research begins to fill this gap by exploring the influence of Black families in the development and maintenance of a colorist ideology and consciousness among Black women. Results of focus group interviews with 26 Black women indicate that color differences are learned, reinforced, and in some cases contested within families, ultimately shaping Black women's perspectives and experiences with colorism.

Keywords

Black women, colorism, family

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Family is regarded as a powerful force in the lives of Black Americans[1] (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; McAdoo, 1997; Staples, 1986), representing the bedrock of survival, kinship, and community. Historically, Black parents and caregivers have worked to buffer Black children from the external forces of racism, with many African American parents engaging in racial socialization practices that work to foster independence and self-esteem in Black children (Suizzo, Robinson, & Pahlke, 2008). It is oftentimes within the family unit that Black consciousness and Black pride is learned and celebrated. At the same time, however, Black families can simultaneously cultivate an internalized skin tone bias, or *colorism*. Although this notion is well documented in contemporary literary works such as *Our Kind of People* (Graham, 1999) and *Don't Play in the Sun* (Golden, 2004), there is still a dearth of scholarly research. Although there is an extensive body of revisionist literature on Black families *and* a growing body of scholarship on the contemporary nature of colorism, little is known about the process of color socialization within Black families. This research begins to fill this gap.

The term *colorism* is not part of everyday language; yet in a scholarly context, colorism is defined as an intraracial system of inequality based on skin color, hair texture, and facial features that bestows privilege and value on physical attributes that are closer to white. Despite the overall advancements and achievements accomplished by Black Americans in recent history, colorism among Blacks has persisted (Hochschild & Weaver, 2007; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Keith & Herring, 1991; Seltzer & Smith, 1991). Today, this issue holds particular significance for Black women (Hunter, 1998, 2005; Thompson & Keith, 2001). Scholars have argued that Black women are subject to multiple jeopardy and domination as it relates to their social location (Baca-Zinn & Thornton-Dill, 1996; Collins, 2000; King, 1988); inserting skin tone as an additional factor can further compound the situation of interlocking oppressions (Thompson & Keith, 2001). Increasingly, more scholars are engaging in discussions about the continued significance of colorism in the United States (R. Hall, 2008; Herring, Keith, & Horton, 2004; Hochschild & Weaver, 2007) and around the world (Nakano Glenn, 2009). In light of the growing scholarship on the modern-day nature of colorism, we aim to explore the role of Black families in the socialization of skin color consciousness among Black women. Our research is based on the following question: How do families shape Black women's understanding of and experiences with colorism?

This study contributes to the scholarship on Black women and families and the broader literature on colorism by offering an empirical and in-depth look

at the various ways in which families are implicated in colorist beliefs and practices. Furthermore, by incorporating an analysis of race, gender, and skin tone, we add an important intersectional perspective to existing knowledge of Black families. Although the skin tone of Black parents and children may not be a *central* dimension influencing how parents rear children, it is nonetheless an important and commonly ignored aspect of Black American culture that may in fact shape the various dimensions of Black families.

Literature Review

Race and Skin Tone Socialization Within Black Families

The family represents one social institution that in many ways is responsible for shaping an individual's identity, perspectives, and life experiences through the process of socialization. Family life and socialization patterns vary greatly across cultures; for African Americans, a central feature of child-rearing and family socialization practices includes race socialization (McAdoo, 2001). As family scholar Shirley Hill (2001) has maintained, the "socialization work" of Black parents "reflects their lived experiences, their definitions of social reality, and their efforts to equip their children with the beliefs, values, and resources needed for success" (p. 505). Within many Black families, race socialization includes a knowledge and recognition of the legacy of slavery, a positive self-awareness and ethnic pride, and preparation for dealing with issues related to racism and inequality (Ferguson Peters, 2001; Suizzo, Robinson, & Pahlke, 2008). Furthermore, there is evidence that African American families also work to teach children high standards of responsibility and achievement, despite the negative images of Black families that pervade mainstream culture (S. A. Hill, 2001).

Some scholars have argued that feminist theorizing on motherhood has left women of color out of traditional discourse. For instance, Collins (1994, 1997), S. A. Hill (2005), Jarrett (1997), and Jarret and Jefferson (2003) have underscored that the experience of Black mothers is quite different from conventional and traditional White, middle-class representations of mothering. As Collins (1997) has pointed out, patterns of Black motherhood have traditionally been symbolic of community, strength, and power. Unlike Eurocentric norms that identify motherhood as a full-time activity or occupation that is privatized within the home and segregated by sex roles, parenting by Black women is oftentimes shared between "bloodmothers" and "othermothers" (pp. 265-267).

Bloodmothers, or biological kin, and othermothers, extended family or nonkin, play integral parts in the child rearing and child care of Black children (Collins, 1997). Grandmothers, especially, have played a crucial role in providing child care and economic support (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). Collins (2000) has described the historical and continuing significance of women-centered networks and the "centrality of women in African American extended families" (p. 178). Demographic trends help explain this pattern; compared with their White, Latino, and Asian counterparts, Black children are more likely to be raised by one parent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Moreover, single Black women are responsible for rearing more than 40% of Black families (Malveaux, 2008), and many rely on extended family and support networks, underscoring the presence and importance of othermothers.

Narratives of skin tone stratification in Black families are widespread in novels and fictional and autobiographical accounts (e.g., Golden, 2004; Haizlip, 1994; Tademy, 2001). However, there is a dearth of detailed scholarly research on how colorism operates within families. In our field of sociology, family is often mentioned briefly or used as a variable when considering annual income and parents' education but is undertheorized as a fundamental context in which colorism is taught, perpetuated, and contested. Scholars in the areas of social psychology, psychotherapy, and family therapy have tended to give more attention to families in relation to colorism. For example, Coard, Breland, and Raskin (2001) have pointed out the importance of "family ideals" with respect to self-perception and self-esteem about skin color. They argue that family "ascribes or projects roles, expectations, and acceptance onto an individual based on appearance" (p. 2268). Similarly Bond and Cash (1992) have reported, "Regardless of how one's skin tone compares with that of peers, being the 'light child' or 'dark child' may carry special significance, either favorable or unfavorable, in the context of specific family dynamics" (p. 884).

