

PROBLEMS COME WITH THE PACKAGE: EXPLORING THE EFFECTS OF RACE, CLASS,  
GENDER, AND MEDIA ON THE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN  
ADOLESCENT GIRLS

By  
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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of  
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Abstract

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December 2009

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Historically, African American adolescent girls have been neglected in social science research. The studies of girls over the last decade generally lump African American girls with all girls or with all girls of color. Rarely has the African American girl population been studied as a group with specific cultural nuances that do not pertain to Hispanic or Asian American groups (Orenstein, 1995; Piper, 1994; Ross Leadbetter & Way, 1996; Ward & Benjamin, 2004; Weis & Fine, 2000). The literature that examines African American girls as an individual population (Paul, 2003; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996; Stevens, 2005) do not address issues of race, class, gender, and media together as relevant aspects of the Black girl's identity.

Using critical race theory as the theoretical framework, this study evaluated the impact of race, class, gender, and media on the way African American adolescent girls construct their identity and make sense of the world. In addition, this study used critical race theory to evaluate how the portrayal of African American women and girls in television and film influence African American adolescent girls' identity development. The results indicate that race, class, and media are the most salient factors affecting African American adolescent girls' identities.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

During the 1940s, researcher Kenneth Clark conducted a revolutionary study that examined the effects of segregation on African American children. Using four plastic, diaper-clad dolls that were identical in every way except color, Clark interviewed African American children between the ages of 3 and 7 to determine their level of racial perception and preference (Library of Congress, 2004). Almost every child identified the race of the dolls, which were Black and White. However, when asked which doll they preferred, the majority of children chose the White doll. The children were also presented with outline drawings of boys and girls and asked to color the outline the same color as themselves. Many of the African American children colored their outline white or yellow. The researchers concluded that prejudice, discrimination, and segregation caused African American children to develop a sense of inferiority and self-hatred (Library of Congress). Clark's work was so pivotal that the results of his study were cited in the landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ended school segregation (Library of Congress).

It has been over 50 years since school desegregation and Kenneth Clark's doll study, but the impact of racism and racism itself have not diminished. In 2005, a 17 year-old student from New York revisited Clark's doll research. Kiri Davis' award winning short film, *A Girl Like Me* (Davis, 2005), not only duplicates Clark's doll study, but also provides a real account of beauty and identity ideology from African American adolescent and teen girls. Of the 21 African American children who participated in the project, 15 preferred the White doll over the Black doll. In the film, one girl was asked to choose the doll that looked most like her – the reluctance of acknowledging her identity was evident in her hesitancy to put down the White doll and push forward the Black doll. The girls who were interviewed spoke about the pressure to conform to



White standards of beauty, such as having straight hair. Girls interviewed in the film also spoke of African American females attempting to bleach their skin.

Despite school desegregation, the recent election of the nation's first African American president, and subsequently a First Lady of color, African American girls' identity development is still damaged. The effects of racism and prejudice continue to affect the way African American girls see themselves as compared to White girls, which has implications for African American adolescent girls' social development. The child participants in Clark's study struggled with affirming their acceptance of their race. Kiri Davis' recreation of the study indicates that African American adolescents today have the same struggle. It seems as though African American youth still identify the aspects of Caucasian culture as being more desirable than their own.

Racism has played and continues to play an integral role in the lives and development of African Americans. Clark's doll study was more than just influential in the desegregation of schools; it set the tone for an examination of the power racism has in daily life and how it manifests in society's operations, and the personal and social development of Black people. During the 1970s, a host of lawyers and activists noticed that subtle acts of racism had become more prominent, and that theories and strategies would be needed to combat these acts. Taking ideas from scholars and prominent figures such as Antonio Gramsci, W.E.B. DuBois, and Sojourner Truth, the critical race theory movement began and continues with the purpose of drawing attention to racism's covert nature and to use activism as a means to combat it. The notion that racism is a part of everyday life is the primary truth of critical race theorists' beliefs (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001).

Grounded in legal studies, critical race theory is a movement of activists and scholars concerned with the relationships among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The movement draws from civil rights and ethnic studies discourses, but broadens its scope to include aspects of history, the economy, and group preservation. Critical race theory questions the foundations of “the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law” (Delgado & Stefancic, p. 3). Taking a broader stance, critical race theory has been used to examine school curriculum, poverty, historical accounts, and other areas of social science (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Taylor, 2009).

Critical race theory is founded on several tenets or principles. The first principle is that racism is normal. Racism is a part of everyday lives, especially for people of color. Racism is so normal and so common, that at times, it is not recognized. Second, racism advances the interests of both Black people and White people. Racism serves Blacks’ purposes primarily when it coincides with the interests of elite Whites. Third, critical race theory posits that race is a social construction; races are categories that society invents, manipulates, and retires when convenient (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical race theory supports its standpoint by deconstructing the function of race since scientific evidence proves there are no distinct biological differences among groups of people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001)

The tenets of critical race theory bring forth themes that embody its principles: (a) interest convergence, (b) revisionist history (or counterstorytelling), (c) a critique of liberalism, and (d) structural determinism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The term interest convergence describes how the majority group tolerates advances for racial justice only when it suits their interest to do so. Racism manifests itself into the ways that society distributes privilege and status. Race has economic implications that divide society into those who will always have

certain opportunities and those who will most likely never be in a position to take advantage of some opportunities. Interest convergence allows Whites' to obtain material possessions and working-class African Americans to fulfill some basic life-sustaining needs.

Revisionist history gives power to the art of storytelling. Revisionist history "reexamines America's historical record, replacing comforting majoritarian interpretations of events with ones that square more accurately with minorities' experiences" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 20). When minorities use their own narratives and reflect upon their real, lived experiences, it sheds a different light on historical events that would not otherwise be questioned. It is a way to call attention to details in history that have been suppressed or omitted. By presenting another historical truth, minorities can be empowered and bring validation to their experiences.

A critique of liberalism is extremely important to critical race scholars who believe that the color-blind attitude will not contribute to addressing societal race problems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical race theory argues that to effectively address racism, extensive changes must be made. A liberalistic view of race and its impact on equality is what causes progress to be slow. People of color may be conceptualized under the law as equal to Whites, but in reality the experiences of African Americans say otherwise. The continued belief that race is not an issue allows its economic and social influence to be circumvented (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

The theme of structural determinism is simply that race will continue to be an issue because of the sheer nature of the system of language (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The structure and vocabulary of society cannot address certain types of wrong. The language needed to combat racist ideology is lacking and some people tend to stay within their own cultural zone, thus rarely interacting with person of another race which would help confront stereotypical

thinking. Changing the language of race would be a slow process, as most people tend to stay within their preconceived notions and rarely seek to gain a different perspective.

As the background elements that make this study important are presented, critical race theory is introduced as a central piece to this research as it directly complements and speaks to the significance of and rationale for examining the lived experiences of an African American adolescent female population. Critical race theory demonstrates how African Americans struggle with the impact of race, racism, and class on a daily basis. African American adolescent females are not shielded by their youth. They too, experience or are likely to experience the same struggle with race, racism, and class. While gender and its role in historically limiting opportunities for females should not be neglected, this study places emphasis on race as the focal point from which all struggles emanate.

### **Black Adolescent Girls: Issues of Class, Race, and Representation**

Since the 1970s, scholars have noted that African American girls were underrepresented and ignored in academic literature (Henry, 1998; Lightfoot, 1976; Paul, 2003). African American adolescent girls remain in the category of least studied, following White boys, African American boys, and White girls (Paul). Little is known about the African American adolescent girl and how she manages life as a raced and gendered individual, especially during her transition into adulthood.

African American girls' neglect in social science appears as a continuing pattern seen in relation to African American women generally. Frequently, the experiences and concerns of African American women are subsumed under the category of African American or female. On her own merits, the African American female tends to receive little attention. (Paul, 2003, p. 27)

The lack of consideration for the African American girl can be considered as a subtext to the way African American women are represented. The conceptualization and representation of the African American woman is based upon dominant ideologies that surround African American womanhood in American society (Hill Collins, 1991). These ideologies are used as a means of control and are rooted in the maintenance of hegemonic power, a power that allows those in leadership positions to maintain rule over others. Dominant ideology is then constructed and disseminated through media and popular culture, which reinforces an oppressive view of the African American female. Since the mainstream exploitation of hip hop culture in the 1990s, the representations of African American females has become more materialized and hypersexualized. To be African American and female is to experience racism and sexism, which manifests into differential treatment, a loss of opportunities, and a personal struggle to feel valued (Giddings, 1984).

Similar to the African American woman, there are two important attributes about the African American adolescent girl that make her a primary target for discrimination. One, she is raced. If racism is a normal part of everyday life, then the African American adolescent girl will undoubtedly face situations of discrimination because she is African American. The second important attribute is that she is female. Being female comes with its own set of oppressions as the dominant group in society is male (and White). While the age of the African American adolescent girl does not make her a target for discrimination, it compounds the existing issues of race and gender.

Society sees the issues of the African American female as either relating to being African American or being female, but not as interconnected. The two attributes cannot be thoroughly understood apart, as race and gender is interconnected. The Black female must be considered as

both a raced and gendered person simultaneously, as the two facets of identity intersect (Giddings, 1984; Hill Collins, 1991) In order to accurately comprehend what it is like to live as a raced and gendered person, the twain must be considered as one. With race and gender conceptualized as inseparable, it can be acknowledged that these joined facets of identity bring with them special lived experiences, circumstances, and struggles; struggles that many times overlap and cannot be attributed to just being African American or just being female.

Despite what has been stated about the dominant ideology's conceptualization of the African American female and her persistent struggle against race and gender discrimination, she is successful academically and is a primary source of support for the Black family. Thirty-five percent of young African American women attend college and only 13.5% are high school dropouts (Cose, 2003). The African American woman is known to singly maintain a household, raise children, and work (Sudarkasa, 2007). The Black woman's knowledge of her oppression is what leads to her empowerment (Hill Collins, 1991). However knowledgeable Black females are about their oppressive identity elements, barriers presented by race, gender, and class are still ever present. Women still make less than men in the workforce, as women make 75.5¢ for every dollar a man makes (Longley, 42004). Among all Fortune 500 companies, 393 reported having no women among their top executives (USA Today, 2003).