Greene (1990) has supported the notion that skin color variation can create difficulty among family members. She has suggested that when the issue is raised, therapists should explore it with sensitivity. She has been especially attuned to issues between mothers and their children, such as the possibility of preferential treatment toward light-skinned children or a "heightened sense of protectiveness" toward darker-skinned children (pp. 205-225). Boyd-Franklin (2003) has argued that all families "project characteristics onto their children based on their appearance" (p. 42). For Black families, this practice takes place within a sociohistorical racialized hierarchy of skin color, hair texture, and facial features (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). This hierarchy is also highly gendered, a phenomenon we address below.

Black Women and Colorism

Lived experiences that surface from colorism are gendered (e.g., M. Hill, 2002; Hunter, 1998; Ozakawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1987). Skin tone, along with other correlated characteristics such as hair texture and facial features, has "more bearing" in the lives of women (M. Hill, 2002, p. 78) than men. The association between skin tone and physical attractiveness is significantly stronger for women than men, with an "exaggerated preference for very light women" (p. 84). Moreover, skin color is more important as a predictor of self-esteem among women than among men; lighter skin tones are positively related to higher self-esteem, particularly for women with lower socioeconomic status (Thompson & Keith, 2001). These findings are not surprising given the societal value placed on female beauty and the ways in which the pursuit of beauty is gendered. As Hunter (2004) has stated, the social construction of beauty is "informed by other societal status characteristics including race" (p. 23). Because White racism persists in the United States, "light skin is defined as more beautiful and more desirable than dark skin, particularly in women" (p. 23). Light skin can also work as social capital for women of color; more specifically, lighter skinned African American women are more privileged in the areas of education, income, and spousal status than their darker skinned counterparts (Hunter, 1998, 2002).

Method

The data for this study draw from five focus group interviews with 26 women between the ages of 18 and 40 years. This article focuses on one aspect of our larger research projects devoted to colorism in the lives of Black women (see Cain, 2006; Wilder, 2008). In the process of investigating the broader implications of colorism, we recognized a need to explicitly address the role of Black families in more detail when the topic came up numerous times throughout the course of data collection. Based on the prevalence of this theme and strong feelings surrounding it, this study serves as a starting point in the exploration of this significant yet understudied topic.

We find focus groups to be a particularly useful methodological tool in studying colorism. Because participants may be more relaxed in the copresence of others (as opposed to the pressure that can result from the one-on-one interview), focus groups are sometimes thought of as ideal for researching sensitive topics (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). And indeed, issues surrounding skin tone in the Black community can be of a sensitive nature. Furthermore, focus groups may be particularly fitting for those groups

whose voices have historically been silenced, such as women of color (Madriz, 2003). They can minimize the control of the facilitator, thus combating a relationship between researcher and participants that might have reproduced "colonial and postcolonial structures" (p. 371). Last, focus groups are appropriate for researchers concerned with the promotion of social change. Communication among participants can raise awareness and a sense of validation, contributing to a realization that personal experiences are shared and structural (Madriz, 2003).

Guided by feminist methodology and its call for reflexivity, we are cognizant of our presence and participation within the focus groups. We recognize that every person enters his or her research from a particular social location and that this informs data collection and analysis. Particularly relevant here may be our own racial/ethnic backgrounds, as one of us is an African American woman, the other a White woman. There are significant benefits in having a Black woman as part of the research team. Because of the sensitive and protected nature of this topic, it would be very difficult (though not impossible) for a non-Black woman to gain access, build rapport, and to recruit participants. We are also aware that having a researcher who is neither extremely light nor dark-skinned can also be viewed as an asset throughout this research process. In addition, we believe that the presence of a White researcher may have been advantageous. We were initially concerned that our participants might hold back in front of someone from outside the Black community. However, in some instances it seemed as if participants presumed the White researcher had been unaware of this hidden phenomenon and were interested in informing her. Although one of us is African American and both of us are academics, we realize that our identities do not privilege us as experts; we aimed to conduct research that is empowering for our participants.

We included a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques for the recruitment of participants. Purposive sampling involves the development of "certain criteria established by the researcher" to serve the purpose of the research and the questions of the investigation (Huck, 2004, p. 109). Snowball sampling starts with a group of key individuals who can offer referrals on future participants. To begin, we circulated a flyer through organizations and institutions that have a high population of our designated selection criteria; this included a host of Black student organizations. A number of friends and/or associates who teach classes with a large number of Black women were willing to circulate the flyer in their respective classes as well.

Because of the sensitive nature of this topic, however, it took more than just the posting or emailing of a flyer to garner participants. For this reason, we attended a number of student organizational meetings to personally introduce

ourselves and our research. This personal approach is particularly successful in recruiting women of color (Madriz, 2003). One of us (J. W.), especially, relied on personal networks and employed a more informal, personalized approach to generate participants. Participants referring other women proved to be the most effective method for us.