While adults experience social and economic disparities, so do young people. A significant number of youth experience the consequences of social ills such as being affected by violence, poverty, homelessness, substance abuse, school dropout, delinquency, and imprisonment - that jeopardize future possibilities (Stevens, 2005). In 2007, African Americans had the lowest median income (\$33,916) when compared to Whites, Hispanics, and Asian Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). From 2006 to 2007, both the poverty rate and the

number of people living in poverty increased. For children under the age of 18, the poverty rate in 2006 was 17.4 percent and in 2007, the rate was 18.0 percent (U.S. Census Bureau). The number of children in poverty in 2007 was 13.3 million, up from 12.8 million in 2006 (U.S. Census Bureau).

In single parent family homes where children are likely to live in poverty, the majority of children in this living situation are African American (or 65 percent) compared to 23 percent of White children (National Kids Count Program, 2007), meaning that Black children are more likely to live in poor single family homes than White children. While this data is not disaggregated by gender, it is important to note that more African American children are affected by poverty than Whites. Among Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian children, Black children are disproportionately poor, as 34 percent of Black children live in poor families (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2009). African American youth are more likely to experience the most hardship compared to White youth, Hispanic youth, and Asian youth. This places African American youth at more of a social and economic disadvantage than any other youth group. Based on the aforementioned research, African Americans as a group experience economic hardship at rates above Whites, Hispanics, and Asians.

### **Role of Popular Media**

While disproportionate economic hardships, racism, and sexism influence the lives of African American adolescent girls, these are not the only facets of life that play an important role in defining who they are. In today's society, youth of all racial and ethnic heritages are immersed in hip-hop culture. Social science research affirms this notion, as ethnographic studies have explored the impact hip-hop culture has on how African American youth make sense of their lives, social surroundings, and the world around them (Arnett Ferguson, 2000; Patillo-

McCoy, 1999). In order to better understand the lives of African American adolescent girls, paying attention to the role popular culture plays in informing their decisions and beliefs can lead to knowledge about the identity development process of African American adolescent girls. Understanding the role of popular culture in the lives of African American adolescent girls can also highlight the ways in which media represent and reproduce race, class, and gender ideologies.

The media play an important role in the examination of the lives of African American adolescent girls because of their key role in the production and dissemination of culture. The power ascribed to media assumes that messages have some effect on the public beyond basic entertainment, thus giving credibility to the long standing debate among media researchers as to the level at which media messages affect people (Hunt, 2005). The African American adolescent girl's consumption of the media's representation of the African American female could have a profound impact on the way this population interprets the relevance of what it means to be a Black female in society. Since hip-hop culture is a gateway to understanding how African American adolescent girls make sense of their lives, considering the representation of Black women in music videos is important. The insurgence of hip-hop into mainstream culture in the 1990s transformed the depiction of the African American female.

Hip-hop is considered a cultural movement of song, rap, and dance. Primarily constructed by young people, hip-hop has become the method of musical expression for African Americans. The music constitutes fast moving beats, raps, and dancing. The music video is important to hip-hop expression, as it allows the artist to provide a visual in which to showcase dancing and rapping skills. The lyrics of hip-hop music are also important, as they speak to the lived experiences and aspirations of the artists.



Many hip-hop music videos depict the African American female as a commodity to be fantasized about and as an accessible, available product for sexual pleasure and exploitation (hooks, 1992). The notion that African American female beauty is constructed based on her body, and not inherent, is confirmed through the narrowly focused way media portray the essence of the African American female. This is confirmed through bell hooks' (1992) powerful research on the politics involved in identity representation of Black women. According to bell hooks, within the bombardment of images representing African American female bodies as expendable, African American women have either passively absorbed this thinking or vehemently resisted it (hooks, 1992). The manipulation of the image of the African American female is an example of how dominant patriarchal ideology uses race and gender to sabotage the well being of the group. If African American adolescent girls are making sense of their identity through these types of portrayals of Black femaleness, their scope of reference is skewed and potentially damaging to their social development.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Historically, African American adolescent girls have been neglected in social science research. The studies of girls over the last decade generally combine African American girls with all girls or with all girls of color. Rarely has the African American girl population been studied as a group with specific cultural nuances that do not pertain to Hispanic or Asian American groups (Orenstein, 1995; Piper, 1992; Ross Leadbetter & Way, 1996; Ward & Benjamin, 2004; Weis & Fine, 2000). These previous studies, while making a contribution to the literature at large on adolescent females, fall short of thoroughly examining race, class, gender, and media together as pertinent aspects in the African American adolescent girl's identity development. One study explored identity development among African American

women (Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996) but addressed the issue with a population outside the true range of adolescence (18-22 year-old college students) and overlooked the discussion of class and media. The most relevant and recent work in African American adolescent girl literature, *Talkin' Back: Raising and Educating Resilient African American Girls* (Paul, 2003) provided an in-depth look at the neglected status of African American girls in the United States and drew historical parallels that can explain the neglect. However, Paul focused on African American girls in the fifth through eighth grades and omitted the importance of popular culture in the lives of Black girls.

The importance of the media in examining the lives of African American adolescent girls is an aspect excluded in most studies involving the Black girl, but is central to better understanding how she makes sense of her environment and her identity. Therefore, media effects research can provide some insight into the social ramifications of young people's indulgence in media. However, similar to some of the Girls Studies literature (Chesney-Lind, M. & Irwin, 2004; Orenstein, 1995; Piper, 1994; Ross Leadbetter & Way, 1996; Ward & Benjamin, 2004; Weis & Fine, 2000). media effects research overlooks the importance of separating adolescent populations of color to determine how media messages affect Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians within their own cultural contexts. At the present time, the salient work on adolescents of color and media are outdated (Berry and Asamen, 1993; Berry and Mitchell-Kernan, 1982; Dorr, 1982). The studies published within this decade (Perse, 2001; Valkenburg, 2004) briefly discuss adolescents of color as one population with no delineation of gender. Within the literature at large, there is a lack of focus on the African American adolescent girl as a population worthy of studying separate from other adolescent girls of color. While the literature does acknowledge the Black adolescent girl's existence, little is known about this population's perceptions of identity

development from a sociocultural point of view.

The goal of the current study is to develop a better understanding of how the African American adolescent girl defines herself. Involving the facets of race, class, gender, and media make this study distinct, as no study to date examines the identity of the African American adolescent girl in her own context, using the aforementioned characteristics. Adolescence is an important element in the equation because it is a critical period for girls' development that has important consequences for identity formation, gender-role socialization, and mental health (Spinazzola, Wilson, & Stocking, 2002, p. 112). Blackness, class, and gender are also key to the design of this study as the combination of these three components of identity is what makes the African American adolescent girl unlike other girls of color, as Hispanic and Asian adolescent girls are not affected by economics like Black adolescent girls. The experiences of African American adolescent girls should be identified as independent of other adolescent girls of color. The final piece in exploring the identity of African American adolescent girls is the role of media, particularly popular culture, in her development. Hip-hop culture is a lens through which the Black adolescent girl views her environment (Emerson, 2005), thus consideration of how media messages affect her are vital to understanding how she sees her place in society.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how the African American adolescent girl describes her identity and the roles race, gender, class, and media play in affecting this description. Using critical race theory as the theoretical framework, this study deconstructed the impact of race, class, gender, and media on the way African American adolescent girls construct their identity and make sense of the world. In addition, this study used critical

race theory to understand how the portrayal of African American women and girls in television and film influence African American adolescent girls' identity development.

### **Implications and Importance**

While previous research has addressed adolescence, identity development, race, gender, class, and media in combinations, no study to date has attempted to look at each area together as one combination. This study highlights the importance of considering the interactions of race, gender, class, and media as a unit working together in the lived experiences of African American adolescent girls. This study provides a unique opportunity to contribute to the literature on African American adolescent girls, as well as to add to the understanding of how social issues affect a young African American population. African American adolescent girls have been overlooked and overshadowed in social science research and much can be learned about African American adolescent girls from their stories. The age range of the participants provides a progressive look at adolescence, as each participant represents a different stage in development. The current study is also important because of its contribution to understanding the impact media, specifically television and film, have on African American adolescent girls. Overall, this research is beneficial to understanding the uniqueness of the African American adolescent girl population and the struggles inherent in living a raced, gendered, and classed existence in a mediated society.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides an overview and examination of several bodies of literature that are important to the current study, which examines how African American adolescent girls define themselves and how race, class, gender and media affect this self definition. First, an overview of critical race theory is provided. The second portion of this chapter examines how contemporary female adolescence is constructed and where African American adolescent girls fit into this construction. An examination of the role media play in defining what it means to be African American and female is presented in the third section of the chapter. The final portion of this chapter provides an overview of Black feminist ideologies and their relationship to Black female adolescence.

#### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory's importance to this study is found in the connection of race to the lives of the participants. The sheer nature of the participants being African American gives credibility to the use of critical race theory as a means of viewing and analyzing the results of this study. Built with legal studies as its base, critical race theory is a movement of activists and scholars concerned with the relationships among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical race theory draws from civil rights and ethnic studies discourses but broadens the scope of its application to include aspects of history, the economy, group preservation, and liberalism. Based on the notion that racism is embedded in patriarchal, western, Eurocentric societies, critical race theory explains how race works in covert ways that maintain social hierarchies. Critical race theory questions race as a product of social thought, and examines how race advances the interests of Whites and the working class Blacks simultaneously (Delgado &

Stefancic; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Taylor, 2009). Critical race theory is founded on several guiding principles. The principles are that racism is part of everyday life, racism advances both the interests of Blacks and Whites when it primarily benefits Whites, and race is a product of social thought (Delgado & Stefancic). Along with these principles are a set of themes which include (interest convergence, critique of liberalism, counterstorytelling, and structural determinism) (Delgado & Stefancic; Ladson-Billings, 1998) that explain how racist ideology continues to function in society.

In scientific terms, racism is a powerful tool that allows for the categorization and prejudgment of people based on observable physical characteristics (Shujaa, 1994). Race, despite the refutation that it is biological, is an impervious part of our identity. Conceptions of race are deeply imbedded and fixed in the fabric of our society, now more than in previous ages (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Race is ever present in each and every social configuring of our lives (Delgado, 1995). The categorizations of cultures into White, Black, Asian, or Hispanic help to form and maintain a system of power and oppression, supported by an ideology that race is real (Omi & Winant, 2005). African Americans and other marginalized groups will continue to fight for equality and equal opportunities, but those equal opportunities will continue to elude them because of the power racial stratification allows Whites to maintain (Taylor, 2009). The following sections present the themes of critical race theory, which help to elucidate the theory's core beliefs.

### **Interest Convergence**

The notion of interest convergence dates as far back as *Brown v. Board of Education* (Bell, 1980). Bell, a legal scholar, pointed out that during the Civil Rights Movement, advances for Blacks primarily coincided with changes in the economy and the interests of White elites.

Standards for education and racial equality had little or nothing to do with the court's decision. *Brown* happened because America needed to maintain its reputation as a powerful and just nation, one that certainly does not marginalize its people of color. Thus, the interests of Blacks, who wanted equal education opportunities, and the interests of Whites, who did not want to lose potential allies in the ethnic peoples of Third World countries, converged (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

When it comes to civil rights legislation, critical race theorists argued that Whites have been the primary beneficiaries of said legislation (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Upon implementation of affirmative action laws, Whites gained more, despite public disapproval of the policy. Research on affirmative action policy shows that White women have traditionally been the major beneficiaries of affirmative action hiring practices (Guy-Sheftall, 1993). According to the concept of interest convergence, advances will happen for people of color when there is a benefit to Whites. Systems of privilege and power are always working to maintain dominance over the minorities they minimize, whereby keeping power with the elite (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

### **Critique of Liberalism**

Critical race theorists are most passionate about this aspect of the theory. Liberals believe that there are differences among races, however, those differences are not important from a socioeconomic standpoint and that all people are truly created equal. Critical race theorists believe that those differences are important and do need to be recognized, as they have implications in the lives of people of color. The critique of liberalism is that when people do not acknowledge that differences do exist among the dominant White culture and the subordinate ethnic cultures, racism will continue to exist. Liberalist race ideology says that racism is no longer a structural problem of society, but is one of individual attitude and behavior (Rosenberg,

2004). This new racial ideology, the color-blind mindset, avoids direct discourse about race – but safeguards racial privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

The color avoidance way of thinking will continue to keep minorities oppressed and in subordinate positions, while White systems of supremacy and power, continue to flourish (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Liberal ideology is at the forefront of the concerns impeding progress in changing the ways people conceptualize race because of the interpretation of United States Constitutional law. Notions such as “merit,” and “equal protection” were supposed to create a more level playing field among Whites and people of color. Critical race theorists surmised that such race-neutral terms do not eradicate racist ideology, but strengthen it in a way that privileges Whites and those who have the power to create such laws.

By ignoring racial differences, hegemonic ideology is reinforced. Society becomes trained to believe that race just relates to skin color and has no other implication. Race becomes something that is just physically seen as a difference in outward appearance or culture. However, the real difference lies within how culture, lifestyle, and opportunity is affected as a result of race. Upholding the idea that all people are created equal and have equal opportunity for prosperity under constitutional law makes it difficult for people of color to use race as a rationale for lack of opportunity or access to resources. Race does play a role in African Americans gaining access to certain opportunities, but based on the way the law is written, there appears to be no difference in access.

To be color-blind eliminates the ability to address the ways in which race shapes the social, political, and economic terrain and contributes to White privilege and inequality. Liberal legal practices and perspectives are what lead to the slow progression of people of color to argue legal precedence to gain citizen rights (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The refusal to acknowledge race



in the interpretation of the Constitution is what legitimizes and maintains social, economic, and political advantages for Whites (Gotanda, 1991). If African Americans are seen to have the same opportunities as Whites based on the United States Constitution, then the merit to the argument that African Americans are denied opportunities because of race does not hold. However, through a critical race theory lens, there is a difference in opportunity based on race and the Constitution aids in concealing the problem.

### **Counterstorytelling**

The promotion of color blindness can have detrimental effects for people of color. It contributes to the devaluing of cultural heritage, the ignoring of racial group distinctiveness, and the promoting of White hegemonic culture (Decuir-Gunby & Williams, 2007). The critical race theory movement is guided by understanding how White supremacy maintains the subordination of people of color (West, 1995) and also incites action to change the state of race relations in society. A method that is believed to counteract racist ideology is counterstorytelling. Also known as revisionist history, this method of retelling historical events and sharing personal narratives and experiences offers evidence to challenge the dominant ideology regarding the history of people of color (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001).

Counterstorytelling not only serves as a tool to describe the oppression of minorities, but also serves to provide “deconstructors and a reconstruction of human agency” (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995, p. 55). Providing people of color a mechanism through which they can express their own account of culturally established myths, stereotypes, and the like, can be a liberating experience for African Americans and other minorities. The importance of stories and narratives among critical race scholars is their ability to provide an alternative to “objective” positivist

perspectives (Ladson-Billings, 1998) and to provide an opportunity to critically analyze the issue of race and its prominence in America.

### **Structural Determinism**

The theme of structural determinism is simply that race will continue to be an issue because of the structure of society. Society has consumed racial images, thoughts, and languages that have become an accepted part of culture, which makes it difficult to redress more reasonable ways of thinking, speaking, and interpreting images. For example, Sambos, coons, and lazy Mexicans are racial descriptors that were perceived at the time they were presented as true or entertaining (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Change comes slowly, as it is difficult to tell a person who has never seen a Mexican, except in cartoons wearing sombreros, that most Mexicans don't really wear hats.

Finally, critical race theory has a call-to-action component. Not only are these theorists committed to studying the relationship among race, racism, and power, they are interested in transforming the relationship as well. It is not enough to understand the racial landscape or to explore the ways society organizes itself using race and hierarchy. Critical race theory scholars aim to change the social landscape through action, through research, and through discussions that bring issues of race, patriarchy, and power to the forefront.

### **Contemporary Construction of Female Adolescence**

The use of critical race theory in this study highlights the role in which racial ideology affects the ways in which minority cultures are represented and perceived by other cultures. The viewpoints presented by critical race theory can also serve as a lens to observe many settings for the impact of racial ideology, including academic literature. As this study explored the appearance of the African American adolescent girl in the literature at large, critical race theory

is used as a magnifier to draw attention to ways in which Black adolescent girls are discussed, or not. As the literature on adolescent girls is extensive, the following section examines the African American adolescent girl and how she is situated within the research.

### **Historical representation of female adolescence**

Over the past 15 years, the life of the adolescent girl has taken center stage in social, political, educational, and economic arenas. In the large landscape of topics that relate to girls' lives, Girls Studies scholars distinguished their work by focusing on the issues relevant to the everyday lived experiences of girls (Bettis & Adams, 2005). After the start of the second-Wave Western feminist movement in the 1990s, the examination of girls and girlhood became more prominent as feminist ideas emerged in mainstream culture (Griffin, 2004). The work of Women's Studies and Girls Studies scholars shows us that the adolescent girl is a complex being who is dealing with a myriad of life changes and challenges. Psychologists, researchers, and educators have explored a range of issues in adolescent girlhood, from the psycho-social effects of the first menstrual cycle (Brumberg, 1997), to the slow silencing of the girl's voice (Ward & Cooper, 2004,) to the construction of her identity (Harris, 2004), to her badass attitude (Hentges, 2006). Works have also examined female adolescent sexuality (Motivational Educational Entertainment, 2004; Weekes, 2004) and sexual orientation (Barry, 2000; Hentges, 2006).

Concern for the girl exploded into a movement of greater public concern regarding interventions to address challenges in adolescent female development (Ward & Benjamin, 2004). Described as misunderstood, silenced, and objectified (Fordham, 1997; Griffin, 2004; Ward & Cooper Benjamin, 2004), the adolescent girl was in crisis (Ward & Cooper Benjamin, 2004). The girl began to edit herself and to become fearful of public humiliation and conflict that would lead to isolation. This event was described as the movement of girls' voices "underground into

protected spaces...that over time made it harder for girls even to identify, much less express, their true feelings and opinions” (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p.. 47). From voiceless, to powerful, to mean, the girl and her constructed identity is constantly changing and being interpreted by popular culture.

While the attention to the lived experiences of girls as a significant part of culture is important, not all girls have been given the same consideration. Absent from this body of research is the thought of race alone as an important factor in the lives of girls. Very few studies focus on the African American girl as independent from other girls (Paul, 2003; Shorter-Gooden and Washington, 1996). Within the earlier writings, the silencing, misunderstanding, and objectification of girls is expressed through White girls’ experiences from a White, Eurocentric point of view. Later, the work of Signithia Fordham (1997) and Janie Ward (1996, 2000) began to diversify the Girls Studies literature by revealing that African American girls do not share the same troubles as White girls and that African American girls are more resilient and can maintain high self-esteem throughout adolescence.

The lack of focus specifically on African American adolescent girls could be attributed to a liberal viewpoint that all adolescent girls will face the same issues, regardless of race. This viewpoint is hazardous, because to ignore race would be to misinterpret the cultural nuances lived by each group of adolescent girls, whether they be Black, Asian, or other race. Each ethnicity of adolescent girls has their own experiences. For example, the “silencing” of the girl refers to the White girl, as the literature states that Black girls have been quite resilient over the years. In fact, it is Black girls’ voice that is a source of strength (Fordham, 1997; Paul, 2003). Black girls show great flexibility against the “boundaries that are constructed against them due to their race and class” (Pastor, McCormick & Fine, 1996, p. 16). The aforementioned authors

challenge the generalizability of previous work on adolescent girls because of its inability to relate to the Black girl within her own space and agency.

White girls reclaimed their voice in the late 1990s with the support of feminist ideology. Girl Power emerged as the discourse to represent equality among the sexes in the adolescent, pre-teen, and teen age ranges. This discourse represented a world of all-female fun and pleasure, minimizing the importance of boys, and placing a high value on female friendships. The postfeminist critique of the girls-are-equal-to-boys viewpoint is that it expresses no need to address the patriarchal system, whereby “silencing feminist voices through a discourse that appears as ‘pro-feminist’” (Griffin, 2001, p. 184). From a critical race perspective, the Girl Power ideology also avoids a discussion of how this discourse is racialized and its implications for girls and women who are not White and/or upper class. While the Girl Power movement represents equality in opportunities for girls and boys, there is nothing that really represents equality in opportunities for Black girls and White girls.