The 26 participants were all women between the ages of 18 and 40 years, currently living in Northern Florida, working at and/or attending school at a large, public institution. The majority of the participants (69%) grew up in Florida; the remaining percentage was born in the Northeast and Midwestern regions of the country, or states their places of origin in the Caribbean. Fourteen women—just more than half of our respondents (53%)—identify as Afro-Caribbean (Haitian, Jamaican, and Bahamian); the remaining self-identify as African American.[2] To categorize the skin tone of our sample, we adapted the scale used in the National Survey of Black Americans (very light, light brown, medium, dark, very dark), asking each respondent to describe her skin tone according to one of the five categories. Although we recognize that there are numerous shades and tones within these categories, this scale is the most practical and the most socially significant for our purposes. To that end, our study consisted of 3 women who categorized their skin tone as *very light*, 6 women who identified as *light brown*, 12 women who described their skin tone as *medium*, 4 women who identified as *dark*, and 1 woman who categorized her skin tone as *very dark*. We are aware that we do not have an even distribution of skin tones in our sample. Although we made concerted efforts to recruit participants from all skin tone categories who were interested in sharing their experiences, gaining a representative sample according to skin tone proved difficult. As colorism is a delicate issue, we could not easily approach potential participants and ask them if they would be willing to discuss their experiences with colorism based on their skin tone. In addition, it would have been biased for us to assume that women with very light or very dark skin tones would have the most interesting viewpoints to share.

The focus group sessions were guided by a flexible interview guide, with one of us acting as the primary facilitator and both of us engaging in follow-up or clarifying questions. Participants were asked about the following: the effects of their skin tone on their lives, especially their personal relationships; how they came to learn about the value placed on skin tone; how their generation compares with others in light of this issue; and what might be done in the way of progressive change. It was not until later focus groups, once it became obvious that family was a recurring and dominant theme, that we inserted a specific question about the role of family into the guide.

Each focus group session lasted approximately 90 minutes. Each session was audiotaped in its entirety, and audiotapes of each focus group were later transcribed verbatim. On arrival, the women were asked to fill out a demographic sheet and to choose a nametag, which served as a pseudonym for the remainder of the conversation. We also engaged in a triangulation technique with respect to skin tone. After each focus group, we used the demographic sheet to compare our own perceptions of participants' skin color (which were usually the same) with that of their self-perceptions. This allowed us to further study discrepancies between perceptions, possibly looking to the data in order to understand why a participant might have identified with a certain skin color.

Our analysis was informed by a *constructivist* version of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2002, 2006). Grounded theory features the simultaneous and constant comparison of data *and* analysis, enabling the researcher's empirical data to inform further data collection, analysis, and theory building. This involved a multistage process of layered (manual) in-depth *open* coding (Charmaz, 2002; W. A. Hall & Callery, 2001) of all data for relevant themes and patterns, followed by a second stage of more *focused* coding. At this time, larger pieces of data are used to develop subcategories describing the data. Finally, we engaged in *axial* coding, which enabled us to create larger frames of categories connecting subcategories together and providing relationships from one subcategory to the next. We also engaged in *clustering* and *free writing*, two techniques of memo writing (Charmaz, 2006) to begin the analysis of data and codes early on. Once family was identified as a major theme, further coding of family-related pieces of the transcripts was undertaken to determine how exactly the family was implicated in both the continuation of and resistance to colorist beliefs and practices.

Findings

Family plays an integral role in color socialization. Our findings point to several factors (including the media and school) in shaping how people learn about colorism; however, women in this study cited their families as the most influential force in shaping their views and ideas about themselves and others as it relates to skin tone. As Patricia, a participant who identifies as light brown, observed, "I've always been affected by colorism. The majority of the members of my family are light skinned; there are a couple [who] are dark skinned. It's just always been a big issue." When sharing their stories many participants began their narratives—even if they were not about the family—by

describing the skin tone of their family members, at times even mentioning great-grandparents. Furthermore, women were very honest about the color dichotomies existing within their families, often referring to the "light side" or "dark side" of the family, or placing emphasis on family members with distinctive features, such as "the cousins with the curly hair," or the "gray-eyed" nephew.

Teaching and learning color consciousness occurs within many familial contexts at various points in life. Our findings point to three specific patterns within the family: (a) maternal figures as points of origin for *normative* ideologies of colorism; (b) the family as the site for reaffirming and transforming color consciousness; and (c) the family as the point of origin for *oppositional* ideologies. It is through these patterns that color differences are learned, reinforced, and in some cases contested, ultimately shaping Black women's perspectives and experiences with colorism.

Bloodmothers and Othermothers: Points of Origin for Normative Colorism

The most prominent pattern in the data illustrates the influence of maternal figures in instilling within women a belief system of *normative colorism*, or bias and judgment as it relates to skin tone. As Nicole,[3] a woman who identifies as very light, shared,

> I had an Aunt who always equated . . . dark skin with unattractive, so I always heard Black and ugly, it was like there was one word "black-andugly." "He was blackandugly." You know? And I always, but I've always questioned, even as a kid, I didn't want to buy into it, cause I, maybe I wanted people to not make my color such an issue.

This pattern seems fitting, considering the centrality of women in African American families and networks, as described in the literature review (Collins, 2000, p. 178). Part of this centrality involves what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) has referred to as the power of motherhood. Although she has raised this idea in the context of the politicization of motherhood as a source of activism and empowerment, in our research the power of mothers—bloodmothers and othermothers—also lies in their ability to shape perceptions about skin tone. Bloodmothers and othermothers play integral parts in child rearing and child care, and, as Nicole's experience illustrates, thus play a major role in handing dominant notions of colorism down to the next generation. Many women in

our study learned early in life from their mothers, grandmothers, and other female family members to associate negativity with darkness, and to equate goodness with lightness.