### **Girls have buying power**

After the culmination of the Girl Power discussion, the literature at large begins a discussion of the girl as a consumer. In First World markets, young people constitute an increasingly growing group of consumers, with girls and young women constituting a large demographic segment of this population (Stearns, 2001). What seems to situate girls’ positions as consumers is the pervasiveness of imagery and messaging relating to their everyday lives. Girls are often represented as consuming objects and as the objects of consumption, especially those of male desire (Griffin, 2004). To date, no study includes or discusses African American adolescent girls as important to the girl consumer discussion, except research which attributes importance to African Americans in general as consumers. A recent report shows that \$2.3 billion dollars were spent on advertising directed toward African Americans from October 2006

to September 2007 (Nielsen Media Research, 2008). This report presents the power of the African American as a consumer, but there is no acknowledgement of African American girls as part of the advertising directive, or as consumers or influencers of products.

### **New Age Girls: Mean and in the Middle**

While girls may have the power to influence products, they also have the power to shape and be shaped by popular culture. As the 21<sup>st</sup> century commenced, so did a shift in the adolescent discourse to the “mean” girl. The struggle for popularity among adolescent girls morphed into a popular culture construction of girls as petty, manipulative bullies (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004). The popular discourse states that as girls compete to be a part of the popular social cliques, they degrade each other and spread rumors in an attempt to tarnish reputations. The image of today’s bad girl changed from the Latina or African American gang member to White upper-class girls (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004). The new focus of ‘mean’ White adolescent girls as opposed to the gang member representation of girls of color, provides a means for White capitalistic patriarchs to maintain financial gains and control over minority representation by utilizing White actresses in primary roles and Black actresses in secondary and less important roles.

The more recent writings in Girls Studies shift focus from political and global feminist concerns to an examination of girls’ everyday experiences and the places that adolescent girls inhabit in attempts to better understand how girls navigate the “in between” spaces of female adolescent identity (Bettis & Adams, 2005; Kearney, 1998). Described as being in a liminal space, where the rites of passes into adulthood take place, girls are discussed as not only consuming culture or being influenced by it, but creating it. This space may be overflowing with complexity, confusion, exploration, and a newfound awareness of self, but this is the important

space to observe and to question the realities of identity work. When girls spend time in the bathrooms, on the phone, and at the mall, they are actively engaging in conversation that is shaping their outlook on social behavior, race, sexuality, and the idiosyncrasies of becoming a woman (Bettis & Adams, 2005). It is in these everyday spaces that girls are hard at work on understanding society and their place in it.

### **Girls in School**

Girls in school became a pressing issue with the publication of the American Association of University Women (AAUW)'s study (1992) on girls and boys in public elementary and high schools. This study linked the psychological and social struggles of girls to the school environment, claiming that girls performed poorly in academics because of biased school practices. Supporting studies followed and claimed that the educational system privileged boys while degrading the academic experience of girls (Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Orenstein, 1994). The most successful and captivating publication of the time was Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1994). Pipher described adolescent girls as more prone to develop eating disorders, self-injury, suicide, and depression, calling upon the connection between womanhood and girlhood as a means to promote healthy adolescent development.

While both the AAUW study and *Reviving Ophelia* shared a cultural perspective on the experiences of girls in school and society, these works inadvertently highlighted the position that African American adolescent girls' experiences are different from those of White girls and other girls of color. The AAUW study also assessed girls' self-esteem levels and found that African American girls scored higher than White girls. Using Carol Gilligan's work on self-esteem (Gilligan, 1982) as a backdrop, the AAUW researchers noted that research conducted in 1991 "discovered that black girls of the same age do not, in fact, experience the drop in self-esteem

that Gilligan observed in the population she studied-predominately White, upper class girls attending private elite school” (AAUW, 1999, p. 5). Of importance to mention is that the AAUW constructed its own scale of self-esteem rather than using a well-established scale. Nonetheless, Black girls scored higher than white girls and white boys on self-esteem on the AAUW’s scale (Barnett & Rivers, 2004).

*Reviving Ophelia* (Pipher, 2004), the pop culture piece on girls penned by psychotherapist Mary Pipher, claimed to be descriptive of the lived experience of all girls, whether they have been seen (or not seen) in therapy. In actuality, she could not overlay her clients’ issues on Black girls, as they were not a part of her work. In her own words, “I was mostly seeing white girls in therapy and I wrote about what I knew” (Pipher, 1994, p. 21), as Pipher’s clients were described as having been exposed to parental suicide, violence, and drug abuse (Barnett & Rivers, 2004). Not only was Pipher’s clientele predominately White, they were middle and upper class, which changes the dynamic of how relevant Pipher’s concerns are to even all White girls. *Reviving Ophelia* is presented to highlight the essentialist nature of some literature to categorize African American girls into the general category of girls, without consideration for intra-gender differences.

Joyce Stevens (2005) conducted a study that examined the social and political factors that affect African American girls in an inner-city middle school and the coping strategies these girls used to manage their environment. Stevens’ observations noted a lack of support for the young girls. “The girls’ behaviors generated insensitive gossip among school staff, the content of which denigrated and devalued the girls” (Stevens, 2005, p. 48). The girls were aware of their negative reputation among school staff, who viewed them as loud and boisterous. Labeled as



having disorderly conduct by the school's social worker (who was a social work intern), the teachers, overwhelmed with discipline problems, agreed with the label.

In order to deal with an unsupportive school staff, the girls used their voices as a way to cope with being put down and feeling disrespected by their White teachers. Speaking up was a way to protect themselves from feeling powerless and devalued. The girls felt the teachers were not invested in their learning and were "contemptuous of their scholastic efforts" (Stevens, 2005, p. 49). The girls questioned whether being Black affected their teachers' disapproval. Black girls are not just loud because they have conformed to the stereotypical depictions of being attitudinal and bitchy. Black girls use their voices as a means of survival in less than supportive educational and community environments.

In addition to having a lack of support in their educational environment, these young girls were also faced with sexual advances made by adult males in their neighborhoods (Stevens, 2005). Frightened, shocked, and angered by the men's comments, the girls felt violated. When the girls responded to the men's advances with silence, the rude and insulting comments the girls received made them more angry and scared. In the school environment, the girls are seemingly self-assured and outspoken. However, in their neighborhood, they are more "...intimidated...but silent" (Stevens, p. 49). Discussions with the school social work intern revealed that the girls were undergoing a developmental transformation as adolescents, which likely led to the girls' confusion about wanting to be sexually attractive and being angered by the men's derogatory comments.

The situations experienced by the girls in aforementioned study provide an example of the need to explore the experiences of African American adolescent girls within many settings, especially education. This study also highlights the usefulness of critical race theory as a tool to

examine how racism impacts systems, such as education. Since critical race theory became a prominent means of examining issues of race, power, and privilege across many fields, numerous scholars have written on racial issues in education (Anyon, 2005; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1998; McCarthy and Dimitriadis, 2005; Tyson, 2003). These scholars found disadvantages for youth of color in the historical curriculum taught in school (Carlson, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Sleeter, 2005) in the economics of their social class (Anyon, 2005; MacCleod, 1995) and in educators' conceptualization of a high achieving student (Pruitt, 2004). Black children experience the watered down historical account of Black history, without many opportunities to engage in a rigorous and enriched curriculum, left primarily for the gifted and talented children (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Urban schools have become the symbol for deficit in education, allowing other schools to be more responsive and creative (Pruitt, 2004). School for African American adolescent girls is a highly racialized and gendered environment which makes success nothing short of problematic. As one of the primary places for socialization, the classroom for African American adolescent girls seems to provide more of an unhealthy environment than one that is beneficial.

### **Poor Performance**

A discussion of educational disparity, identity, or any other facet of opportunity is incomplete without the consideration of the impact of class. Poverty and class are issues that society avoids discussing. As a system that functions to maintain capitalism, poverty is racialized, which gives a false sense of equality in opportunities. Those in positions of power believe in the notion of meritocracy, which says that anyone with determination, regardless of situation and circumstance, can succeed. Thus, the majoritarian view is that people live in poverty because of "not doing enough", not because of circumstances or cultural patterns

(Iceland, 2003). To the contrary, the low and working class may do enough, but the racialization and assumptions made about those living in poverty contribute to the problem.

Class is symbolic with regards to identity (Bettie, 2003). Historically, women have rarely been seen as having class, as class was only relevant to a White working-class man. The woman's class location is hidden by the discourse on the family, thus negating the notion that women also strive for economic well being. Bettie also described class as performance (having agency and attempting to pass) and performative (being caught in the social script of acting out class because of the cultural capital that is possessed). The notions of class as performance and performative are important to the overall understanding of how girls navigate through being a part of a larger social organism that can dictate a pre-scripted way of living based on class. The failure to see women as having class subverts the discussion on class and young Black girls, leaving very little that is known regarding how their economic status affects their perceptions of themselves and how it plays out in the ways they perform their class (Bettie, 2003). Class not only dictates behavior, but economic stability and job potential, as class has a cyclical effect on generational living conditions, especially when race is a factor (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Economic, social, and cultural factors profoundly influence how people live and what people do.

The societies we live in, the relationships we have and create with other people, the ways we accommodate or resist unfairness and oppression, and the ways we choose to think about these phenomena are both limited and enabled by our place in the economic structure of society. Whether we like it or not, at individual, community, and societal levels, everything we believe and everything

we do is influenced by our place in an economic and social order. (Nesbit, 2006, p. 172)

For African Americans, education has been the gateway to obtaining a better lifestyle and financial employment, which also help increase societal status. However, despite the increased number of African Americans in professional occupations and positions primarily occupied by Whites, the experiences of glass ceilings, tokenism, residential segregation, and discrimination still persist (Cole and Omari, 2003).

### **The Role of Media in Understanding Black Femaleness**

As a perpetuator of classist, sexist, and racist stereotypes, the media play a significant role in the perceptions of social groups. The media are described by some scholars as advocates of racist ideology (Denzin, 2003; Gray, 2005; Hall, 1981; Hunt, 2005). As an entity in the business of changing perceptions and influencing decisions, media provide a place where ideas about race are “articulated, worked on, transformed, and elaborated” (Hall, 1981, p. 91). One of the media’s greatest social production tools is hip-hop, which has emerged as culture that is primarily influenced by African Americans (Hunt, 2005). Within the last few years, the image of Black women, especially in hip-hop culture, has become more commodified and hypersexualized (Perry, 2003). As one of the primary sources for information, self comparison, and entertainment, hip-hop is at the center of African American adolescent consciousness (Emerson, 2005).

The images of the African American female in hip-hop culture contrast with the images of White females and the dominant ideals of femininity, as the images of White women have defined beauty for decades and have remained constant. Long, blonde hair, blue eyes, and thin bodies are society’s standard attributes of a beautiful woman. Before hip-hop, Nell Carter’s

character on the television show *Gimme a Break*, Esther Role's character on *Good Times*, and Isabel Sanford's character on *The Jeffersons* were the representative sample of what it meant to be a Black female. In addition, the jezebel was a recurring representation of Black femaleness (Hill Collins, 1991; hooks, 1992) Today, women such as Karrine Stephens, an African American woman who wrote a memoir, *Superhead*, of her sexual exploits with men across the entertainment industry, seem to garner more attention from young African American girls than women such as First Lady Michelle Obama. In the past, Black girls may have been saved from the public pressure to conform to the White standard of beauty because of their family socialization, which taught them to see beauty in strong personality characteristics (Ward, 2000). Now it is possible that with the image of the African American woman as hypersexualized, there may be more cause for young Black girls to focus on their bodies as a central part of their beauty and self-definition.

### **Token Teens and Tweens**

While magazines and the Internet are sources adolescents use to stay abreast of current trends in youth culture, television and motion pictures are a primary source for information and entertainment. Since the early 1990s, tween and teen flicks have dominated the box office. Films such as *Clueless*, *Bring It On*, *Mean Girls*, *American Pie*, and *Save the Last Dance* are among the most popular movies of the past decade. Some of these movies don't include characters of color, but those that do portray African Americans as limited, stereotyped characters. These films also represent a very White view of reality (Hentges, 2006).

In many of these films, unrealistic images expose all adolescents to a host of incongruent messages. The lead female characters in *Mean Girls* and *Bring It On* are adult women playing young girls. As adolescent girls enter the "coming of age" stage, they can be hurt and confused

as they feel they have to conform to a body type that they just have not yet developed. “What is made desirable on screen is unattainable physically and realistically until after the awkward stages of adolescence, if ever” (Hentges, 2006, p. 52). Girls are exposed to bodies that are not indicative of their level of maturation and girls also experience incongruence in seeing a girl in a woman’s body, but acting like a young girl, as in *13 Going on 30*.

Despite the creative ways to depict the adolescent body and state of mind, class and race are two factors that rarely change to reflect a less stereotypical representation than usually presented in mainstream media. For example, *Bring It On* is filled with blatant statements of race, class, and gender, as it centers on the sport of cheerleading. The movie juxtaposes two high school girls, one White and the other Black, who enter into a literal showdown for the title of national champions. Both girls are captains of their respective cheerleading squads and represent the opposite ends of the economic spectrum. The Black squad is situated in East Compton, California, a working-class community. The White squad is situated in an upper class suburb near San Diego. This movie is presented in a Black and White binary that contributes to racist ideology through well-crafted characters of Black “hoochies” with attitude and snotty, preppy “Valley Girls.” Most viewers overlooked this framework when describing the movie as delightful and enjoyable entertainment.

In general, mainstream films offer a stereotypical representation of characters of color. Many of the leading roles in today’s teen and girl films are White, upper class, and portrayed by the most popular young stars. “Teens of color, gay teens, and teens of lower socioeconomic or working-class backgrounds rarely appear” (Hentges, 2006, p. 13). When they do appear, they take a backseat or sidekick role, like that of Dionne, Cher’s best friend in *Clueless*. These sidekick roles hardly portray Black characters as having their own sense of agency. They exist

only as a depiction of Blackness defined by the White upper-class men who produce these tween/teen movies. While there are a few film representations of Black girls which project a sense of reality, such as *Akeelah and the Bee*, the fact remains that Blackness in television and film is a commodity to be socially produced and reproduced, driven by economic gain of networks and movie studios (Gray, 1995).

Media representations of Black girlhood and womanhood are even more distressing. Young Black girls and women face a time of ambivalence and contradiction in their relationship with Black popular culture (Emerson, 2002). They face “conflicting messages about their sexuality and femininity, as well as their status both in the Black community and society at large” (Emerson, p. 218). These messages are exacerbated by music videos, which serve as a representation of African American culture. While Emerson defines the contradictory space in music videos as a way for the Black female to negotiate control over her own sexuality, an alternative view is that the conflict is not being negotiated, but rather diffused in a way that allows the Black female to live a sort of dual reality, one where she can participate in both actions that declare independence, such as wearing an afro hair style, and submission, that of condoning and supporting the subjectivity of the Black female in music and music videos.

### **The Meaning of the Messaging**

How does the depiction of African American femaleness in media socialize African American adolescent girls? While television is seen as a means of entertainment programming, its essence is far more than that. Television is a carefully crafted series of connected themes, that when repeated daily result in the cultivation of perceptions of reality (Gerbner, 1997). The reality gleaned by youth from television has changed dramatically over the past several decades.

For the first time in human history, children are hearing most of the stories, most of the time, not from their parents or school or churches or neighbors, but from a handful of global conglomerates that have something to sell. It is impossible to overestimate the radical effect that this has on the way our children grow up, the way we live, and the way we conduct our affairs. (Gerbner, 1997, ¶ 1)

At such an impressionable stage of development, youth, regardless of how resilient they may be, are still vulnerable to racist, classist, and sexist viewpoints projected by the media (Gerbner, 1996). What do African American girls take away from the images they see? What becomes of the conversations that take place after watching representations of girls that resemble their likeness in movies such as *Bring It On*? Exploring these conversations are important to understanding at what level Black adolescent girls are affected by representations of Blackness and femaleness.

The ways in which media impact people in general are far from generalizable. The content of the message, the number of times the message is seen, and the person interacting with the message are factors to consider when evaluating how media influence a person (Valkenburg, 2004). Issues of race and gender are also important to the context needed to analyze and evaluate the situations in which media's influence is most powerful. While they are eager to learn, adolescents won't accept every message that is presented. The message has to relate to their lives in some way. For example, Black adolescent girls would be less inclined to pay attention to media that project slender, thin White bodies as the beauty standard, as research indicates that Black (and Latina) females are less affected by media representations of body image (Ward & Harrison, 2005). However, a Black girl may focus her attention on a music video where images of Black women are abundant (Emerson, 2002).



Media producers capitalize on the desires and interests of the public to maintain control over what is seen and what is unseen (Gerbner, 2002). It is the constant exposure to the same message that leads people to change their behavior and perceptions about what they observe. The exposure serves as a way for ideologies to “recruit” its subjects through the motions of everyday life (Tobin, 2000). Controlling mainstream ideology through imagery is one of the primary ways to keep racism alive. The constant perpetuation of African American females in typecast and stereotyped roles reinforces the majority’s perceptions of what an African American woman is supposed to represent. Thus, when media are created that present an alternative to the dominant viewpoint, it is more likely to be dismissed. Expecting society to evolve and change its views after the repeated messaging is naively optimistic.

Naturally, it is impossible to escape interacting with media, as society is inundated with multiple forms of communication daily. Television and film are primary sources of visual entertainment, self-evaluation, and information for both adolescents and adults (Comstock & Scharrer, 1999). Society actively engages in interacting with media of their choice based on needs (Van Era, 2004). If African American adolescent girls are choosing to watch hip-hop videos, despite the scantily clad Black women, what message(s) are they gathering? Have Black girls readily accepted the image of the African American female, or is it just the connection to hip-hop that causes them to interact with this type of media?

A long-lasting debate about the power of the media to influence the conscious and unconscious minds of viewers and listeners continues. Researchers from various disciplines that engage in media research are divided among those who believe the media controls the masses, those who believe the audience or public is in control over what they believe (not the media), and those who are in-between the two perspectives (Hunt, 2005). Scholars who believe the media

control the masses base their stand on the Marxist ideology that the ideas of those that rule are the ruling ideas. The scholars on the opposite end of this view believe that media messages have a limited effect at best, as messages are filtered by contact with others. The in-between camp, inspired by Gramscian thought, believe that the forces of hegemony and everyday consciousness are in a constant struggle. The question of where scholars would place African American adolescent girls in this scheme of thinking has yet to be answered; no one's asked African American girls in order to find out.

### **Black Feminist Theory**

The beginning of feminism for African Americans began in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century when racial segregation and oppression were at a peak (Hudson-Weems, 2001). The Woman's Suffrage Movement began with a group of liberal White women who became interested in exploring ways to grant equal rights to all people, regardless of race, class, or sex. With the passing of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1870, only Black men were granted the right to vote, while White women were excluded. Black women considered any vote in their community as a positive step forward in improving life for Blacks. However, White women were disappointed believing their compassion toward Blacks would ultimately benefit them. Thus, the focus for woman's liberation became White and middle classed.

White women did not initially see color as obstructive towards their goals of privileging gender. Hegemonic and liberalistic thought convinced them that Black women dealt with the same issues and experienced the same prejudices. However, the Black woman's position was just the opposite; they did not experience the same issues and did not experience the same prejudices. The Black woman's issue was compounded by the effects of being a raced and gendered person. The White woman's issues focused on gender alone.

White women took the stance that Black women were inherently inferior and should not be allowed to vote before them (Hudson-Weems, 2001). The feminist agenda was now designated to meet the needs of White women, not all women as suggested at the inception of the movement.

[P]lacing all women's history under White women's history, thereby assigning the definitive position to the latter, is rather presumptuous. It demonstrates the ultimate in racial arrogance in suggesting that women's activity resides with them alone. It is important here to establish the true role of the Africana woman as not a participant in a separate struggle, but rather as a co-partner with the Africana man in this tremendous struggle between the races. (Hudson-Weems, 2001, p. 140)

Therefore, the Black feminist movement began as a political response to the White woman's feminist movement. Black women realized that in order to address the issues they faced as women, they would have to address their Blackness simultaneously, as it was Blackness that separated them from the first supposed all-inclusive feminist movement. The Black feminist movement aims to exploit capitalism, the racialized construction of sexuality, and to protect Black women's minds and bodies. Black feminism was the first theoretical perspective to emerge during the second wave feminist movement, which coincided with Shirley Chisolm's run for president in 1972. While her candidacy was not supported by White feminist groups, Black women strove to "...construct strategies for power and liberation but often became isolated from both black male and white female activists" (Taylor, 1998). Black men labeled Chisolm as a "captive" of the women's movement and a potential sellout to the Black race. White feminist groups resisted supporting Chisolm because of her public backing of Angela Davis, who at the

time was wanted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Taylor, 1998). Black women, while active in the community, were not politically organized. Thus, in order to create a more cohesive representation of Black women, the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) was founded in 1973.