Each woman in this study understood herself as a direct reflection of her mother, grandmother, or other female family member. In many ways, these maternal family members serve as the source of identity construction. For many of the participants, making this connection was not an easy one, as talking about their families in the focus groups made them realize that women were responsible for instilling normative ideas of colorism. Consider the story of Luann, a 21-year-old who initially had difficulty pointing to female figures as points of origin within her own life. At the beginning of her focus group, the medium-toned participant did not consider skin tone bias to be a problem, citing, "I don't think my life has been shaped by colorism; I think I'm medium, right in the middle." Despite her initial misgivings about the impact of colorism in her life, Luann later recognized that she was wrong. Like many other participants, she shared stories of the women in her family doing a range of things: from cautioning her to stay out of the sun to influencing her attraction to light-skinned men. By the end of the discussion Luann confesses, "I don't think colorism will ever go away." She went on to say,

> 'Cause we all know about it, and the moment we started talking, I didn't even realize . . . what I said at the beginning. When I started talking I said I don't think [colorism] should [matter], well not that much. And then I kept talking [and thought] well you know what, my grandma said this to me, my auntie said this, my mom has said . . . it's all, it's the women. It's how you internalize [colorism] is in Black women. I didn't even think about it. Wow.

Luann's participation in a focus group conversation with other Black women helped her understand the oftentimes covert nature of colorism, particularly within Black families. In many instances, color consciousness is so deeply embedded within Black culture that it becomes difficult to decipher and challenge.

Another woman who shared in the same mental voyage connecting family to her first awareness of colorism was Karina, a 21-year-old Haitian woman who identified herself as medium. When thinking about her first memories of colorism, Karina initially attributed college life to exposing her to skin tone differences. Prior to beginning college, she attended predominantly White schools, which served as a reminder of racial difference—Black versus White—rather than distinctions based on color. She also pointed to her diverse

circle of friends for making her less aware of colorism. However, similar to Luann, Karina did not recognize her family's role in shaping her awareness of colorism until the stories of other women were shared in the focus group. She continued,

> But my family, well now that I know about it and I look back . . . you know my family had roots into colorism . . . a lot of them are mixed and [a lot of them are] the darkest of dark. And there were little competitions, like you know my child came out lighter than your child or, my child had better hair, you know little things like that. And I didn't notice it when I was younger . . . I didn't care about that, cause my mind was focused on other things. Now that I look back on where all this coming from, it's like now I notice [that] it's probably coming from family.

Karina went on to share that as a young adolescent she stayed in "constant competitions" with her cousins whom she considers to be more "colorstruck" because they migrated to the United States from Haiti in their late teens. Noting that class and color is a "pretty major" issue in Haiti, Karina admitted that her cousins (who have darker skin tones) were socialized to concentrate more on skin color differences than she, and that resulted in small battles over who was prettier or who had the better hair. Like the African American community, Haitians have a similar history of colonization, yet the socially constructed differences based on phenotype translated into a more rigid caste system of hair, skin, and features (Trouillot, 1994). As such, class and color differences are more pronounced, which may explain why Karina's cousins were more concerned about skin color and hair.

Despite the fact that some women were completely unaware of the impact of female family members on their views on skin color, there were quite a few participants who readily identified experiences with their mothers as having the most influence over their identity, ability, and relationship choices. Rachel, an 18-year-old participant, spoke openly about the preferential treatment she received as a light-skinned woman. She remembered that as a child her mother would create a hierarchy between her and her older sister, whose different fathers contributed to their dissimilar skin tones. Rachel suggested that even in the smallest things such as housework, her mother would elevate and praise Rachel more than her darker sister:

> I don't know if it's just my imagination but my mom would yell at her more than me . . . growing up doing chores, I would do my chores better

than my sister and it just didn't make sense, but that's how it is in my
family.

Amy, also 18, vaguely recalled overt experiences of colorism in her family, yet
did share that her mother would regularly encourage the medium-toned par-
ticipant to bleach her skin. As Amy described,

> My mom is always trying to get me to use products to lighten my skin
> color because my mother is also pretty light and she wants me to be
> more like that . . . She sees that other people look at darker as a bad
> thing, [and] she doesn't really want me to go through that stereotype.

Although Amy's mother is trying to protect her daughter, she is at the same
time reinforcing the value placed on lighter skin. Amy and Rachel's stories
offer small yet noteworthy examples of how mothers can subtly reinforce the
normative ideology of colorism.

There are, however, more significant instances of mothers making blatant
references to skin tone. Take, for instance, the experience of Leah, a young
woman who considered herself to have a medium tone. As a young child,
Leah was preoccupied with her skin tone, partially because of her mother's
insistence that Leah identify herself as "brown and not Black." Her mother,
a light-skinned woman, was also influential in shaping Leah's relationship
choices. Leah admitted that she was more attracted to dark-skinned men as
a teenager. She stated, "I had this infatuation with men that were darker than
me, I don't care how dark, just as long as you were darker than me 'cause it
was something that made me feel good that they were darker than I was."
From this statement, it appears that for Leah dating darker men was a way to
affirm her skin color. Yet Leah's mother disapproved of her dating choices and
strongly encouraged her to "date up" within the color hierarchy as opposed to
"dating down":

> So one day my mom, being red, being light-skinned, she comes [and]
> I'm telling her about my current choice. We were driving down [the
> street] and he was walking past, . . . and I was like "mom, that's him
> right there." My mom turns to me and stops the car and says, "Who?!
> That Black boy there?" I was in complete shock [laughter]. I was like
> "Black boy?" . . . She [said] "I'm tired of you dating these black-
> skinned boys." And I was like "black-skinned?" . . . And then she told
> me . . . "I want my grandchildren to have nice hair and a nice skin

tone." And I'm looking like are you serious? . . . how is it that you're with daddy, and daddy's darker than me?" She was like, "well that's how it's supposed to be, that the light-skinned and dark-skinned are supposed to be together and not dark on dark and light on light."