Patricia Hill Collins (1990) described a black feminist identity that is both diverse and contradictory. Two interrelated tensions are highlighted when defining the Black feminist perspective: (a) who can be a Black feminist, and (b) what constitutes Black feminism. The term *Black feminist* has been used to apply to selected African Americans – primarily women who possess some form of feminist consciousness (Hill Collins, 1990). Some distinguishing factors of Black feminist ideas, such as the dual oppression of being Black and being a woman, result in problems distinct from that of white women and Black men. Collins finds this troublesome because it implies that one must be Black to possess such thought. While the term Black feminist can be used to identify anyone who embraces Black feminist ideas, “the separation of biology from ideology required for this usage is rarely seen in the works of Black women intellectuals” (p. 20).

Collins expresses that any woman who can empathize with the struggle of the Black woman can subscribe to Black feminist thought whether White woman, White man, or Black man. Biology does not matter, but agreement with Black feminist ideology is central to supporting the movement. Collins notes that Black feminists, particularly scholars, do not regularly take the inclusive approach to welcoming a Black feminist who is not biologically a Black woman. Claims that Black feminist thought is exclusive to African American women, regardless of experiences and worldview, should be avoided. This thought only further separates Black women from the larger global movement of concern with women’s rights.

As an ideology, Black feminism encompasses several issues (Hill Collins, 1996). Black feminism is concerned with the economic status of women and issues associated with global poverty (e.g. educational opportunities, employment policies, prostitution). Other issues that relate to political rights, such as women's right to vote and human rights violations are among the second area of concern. The third area of concern involves marital and family issues. Women's health, reproductive rights, marriage and divorce laws are a part of this global area of concern.

Using the term "Black Feminism" disrupts the racism inherent in presenting feminism as a for-whites-only ideology and political movement. Inserting the adjective "black" challenges the assumed whiteness of feminism and disrupts the false universal of this term for both White and Black women. (Hill Collins, 1996, p. 13)

The use of the word Black in Black feminism is used to highlight the assumptions made by White feminists and remind them that they are not the only feminists that exist (Hill Collins). Some Black women have trouble with the term Black feminism because it requires examining personal views on sexism and women's oppression. Many Black women reject the idea of feminism because of its association with Whiteness. In some cases, when faced with choosing race or gender, women choose race and let the aspect of gender go (Hill Collins). Aside from the difficulties Black women experience with fully supporting a Black feminist ideology, its foundation rests upon privileging issues that affect the African American female community.

With regards to making a connection to Black adolescent femaleness, Black feminist theory privileges the raced and gendered nature of this population. The Black adolescent girl can relate to issues of being Black and female. However, the connection to adolescence is missing

from this theoretical frame. Black feminist thought is concerned with global issues that have little relevance to an adolescent girl.

There is the underlying assumption that once Black girls mature, they will be concerned with the same issues as Black women. While this may be true, it is important to realize that Black girls as adolescents are only transitioning into womanhood, where they are only beginning to be introduced to and will learn to recognize issues of race, class, and gender as they encounter them on a larger scale. The literature lacks a perspective that combines race, gender, and age as a position that has its own degrees of separation from the global perspective, thus needed its own space. Girls Studies, while it privileges deconstructing the every day, here and now issues of adolescent girlhood, it does not provide the raced and gendered perspective of Black feminism. Critical race theory addresses the raced aspect, but does not address gender issues. Without using several perspectives to examine identity, race, gender, or age will inevitably be privileged.

### **Summary**

The exploration of the everyday concerns and struggles of the African American adolescent girl's life have been neglected. While scholars have spent considerable energy researching the lives of girls in general, the conclusions have little bearing on African American adolescent girls because they are not White, and the majority is economically middle or upper class. African American adolescent girls have been categorized with all other adolescent girls instead of having their own place in the literature. The real effect of race, gender, and class on the lives of African American adolescent girls has yet to be understood from their own stories. This study aims to examine these effects through the voices of the participants.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

For the past three decades, African American adolescent girls have struggled to have a voice in social science research. Black adolescent girls remain in the category of least studied, beneath White boys, Black boys, and White girls (Paul, 2003). The focus of this study was to explore the ways in which race, class, and gender affect how African American adolescent girls identify themselves. In addition, this study aimed to evaluate how the portrayal of African American girls and women in television and film influence Black adolescent girls' self definition. The following chapter provides a detailed description of the theoretical framework that guides the study, the researcher's subjectivity, the research questions, the method in which data were collected and analyzed, how the data were analyzed, and a portrait of the research participants.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

Critical race theory was chosen as the theoretical framework because of its ability to situate this research process within a cultural context. Central to critical race theory is the ideal that racism is a permanent part of everyday life. Race, which has been scientifically proven to not exist, works as a construct through which those with power and privilege maintain a social hierarchy (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). In many instances, critical race theory refers to the impact of race on the lives of Whites and Blacks, but it is not limited to just these ethnic groups. Thus, this framework is fitting because of this study's focus on African American adolescent girls and how race impacts their identity.

Critical race theory has a practical application that when used as a lens through which to view the discourses, events, and situations that occur in the normal business of life, underlying

meanings and themes tend to emerge that point to race as having a part to play in how the discourses, events, and situations of life unfold. Critical race theory supports the notion that race always matters and should be considered as a factor in exploring social issues. One of the key criticisms put forth by this theory is the color-blind approach taken by people in positions of power, which is a scapegoat for avoiding racial dialogue. The disparities in the quality of education among schools, the ability to meet the basic needs of shelter and safety, and having equal opportunity for financial prosperity are social issues that are impacted by race and in turn impact identity. This study is situated in examining how these social and environmental microcosms impact the life and identity of African American adolescent girls. Therefore, confronting the liberal, color blind viewpoint will serve as a way to deconstruct the participants' experiences.

While critical race theory takes the standpoint that race is an ever-present facet of life and determines opportunities and access to places and spaces in society, this theory is accompanied with an activist principle. Discovery and dialogue on how the social construct of race influences and directs people's lives will not suffice: the knowledge must be used for change. One of the ways in which this theory provides opportunity to incite change in society's interpretation of race is through counterstorytelling. Historical accounts that are invalid can be reconstructed through the narratives and voices of people of color. Previous research describes the African American girl as a resister through social challenges. This study employs counter-storytelling to allow the voices of African American adolescent girls to present an alternative account of their current representation in the literature.

This chosen theoretical framework proves a useful guide for the methodology and data analysis of this study. Critical race theory's foundation is steeped in acknowledgement and



exploration of social constructs, namely race, and how they impact the daily lives of people of color, specifically African Americans. The critical aspect of this theory is necessary to ascertain the covert messages in the participants' responses. The tenets and themes of this study will serve as a means to question social norms and practices in the lives of African American adolescent girls.

### **Inductive Discovery through Critical Research**

One of the factors that sets qualitative research methods apart from quantitative methods is its inquisitive and emergent nature. Not overly concerned with statistics and quantities, qualitative research questions – questions the context in which cultural and social phenomenon happen, why the phenomenon occurs the way it does, and generally seeks to understand what is going on through an inductive approach. According to Maxwell (1996), qualitative research is best suited for five specific purposes, which are (a) understanding meaning (in the broad sense); (b) understanding the context – where participants act and how the context affects their actions; (c) identifying unanticipated phenomena and influences, and generating new grounded theories about the latter; (d) understanding the process by which events and actions take place; and (e) developing causal explanations.

The construction of identity is a process where context plays an integral part. The contexts that are relevant to this study are race, class, gender, and media. This study aimed to understand how African American adolescent girls define themselves and how race, class, gender, and media influence this definition. Do they identify more with their gender or their race? Do they think of themselves as raced and gendered individuals at all? Are they aware of the ways race and gender operate in their daily lives?

One of the enticing elements of qualitative research is the manner in which the data collection process can lead to an unexplored area of thought. Scholars who have written about African American girls generally claim that resilience is one of their strongest characteristics (Paul, 2003; Ward, 2000; Pastor, McCormick, & Fine, 1996; Ross Leadbetter & Way, 1996). African American women are considered to have great inner strength. Because of the relationship between African American mothers and their daughters, and the familial structure of the African American family, there is little question about where the Black girl learns resiliency (Ward, 2000). However, does this resilience have a breaking point and in what aspect of life would this breaking point occur? Is the resilience of Black adolescent girls the strongest when it comes to academics or does it carry over to social challenges as well? The best way to address these questions is to hear the voices of these girls, which can most effectively be accomplished through qualitative methods.

Researchers who decide to conduct critical research (e.g. ethnography, action research, participatory research) are motivated by the notion that beneath the surface of everyday worldly business lies unknown and unspoken truths about the real ways in which society operates and the knowledge we accept without question (Thomas, 1993). Postmodern in nature, this type of work is more difficult because the researcher not only becomes the voice for the participants (or a means through which the participants share their story with the world), but the researcher also seeks knowledge to use for social change. Representing the “other” and the oppressed, critical research becomes the vehicle for political justice and liberating knowledge. This study is critical in the sense that it questions what is really known about the lives and identities of African American adolescent girls. This work does not try to refute any of the existing literature pertaining to African American girls’ resilience, rather it looks at the literature from an alternate

perspective to question what happens when resiliency is met by media influence, racism, and sexism at such a transitional time in life.

According to Michelle Fine (cited by Madison, 2005, p. 6), there are three positionalities in qualitative research. The first simply transmits information, void of political stance, where the researcher aims to be invisible. The second rests with the voices of the participants, where the researcher is present, but not addressed. The third position is that of activism where the researcher makes a clear declaration of “intervening on hegemonic practices.” This study works in both the second and third positionalities in that it serves as a conduit through which African American girls can tell their story and seeks to make a strong statement regarding African American adolescent female ideology.

### **Researching your own**

Madison (2005) says to start where you are, letting your life experiences, past and present, guide you to certain questions about the world. Acknowledging your personal history and the instincts that draw you in a particular direction or towards a particular problem is important, while also realizing that you may not know exactly why you are drawn in that direction. Bias and subjectivity are understood as inevitable in qualitative research (Mehra, 2002). However, the challenge lies in where and how the researcher chooses to position him or herself within the process. The topic of this research was no accident or objective conjecture, but an issue that is closely linked to my identity as the researcher.

I am an African American woman pursuing research interests that directly relate to the African American female, the African American family, and the African American community. Having shared a similar lived experience as the participants, it would be imprudent of me not to acknowledge that I play an important role in the conceptualization of this study. As a youth

growing up in an impoverished community, I speculate that our experiences in the community and environment are comparable, as the participants live in a town of low socioeconomic status. I expect the participants to be naive about the ways race, class, and gender affects their identity, as I was unaware of how they affected my identity at their age. Through attending a multiracial high school, the difference between treatment of Whites and Blacks slowly became apparent to me. My experiences and those of the participants could be considered just a series of analogous events, however, the theoretical framework that guides this research provides a perspective that validates these life events as more than just coincidence.

Critical race theory brings to the forefront issues that accompany being African American in a White, male-dominated society. The participants and I share more than just physical traits in common. The fact that we are African American and female means we experience discrimination because of our heritage and our gender. I embrace my preconceived notions regarding the participants' responses. My assumptions about how the participants will respond are rooted in my own experiences as an African American adolescent girl and my understanding of how race, gender, and class intersect. However, I also embrace the literature that says my preconceived notions about the effects of race and gender in the participants' lives may not be too skewed.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how African American adolescent girls define themselves and explore the ways in which media affect this identity definition. The primary research questions are:

1. How do African American adolescent girls describe their identities?
2. To what influences do African American adolescent girls attribute their

identity development?

3. What types of television shows and movies do African American adolescent girls consume?
4. How do African American adolescent girls interact with media when alone?
5. How do African American adolescent girls interact with media in a social setting with other African American adolescent girls?
6. To what extent do African American adolescent girls attribute their current identities to influences of the media?

Previous research describes Black adolescent girls as resilient towards life's oppressing circumstances, particularly when it comes to education. This study examined the quality of this notion, specifically regarding the media's influence on their identity construction. One may assume that since Black girls are resilient to oppressive educational environments and difficult home situations, that they will also be resilient to the media's influential messaging. I presupposed that African American adolescent girls were affected in ways they may not realize, although they may exhibit signs of strength against the dominant media culture.

Note: For the purpose of this study, media is defined specifically as films and television. This does not include newspaper, magazines, or the Internet (including chat rooms).

### **Data Collection**

There were two primary methods of data collection: interviews and focus groups. This study utilized the three-interview series as described by Seidman (1998). The first interview was for the purpose of gathering background on the participants. This is where the participants described who they were: their hobbies, their goals, and the like. The second interview contextualized the participants' experience and interaction with media. Here the participants

provided details about their television viewing habits, their television show and movie preferences, and other details of their media consumption. For example, do they usually watch television alone or with friends? What are their conversations about when they meet with friends and talk about what they watched? What goes through their minds as they watch African American women on television?

In the final interview, the participants were asked to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. The goal was to address the connections they make (or didn't make) between their life and their interaction with media. For example, one question was phrased, "You've talked about who you are as a person. You've talked about the television shows and movies you watch. Now that you've reflected on these two aspects of your life, how has your interpretation of yourself changed?" While the structure of the three-interview series states that each interview should be 90 minutes in length, the interview time was adjusted for this study. Taking into account the participants' age and ability to focus, 45 minutes to one hour was selected as the interview timeframe. Each interview employed an open-ended interview guide (see Appendix A) and was audio taped, then transcribed for analysis.

The second method of data collection was focus groups. The purpose of the focus groups was to visualize what happens when African American adolescent girls interact with media, as well as to observe how the girls interact with each other. Two focus groups were arranged. The first was for the participants to meet one another and establish familiarity with the research process and each other. The second was for the participants to gather and watch a pre-selected movie and discuss the occurrences of racist, sexist, and classist dialogues and scenes. The movie selected is discussed in a following section. Notes were taken during the focus groups to capture

the details of the interactions, participant comments and quotes, as well as the researcher's thoughts and observations throughout the process for analysis.

### **Participants and Participant Selection**

Using the method of purposeful sampling, a total of four African American adolescent females, ages fourteen to seventeen, were selected as participants. Qualitative researchers choose purposeful sampling in order to better illustrate the phenomenon or process in which they are interested (Silverman, 2000). With such a small number of participants, there is the opportunity to seek out the most representative group possible, while maintaining the confidentiality of the participants. According to Maxwell (1996), sampling requires some knowledge of the setting of the study. As an African American woman raised in a predominately African American town, I used my connections to gain access to the pool of potential participants who would be most open to participating.

The relevance of social class in this study was used to situate the participants in an environment, which provides a subtext through which identity can be examined and understood. My ability to access the geographic region in which this study took place was important in framing this study, which directly related to the classed aspect of this research. There are girls, such as myself, who grow up middle class in a low SES community. Therefore, it is important to make the delineation between the levels of economic status, as girls at each level will have a different lived experience. The fact that I am going home to conduct this work provides a special context because of the historical aspects of my hometown.

Situated in the heart of the Midwest, this relatively small, predominately African American town was once a thriving riverbed community, exploding with wealth from trade along the Mississippi, coal production, and the meat packing industry. Established in 1861, this

historic town was one of the fastest growing cities in the United States with a population of 75,000 by 1920 (ESLARP, 1995). Despite its rapid growth, it was the second poorest American city with a population greater than 50,000. Prior to 1920, changing population and political corruption caused a racial upheaval which led to a historic riot in 1917 that left 45 people dead. Several years post-riot, the neighboring town became the center of a county-wide Klu Klux Klan group. Furthermore, from 1961-1980, more than twenty-one thousand jobs were lost due to the post-industrial decline (ESLARP, 1995). This once healthy community has deteriorated socio-economically, a sub performing school district, and is home to thousands living in poverty.

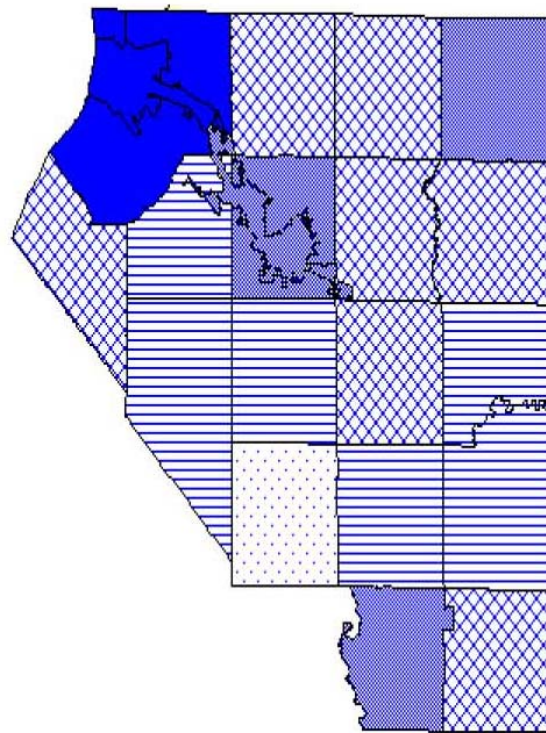
Take into consideration the following graphic and statistics:

This graphic represents the townships that comprise the county where the participants live. *The dark section (upper left, solid color) represents the specific township where the participants live, "Township E."*

According to 2000 Census data, the percent of households with single mothers and children under 18 years old is the highest in "Township E," which is 14.5% to 23.3 %, compared to the two bottom townships, whose rates range from 6.1% to 7.2%.

The Per Capita income for "Township E" (based on 1999 HUD applications) is \$5,500-\$9,599, compared to the White populated townships (represented by the horizontal striped areas) that have a Per Capita income of \$13,800-\$16,300.

Source: Comprehensive "Youth at Risk" Needs Assessment, 2002.



There is additional information in the "Youth at Risk" report which shows the grave difference between the township where these African American adolescent girls live and the townships



where Whites live. These kinds of economic conditions not only lead to health and developmental problems, but increased high school dropout rates, more teenage pregnancies, a greater number of delinquent youth, and higher unemployment (Economic and Environmental Indicators, ¶ 1).

### **Film selection**

The film chosen for the participants to watch during the second focus group was *Bring It On*. Released in August of 2000 and distributed by Universal Pictures, this film highlights a competition between two high school cheerleading squads fighting for the title of national champion. From the success of this film, subsequent sequels have been produced for video and shared similar success. The Rancho Toros are based in a high school located in a suburban White neighborhood in California. Their competition, the Clovers, is based in a high school in East Compton, an African American neighborhood in Los Angeles. The Toros are on their way to their sixth national championship when their captain discovers their routine was stolen from the Clovers. Ultimately, the Clovers win the national championship, with the Toros placing second.

This film projects a host of racist and classist stereotypes in the diversity of the two cheerleading squads. The Toros' school is depicted as upper-class wealthy, while the Clovers' school is represented as lower-class poor. The Clovers' characters are portrayed as the loud, bitchy Black girls with no class, while the Toros symbolize refinement. The goal for watching this movie was twofold: The first goal was to observe how African American adolescent girls interact while watching some form of media together. Will they feed off of each other's reactions or outwardly express alternative opinions? How will they respond to the African American female characters in the film? The second goal was to assess the participants'

awareness of racial stereotypes, discuss the imbalanced representations of adolescent girlhood, and subsequently their attitudes towards the film.

### **Participant portraits**

Each participant chose a pseudonym to protect their identity. The participants' responses have been coded to indicate the data collection source: FG1 and FG2 refer to the focus groups and I1, I2, and I3 refer to the individual interviews.

*“Candice.”* Candice is a 17 year old junior at a local high school. She relocated to the area with her family two years ago. She is a member of the school basketball team, but loves volleyball, and considers school a “main priority.” Currently she resides with her mother, younger brother, and her grandparents. Her mother and father are both employed; her mother as a sales person at Sears and her father as a barber (who also owns his own business). Her father, who has four other children from a previous relationship, is part of her life, but does not live with the family.

While she says that school is a priority, she feels as though she could do better academically. She enjoys spending time with her friends and her younger brother, engaging in the typical teenager activities (going to the movies, to the mall, and out to eat). She describes her relationships with her teachers as good because she does her work and is generally quiet in class, unless someone is talking to her. While she's a hardcore drama tv fan and also has a strong liking for the crime scene investigation shows, she will flip through the channels to find something that catches her attention. Candice admires actresses Vivica A. Fox and Gabrielle Union for what she considers playing strong, smart, and determined characters.