This example shows how powerful maternal influences can be in shaping self-perception and intimate relationship choices and speaks volumes to the ways in which mothers can promote the negative ideals of colorism. Although Leah's mother attempted to guide her on the "right path" in relationships, she did so in such a way that reinforces the rules of the color hierarchy. That it is only natural for people to date and marry those of opposite skin tones was a common theme mentioned throughout the focus groups. Inherent in this popular adage is the idea that a mixed-tone couple (one light-skinned and one dark-skinned) will ideally produce offspring that are brown and exempt from the negative experiences of being extremely light or dark.

In addition to mothers, some respondents acknowledged the impact their grandmothers had in forming their perspectives on skin color. This is not surprising given the special place grandmothers hold in many Black families. As Nancy Boyd-Franklin (2003) points out,

> The role of the grandmother is one of the most central ones in African-American families . . . Grandmothers are central to the economic support of Black families and play a crucial role in childcare . . . They represent a major source of strength and security for many Black children. (p. 79)

As a main figure in many families, grandmothers are oftentimes responsible for the transmission of values from one generation to the next. When the women in this study mentioned their grandmothers playing a significant role in shaping their views on colorism, more often than not these grandmothers were distinguished as the fairest member of their families. One might argue that they have more at stake in the maintenance of colorism compared with mothers. Coming of age in an earlier generation and time when skin tone stratification was more structured and overt, these grandmothers may feel a greater obligation to uphold color divisions and to draw sharper lines between their families and darker Black families.

Indeed, this was the case for Trina and Gloria—two participants who shared that their mixed-race grandmothers were responsible for transmitting the dominant messages of colorism to the women and girls in their respective

families. Trina, a young woman who identified as very light, revealed that growing up she recognized that her grandmother played a significant role in her own color consciousness:

> And what I noticed was that my grandma would [say], don't bring no Black niggers here. She would [say], "I don't want no Blackeys around here." . . . My mom used to date dark guys, and for whatever reason [she] was attracted to really dark, husky Black guys and my grandma would [warn] "no Black gorilla ghosts around here."

The harsh warnings Trina received from her grandmother challenge the popular belief that light-skinned and dark-skinned Blacks should couple together. Instead, it is clear from these admonishments that dark-skinned people are demonized as inferior and in the mind of Trina's grandmother, a threat to the purity of her light-skinned family.

Gloria, who described her complexion as medium, also learned about color differences from her grandmother. She quickly acknowledged the advantages of her grandmother's light skin tone, and confessed that it had provided her a certain amount of leverage and utility. Gloria recalled that while growing up in Jamaica, the benefits of her grandmother's fair skin were indirectly transferred to her. However, her experiences changed drastically on migrating to the United States to attend college and leaving her family in Jamaica. Referring to this change as a "defining moment," Gloria noted that without the presence of her very-light-skinned grandmother, whose parents were "White" and "Indian," she

> didn't have any of that support in terms of which Grandma was coming to pick me up, or something to kind of say "ok well you are ok because [of your grandmother]" . . . I think that impacted me in terms of deciding [that] first of all I am an individual regardless of this color or the fact that my hair didn't turn out as Indian as it should have . . . I was focusing so much on being defined based on my family as opposed to being okay defined based on who I am or what I brought to the table.

Growing up with a wide range of phenotypic variation in her family gave Gloria a sense of security. This feeling of comfort quickly shifted to feelings of insecurity without being able to rely on her family's varied skin tones, particularly her grandmother's light skin, to counteract her darker skin tone and kinky hair.

In some cases, maternal figures were active in constructing their daughter's awareness and experiences of colorism in complex ways. Janice and her

mother, for example, were two of the few light-skinned people in her family and neighborhood. Janice admitted to being confused as a child and would regularly question her dark-skinned grandmother about her light skin and wavy hair: "I would cry and I would say to my grandmother, 'why don't I have hair like yours?' or 'why don't I look like you?'" Added to Janice's confusion were the additional expectations for success. She explained that a great deal of pressure was put on her to make it out of their poor economic situation in the Bahamas because of her skin tone; Janice's grandmother associated light skin with a way out of poverty. Janice's mother, also very light-skinned, "failed" to do this in the eyes of her grandmother, and so it become her grandchild's responsibility. As a result of this pressure placed on her, especially from her grandmother, Janice's identity and special role was shaped for her; she was the hope of her family and neighborhood, the one who was "supposed to make it out." Ironically, Janice attributed her experiences with colorism *and* her success in achieving an advanced degree to the expectations placed on her by her grandmother.

Reaffirming and Transforming Color Consciousness

Our analysis suggests that the process of color socialization is complex; Black families serve as points of origin to introduce color consciousness, yet can also function as the site for color *reaffirmation* and *transformation*. Once the ideology of colorism is introduced, there are influential experiences that can either strengthen *or* shift a young woman's identity and level of color consciousness. *Reaffirming* moments occur when family members and/or events legitimize one's primary understanding of colorism, confirming the negative stereotypes and behaviors associated with normative colorism. *Transformative* moments occur when family members and/or events change one's primary understanding of colorism, in a positive or negative direction. Maternal figures were also highlighted as having the most influence in shaping this second pattern of color socialization.

Tessa's family story illustrates how maternal influences can introduce and perpetuate normative ideals of colorism. A young woman who identified herself as very dark, Tessa openly discussed that her family lowered their expectations for her intelligence and ability because of her dark skin. She states,

> I remember my young cousins growing up who were lighter skinned and had the good hair, . . . they were just expected to be smart, to say smart things, to kind of carry on the family name . . . I was never expected to be smart.

Tessa related how being introduced to skin color bias by her family undoubt-edly made her feel lesser than her lighter family members; yet there were other instances later in life that stabilized Tessa's first memories of color.

Tessa noted that in her late teens, her grandmother's reaction to the birth of a biracial baby served as a reaffirming moment for Tessa and her entire family. According to Russell, Wilson, and Hall (1992), Black families exhibit a great deal of excitement and obsession about a child's impending skin color, hair texture, and facial features that begins well before birth. Tessa explained how this event created a "color commotion" in her family:

> [My cousin has] two sons and a girl, and his daughter in the middle is darker skinned, she takes after her mother, and his younger son . . . was born with gray eyes and you know, turned out to be this beautiful light skinned child, and I just remember . . . in my family a mass flocking to the hospital to see this child and my grandmother, she still to this day, will go to the house and pick up this little boy and leave the daughter there, just leave her there. And I mean, there's no other reason to explain it other than it's just, everyone wanted to babysit him, to take care of him. I even fell into the trap as well, and you know, I want to have a little gray eyed baby myself. And [my grandmother would say] "how can we be so lucky to have a beautiful gray eyed child?"

Tessa openly discussed how members of her family discriminate against each other based on skin tone; the birth of this infant boy reinforced the negativity inherent in dark skin, and the praise and elevation accompanying light skin. People in her family—Tessa included—would provide extra attention to this "beautiful" baby, while disregarding the other child with darker skin. Internalizing the favor given to this baby, Tessa admitted that she "fell into the trap" of colorism and wished for a light-skinned baby of her own. She later realized her bias, noting, "This the wrong line of thinking to have." Like other participants in this study, Tessa recognized that replacing the nor-mative language and practices of colorism with an oppositional line of thinking and behavior is at times very difficult. "It seems so powerful," she confessed, yet Tessa remained insistent on moving from a place of compliance to point of resistance.

Although mothers and grandmothers were most commonly identified as the primary sustainers of colorism in families, it is important to note here the role of other female family members in serving as transformative agents of color consciousness for some of the women in the study. This can be illustrated through the compelling narrative of Chanel, a participant who was affected

the most by her female cousin. The 21-year-old respondent shared that as a child she was not cognizant of skin tone differences because her immediate family was fairly homogeneous in relation to skin tone. However, her experience at a family reunion served as a transformative moment that shifted her thinking about her dark skin. The sharp words of a lighter skinned cousin permanently changed her perspective:

> One of our cousins married a really light skinned woman and . . . the matriarchs, the heads of the family . . . made her this supposedly most beautiful person because she was light skinned and it just used to bother me cause I could never understand . . . And I remember her sitting next to me. She just looked at me [and] said, "why do you look like *that?*" I'm just confused. I'm like "what do you mean? You know, she left the question alone, but I really felt that she was talking partly because of my weight, but also too because of my skin tone. Because you know, most of my family is darker skinned and she really thought she was important because she was light skinned because many people made her believe that.

Chanel honestly noted that her cousin never explicitly degraded her dark skin. Yet this small exchange set the tone for how Chanel would evaluate, perceive, and judge herself in the future. She admitted that this internalization affected her intimate relationships with men. Because of her dark skin, Chanel did not believe she was worthy of a good relationship. She later had to unlearn this crippling mentality:

> I didn't really see myself as being desirable because that's the way you know men treated me. . . . so when I got older and the time came [when] men were showing interest in me, I really had a significant problem accepting that . . . I'm working on it. It's ok, . . . it's been more difficult for me to accept that men would find me attractive because that's not what I experienced growing up.

As we learn from Chanel's story, moving to a point of acceptance and self-love can be complicated.

Family: Point of Origin for Oppositional Consciousness

A considerable share of women in this study admitted that their families were responsible for instilling within them a belief system of bias and judgment as

it relates to skin tone. Many respondents learned early in life the normative ideology of colorism that associates negativity with dark skin, and goodness with light skin. Yet some women involved in this project suggested a more complex pattern of family socialization. For example, several participants spoke of being reared in Black families that espoused the ideals of *Afrocentricity*. This is in line with what Nancy Boyd-Franklin (2003) has observed:

> The Afrocentric movement has been a process by which many African-Americans have reclaimed the cultural strengths of their African heritage while offering them a positive alternative to negative messages and stereotypes perpetuated by the dominant European American society. (p. 144)

For the women who learned from their families to celebrate all the various hues of Blackness, an *oppositional* knowledge of colorism served as their point of origin. In these instances, the family served as a fairly positive socializing agent, and women learned to challenge and oppose colorist ideology. Some women credited the wide diversity of hues in their families for their oppositional foundations of colorism, whereas others described the color homogeneity within their families as causation for less color-conscious family experiences. The following quotations are typical of this reasoning:

> My family always taught me to accept everyone . . . There was never any type of differentiation with anyone in my family. Everyone was always welcome in my house no matter what skin tone you were. And in my family alone, there [is] a wide range of people . . . My dad's side of the family is really light skinned, . . . they have green eyes . . . My mom's side of the family is very dark, so there is a very big mix between everyone in my family. (Kira)

> For me growing up it was not really an issue because most people in my family are either lighter than I am or the same complexion. So with the color complexion everyone was equal. (Melissa)

> Everyone in my family is dark-skinned, I have one aunt who is light, so it was, it's like never been an issue for me family-wise. (Tatiana)

Being exposed to the positive attributes of both light and dark skin, these women learned not to discriminate on the basis of skin tone, and to treat

everyone equally. These participants also cited their family's appreciation of Blackness as a positive influence.

It is noteworthy that various family members—both male and female—were cited as influential figures in the socialization of an oppositional color consciousness. For one young woman, her father played a significant role in the positive valuation of her dark skin tone. In fact, she recalled no formal knowledge of colorism as a child, and confessed, "I didn't really know colorism, I just knew that I was Black." Callea acknowledges her father's strong Afrocentric values as central to shaping her positive self-image:

> I had African ancestors . . . That is what my father really focused on.
> He always told us, (my sister and I) that we're beautiful, natural hair
> is African silk, and you are beautiful the way you are. I guess that is
> because he knew how society is . . .

Yet, similar to other participants, Callea's family teachings were challenged when she entered high school:

> When I went to high school it was the lighter you are, the prettier you
> are. If you had long hair and you're light skinned, you're beautiful as
> opposed as to if you're dark . . . I'm not that pretty [now] because my
> hair is short and it's not long-flowing or straight because I'm darker . . .
> I play[ed] basketball when I was in high school, and we were out in the
> sun five times a week, and I got really dark. And I liked that because
> my skin was even, so I was pretty happy, but it was because I was dark
> skinned I wasn't considered beautiful [compared] to other girls who
> stayed out of the sun and who were lighter than me.

Callea's high school experience served as a transformative event in that she was introduced to the normative ideals about skin tone; she found that her short hair and her dark skin were not valued as her family valued them. Unshaken by dominant standards of beauty, Callea maintained involvement in a sport that made her skin darker, and admits to being "pretty happy" despite how she was viewed by others. Because of her family's positive teachings about skin color, this young woman learned to have no qualms about her darkness and was able to effectively challenge normative ideologies of skin color in her life.

There were certain cases in which women noted that their families engaged in a complex interplay of normative and oppositional discourses of

colorism. Vivica's experiences with colorism were more complex because she was presented with competing ideologies of skin tone from different family members. Vivica described her skin tone as medium, but as those who knew her in the focus group revealed, she was much lighter as a young child. "I was born the fairest of all the children," Vivica explained. It was through her aunt that she learned the dominant ideals of colorism as she was regularly admonished for "turning":

> My auntie . . . was like "why you keep on going in the sun? You keep on turning!" . . . you know kids like to go outside [and] you will turn especially if you go in the pool and stuff. We had a pool at our house. And my aunt would always say, "every time I see you, you turn darker." . . . And it's true because I . . . come from this light, light child and then you know slowly but surely, I become darker.

Despite the frequent references Vivica's aunt made to her changing skin tone, her parents refused to "play color" and create differences between she and her siblings. Unlike this young woman's aunt, her parents were instrumental in countering the dominant notions of skin tone and provided Vivica with an oppositional framework. She recounted a different childhood story where she learned that divisions among skin color were not accepted within her family:

> My little sister . . . remained her color 'cause she's stayed more inside or whatever. She has my grandma's . . . long hair and . . . she's not light, light skinned, but one time she told my older sister who took after my father and is very dark . . . she was prancing through the house and she was like, "Vivica and I are the lightest ones, Vivica and I are lightest ones. We're the prettiest ones" . . . and I remember my father, . . . he came running inside because he's dark and my older sister is dark, . . . and he was upset. He was just like, "No! You know you don't say this." . . . "Don't make her feel bad because . . . she is the darkest."

It was through her father's reprimands that Vivica became keenly aware that making such distinctions was neither valued nor welcomed within her immediate family.

Despite her parents' adamant challenges to colorism, however, Vivica's subsequent exposure to extended family members, schools, and relationships overrode what her parents initially fought so hard to instill. Vivica conceded to the dominant notions of colorism, openly admitting that as a brown-skinned woman, she felt that there were "still more mountains to climb." She was

candid about the struggle she has with color hierarchy; at one moment she was critical of colorism and the larger system of racism, and in another instant she was hoping that her young niece—her older sister's daughter—does not turn out to be her sister's dark color. Vivica's battle with normative colorism and oppositional consciousness was typical of several women in this study. Living in a colorist society can mean challenging the normative ideology in one moment, yet conforming to it in the next. This speaks to the complex and situational nature of colorism: normative and oppositional forms can coexist and be activated in different moments rather than one form ultimately winning out.

Discussion

In this article, we explored the role of Black families in the color socialization of young women. Our research both reaffirms and adds to the extant literature on colorism and the family. Our unique contribution lies in the detailed analysis of exactly how it is that the family comes to instill, perpetuate, and contest a color hierarchy. The narratives of the women we interviewed provide evidence for two important conclusions: first, colorism remains a social problem deeply affecting the lives of Black women. Despite the advancements gained by Black Americans in the post–Civil Rights era, colorism has a continued presence. The influence of Black families in the introduction and maintenance of colorism may in part help explain the survival of colorism within the Black community. Second, our findings reveal a "race paradox" operating within the Black familial structure: We learn that although many participants' families engaged in racial socialization practices to celebrate Blackness and to protect them from the realities of racism, families also engaged in practices of color socialization that simultaneously denigrate darkness.

Collins (2006) has suggested that family rhetoric and practices play a crucial role in naturalizing and normalizing racial hierarchies. This is evident, for example, in the way that people consider familial property and wealth to be "naturally" passed down through generations, thus perpetuating inequality. Situating our research within the sociological literature, we might extend Collins's notion to include the family's role in naturalizing and normalizing intraracial skin tone hierarchies as well. Unfortunately, families continue to introduce, reinforce, and pass on the colorist ideology that stems from the same oppressive system of racism. We might begin to explain the paradox mentioned above by considering the shared roots of racism and colorism. Though decades of fighting for Black civil rights resulted in widespread and continued opposition to racism, it has not had the same effect on colorism. The latter remains entrenched among Black communities, "a dirty little secret"

that is infrequently questioned in everyday conversation. As a result, it erroneously appears to operate separately from White racism, remaining divorced from an antiracist agenda more broadly, and antiracist parenting more specifically.

Our findings illustrate a multidimensional process of color socialization within Black families that is typically carried out by female family members. For all the women in our study, their family was the point of origin for colorism—providing their first exposure to the ideas associated with skin tone and colorism. The majority of women were introduced to a normative framework of colorism; young women learned to espouse the dominant views of skin tone widely held within the Black community. The strength of Black womanhood has stood as a cornerstone in Black families, and fittingly, participants cited their mothers, grandmothers, and other female family members as the main purveyors of this knowledge. Maternal figures were also cited as reaffirming and transformative agents who often worked to perpetuate the normative ideology of skin-tone bias and discrimination, and on some occasions change previously held ideas about skin color.

A fewer number of participants shared that in their families an oppositional framework was laid as the foundation of knowledge. In these instances, individuals were socialized to embrace positive aspects and attributes of all skin tones. Paternal figures were often described as influential in the development of an oppositional color consciousness. This presents an interesting contradiction since some of Black women's concerns about skin tone are rooted in the perception that men prefer lighter skinned women (M. Hill, 2002; Hunter, 1998). We might reconcile these two messages about men and colorism by considering that the men described by our participants were paternal figures; as such, they may have been fulfilling an expected "protector" role for their daughters. Also, as we described in the literature review, colorism tends to have more bearing in the lives of women than men; this may contribute to the ability and tendency of fathers to instill an oppositional consciousness in their daughters. However, just a small number of women in our study learned oppositional perspectives early in life; many were striving later in adulthood to establish this alternative ideology in resistance to the mainstream principles of colorism.

What we also learn from this research is that the dynamics of colorism within families are both complex and wide-ranging; the majority of color socialization practices favor the valuation of light skin over dark skin. However, in many ways, the level of skin tone variation within a family—specifically the variance in skin tone between these women and their maternal influences—shapes socialization practices, ultimately affecting a woman's positive or negative experiences surrounding skin color. In other words, our data suggest that lighter

skinned mothers and grandmothers may teach colorism by encouraging their darker toned daughters to bleach their skin, "marry light," or simply project fewer expectations on them. Darker skinned mothers and grandmothers, in contrast, "do" colorism in their families by extending preferential treatment, higher expectations and fewer limitations on the lighter skinned respondents. Women with very little skin tone variation in their families still illustrate the presence of colorism by having learned the various messages (positive or negative) associated with light and dark skin.

Implication for Further Research on Families and Colorism

It is important to address the limitations of the current study and to provide areas for future research. A major limitation is that our data do not focus directly on parenting strategies according to parents; rather, our findings highlight the family experiences recounted by the women participating in our study. Future research should focus more on mothers, grandmothers, fathers, and other parental figures, asking them explicitly about their parenting strategies and their socialization practices related to colorism.

Additionally, the sample for this project does not include the experiences and perspectives of Black men. Although women are often more affected by colorism, a focus on men would expand our knowledge on the importance of family and how Black men may also be affected by color socialization. This notion was recently brought to the fore of larger discourse when famed public intellectual and sociologist Michael Eric Dyson (2008) confessed that the presence of color consciousness in his own family resulted in *more* opportunities for him as a light-skinned boy, and *less* opportunity and expectation for his darker skinned brother, Everett, who is currently serving a life sentence in prison. Because gender is relational and increasingly studied as such within the fields of women's studies and gender studies, this research would benefit greatly from a similar study of the family's role in men's experiences of colorism.

Although our research includes the perspectives of African American and Afro-Caribbean women, future scholarship on family and colorism should continue to explore how ethnicity may shape patterns of colorism. Half of our sample included Afro-Caribbean women; in discussing how their culture affected family ideals, these participants suggested more exaggerated notions of colorism in Caribbean societies compared with the United States. Nevertheless, our data allowed for only limited observations in this regard, and future research should develop this area more. Impending studies should also pay

close attention to the role of social class in color socialization. Furthermore, colorism is not simply a problem within Black communities. Scholars have pointed to the existence of colorism in many groups with histories of colonial rule and influence (R. Hall, 2008; Nakano Glenn, 2009). Thus, a study of how colorism operates within other families of color would also make an interesting contribution to the literature.

Finally, it is also important to note that although we describe the family as the point of origin, reaffirming agent and in fewer cases, transformation, we are in no way trying to suggest that these roles take place in a vacuum. Although some of our participants believe that colorism has taken on a life of its own, it cannot be divorced from its sociohistorical roots in centuries of White racist ideologies and institutional domination. More important, women in our study discussed the role of other agents of socialization (school, media, and peers) in functioning as stabilizing and transformative agents to reinforce or challenge both normative ideologies of colorism and oppositional consciousness. To that end, more research on colorism is needed to thoroughly explore the varied facets of color socialization existing within Black culture.

Because the family is a primary agent of socialization, it can aid in a solution as well. One of these solutions involves how and where parents raise children. Some participants suggested that parents need to teach their children to be accepting of their peers' skin tones, as well as teach especially light- or dark-skinned children to cope with hurtful treatment by their peers. This is easier said than done, however. It seems difficult for parents to provide these proper tools of coping and awareness for their children when they themselves may have internalized colorist ideology. As our research suggests though, some families *are* using their influence as a powerful agent of socialization to counteract these oppressive forces and are committed to encouraging more awareness and acceptance in their young members. To that end, this study should prompt further research on the suppressive nature of colorism within Black families, in hopes of providing more solutions for their transformation into an institutional buffer against skin tone bias and stratification.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Notes

1. Throughout this article, we will be using the terms Black and African American interchangeably.
2. For the purpose of this article, those women reporting ancestry and/or country of birth in the predominately Black and non-Hispanic islands of the Caribbean are classified as "Afro-Caribbean."
3. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to protect the anonymity of the participants.

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