*“Crystal.”* Crystal is a 14 year old high school freshman who loves to talk on the phone, watch television, and joke around with her friends. She resides with her mother, sister, and

brother. Her mother works with children and her father “works with this company where he goes into stores and stocks things” (CI1). Her interactions with her teachers are positive and open where she “...pays attention to what they have to say and they pay attention to what she has to say.” While she doesn’t consider herself a teacher’s pet, she is very active in class and says she doesn’t give her teachers any trouble.

At the top of her favorite-television-show list is *Hannah Montana* and BET’s *106 and Park*. Among her favorite movies are *Shrek*, *Bewitched*, and *Bring it On: All or Nothing*. For Crystal, a good female role model is someone who has a good education, someone who is likeable with a good personality, and someone who has a lot of real friends who are a good influence on her life. Her hobbies include playing basketball, softball, football, and cooking. She is an avid fan of the food channel.

“*Danielle.*” Danielle is a 16 year old high school junior. She plays basketball for her high school and is a straight A student. In addition to basketball, she’s on the track and softball teams. She lives with her mother, sister, and brother and considers herself very academic. She loves to read, talk on the phone, and go to church, where she’s active in praise dancing. Watching television is a sporadic activity for her.

Danielle’s interactions with her teachers are very positive and she considers herself a teacher’s pet. She is very selective when it comes to the people she associates with and considers other girls at her school to be “messy.” Her aunt, who practices law, is her inspiration, which leads her to watch shows such as *Law and Order* and *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* when she does watch television. While her aunt is inspiring, she considers her mother her greatest role model because her mother “stands on her own two feet” (DI1). Her favorite movies are *Love and Basketball* and *The Cheetah Girls*.

“Michelle.” Michelle is a 16 year old high school junior. She is not active in sports, but says she’s been on the honor roll all her life and education is very important. She describes herself as quiet until you get to know her, then she’s really loud and talkative. She has two half brothers, one adopted brother, and a sister, who are all younger. She lives with both parents. Her mother is a paraprofessional with the local school district and her father is a health care consultant.

Michelle has separate circles of friends (those whom she talks to in school and those she talks to outside of school). She enjoys watching the television shows *One Tree Hill*, *Gossip Girls*, *Trading Spaces*, and most home improvement shows. She spends a lot of time on the computer playing games or visiting *Facebook*. She admires actress Jada Pinkett Smith for her strong character and Jennifer Hudson (Oscar winner in *Dreamgirls*) for “being comfortable in her own skin” (MI2).

### **Data Analysis**

Each interview was transcribed and analyzed using the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The interview responses were coded, looking for similarities and differences, which formed categories of like data. From the categories, themes emerged and frame the discussion of the analysis. The constant comparison method, widely used for analyzing qualitative data was employed in this study. Each interview was transcribed and labeled. The transcripts were then read for similar quotes and comments. Those comments were grouped and given a label based upon their content. This process continued until all the related data was placed into a theme. Those themes were revisited to determine whether new themes or subthemes could be created.

The focus groups served as a descriptive narrative that allows the reader to get closer to the participants in their familiar, comfortable locales. The narrative is important in qualitative research because it provides a richness of data that cannot be acquired by any other methodological means. Madison (2005) refers to ethnographic work as having a performative nature that is evocative and relational. This piece of the analysis serves as entrance into the social lives of the participants and as a means to bring validity to the central concern of this research. The hope is that through the descriptive narrative, the reader will come to understand the lives of Black girls through their own expressions and voices.

### **Validity Concerns and Limitations**

Maxwell (1996) describes validity in qualitative research as a goal, rather than a product. Validity looks at whether the researcher has measured what the research claims to measure. The meaning of validity today has taken a more broad definition associated with truth value - “the correspondence between research and the real world” (Wolcott, 2001, p. 169). Since this study centers on African American adolescent girls, it would seem logical that interacting with this population through interviews and observation would associate some level of realness to the research. While a research design does not completely guarantee a study will be valid, the way the researcher plans to address the research questions can lend itself to a greater chance of measuring what was intended. This study is firmly grounded in a method that is best suited for the topic and will allow the participants to express themselves.

The methodological design of a research study requires a certain level of knowledge and awareness of the subject. A research topic can be multifaceted, making it difficult to address each facet of the larger issue in one research study. One of the limitations of this work is its narrow population focus. Given the small body of literature on Black adolescent girls, there is a

need to consider Black girls at age groups pre and post adolescence. In light of *A Girl Like Me* (Davis, 2006), a recreation of Kenneth Clark's doll tests conducted in the late 1930's, pre-school and primary age Black girls' development is important to consider. Other factors that affect identity development, such as role models, peer groups, racial identity, and gender identity should also be considered as part of the expansion of African American girl literature. Media is also narrowly defined and future research should expand upon the definition to include major information sources such as the Internet.

### **Confidentiality**

Getting participants to be forthcoming in an interview is no small feat. It is natural to be somewhat guarded when sharing personal thoughts with a stranger, let alone being comfortable when your words are recorded. While it may be standard to assume that participants in research will remain anonymous (Seidman, 1998), issues of confidentiality should be explicitly discussed. Anonymity cannot be guaranteed in some cases, but there are steps to ensure that participants understand the conditions under which their identity would be revealed. In some cases, participants are given the choice as to whether they would like their names to be used in the study (Mishler, 1986, as cited in Seidman, 1998).

In this case of working with children, it is of the utmost importance that they and their parents understood that their identities remain anonymous. Because of the small number of participants, each girl was selected from a different neighborhood school in an attempt to create anonymity among the participants, with no guarantee that in this small town the girls will not know of each other, especially those involved in sports. Pseudonyms identify participants and their responses. Before the first focus group, each participant was briefed on the importance of

keeping all conversations confidential. All data collected throughout the study were accessed and stored in a secure location known only to the researcher.

### **Reciprocity**

Researchers are often rewarded through their work. The rewards range from monetary gain, to notoriety, to publication. Researchers are not the only ones who can benefit from the research process. Often, participants get to be heard, which may improve aspects of their personal lives or they may receive help in addressing a recurring problem (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Because participants are willing to allow researchers into their lives and thoughts, it is important that the process is not taken for granted.

Many underprivileged children are not encouraged to take a look at the outcome of their actions, nor are they guided through making decisions on how to act. The benefit to participants in this case is an opportunity to learn more about themselves, including why they make the choices they do. It is an opportunity for the researcher to share the reflections of the participants with communities at large who care and can make a difference by having this knowledge.

Researchers traffic in understanding. Most study participants are preoccupied with *action*-how to work and live better. It can be argued that if you approach your analytic work with a deeper sense of its action and implications, your understanding will be deeper-and the benefits to participants more equitable. (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 292)

The hope is that the participants in this study are affected by the process, taking away from the experience a sense of agency and the ability to recognize power in thinking and questioning what we assume to be real in everyday life. Cultural studies scholars consider themselves part of a social change movement and I consider my work serving an altruistic

purpose – one that teaches the participants about themselves, teaches me about my position as researcher, and teaches us all about each other.

### **Trustworthiness**

A study that has a greater sense of purpose (or worthiness) is what Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe as a key component to helping your audience understand why they should pay attention to your work. To address this issue, a study must be credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). All research methods and techniques (e.g. data collection, data analysis, and participant selection) were documented. Triangulation of the data also reduces the risk of bias and allows for a “...better assessment of the generality of the explanations that you develop” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 93). Through interviews and focus groups, this study addressed these issues.

Providing rich and thick description of the data creates transferability through allowing the readers to develop their own conclusions. Confirmability, which compares the researcher’s assumptions about the data to the participants’ responses, is discussed throughout the presentation of this study. Dependability, which confirms the proper methods of data collection, was achieved through the processing of the research questions to determine the best ways in which to derive the answers. While these aspects of the research design are important, Seidman’s notion of not having formulated approaches to validity and trustworthiness, but “...understanding of and respect for the issues that underlie these terms” (Seidman, 1998, p. 20), is where this study situates itself.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Given this study's examination of the connections between race, class, and gender as constructs that affect and influence identity and daily life of African American adolescent girls, critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) was chosen as the lens through which the data were analyzed. Patriarchy and White privilege have deep roots in our historical, political, social, and economic institutions. Critical race theory aims to uncover these influences and help to transform them into something positive. While this theory began its use in discourses on basic civil rights issues, its scope can be expanded to include any major social issue such as welfare reform, education reform, the discrepancy between men's and women's wages, and so forth. The tenets of critical race theory can be seen daily in interactions among individuals, in business transactions, and in these research participants' lived experiences. This analysis uses critical race theory to illuminate the ways in which race, class, and gender interact as functions of oppression, as well as to reveal the clandestine manner in which these constructs work together unbeknownst to the research participants.

Data collection, which consisted of two focus groups and individual interviews, was conducted during the month of June 2008. The interview method utilized was Seidman's (1998) three-interview series. The focus groups were held June 6<sup>th</sup> and June 24<sup>th</sup>. The data analysis began with the interviews and continued through October, 2008. Both the data from the focus groups and the interviews were analyzed using the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), where the data were coded for similarities and differences, resulting in a thematic categorization of the data.

The data results and discussion are presented together as one woven component. First, the emergent themes are listed. Next, each theme is discussed and analyzed, intertwining data from both the focus groups and interviews. The participants' responses/quotes are coded (see Appendix B) for a reference point as to where the data were gleaned. The participants will be referenced by pseudonym throughout the chapter. Table 1 highlights the basic demographic information about the participants.

Table 1

*Participant Reference Chart*

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Pseudonym	Age	Grade Level	Type of School	Parents in the home	Siblings
Candice	17	Junior	Public	Mother and Grandparents	6
Crystal	14	Freshman	Public	Mother	2
Danielle	16	Junior	Public	Mother	2
Michelle	16	Junior	Public	Mother and Father	4

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The participants represent a range of African American adolescent femaleness. Danielle, the straight A student athlete, wants to become a lawyer; she is the oldest of three children, quiet, headstrong, and sees her father occasionally. Candice, is the middle child among her mother's children. While she doesn't live with her father, she sees him and her four half-siblings often. Candice prefers to stay in her room, watch television, and listen to music; she doesn't quite know what career she wants to pursue. Michelle is the only participant who lives with both parents and two adopted siblings; the aspiring interior decorator loves to talk once you get to know her.

Crystal, the youngest of the participants, is shy and cheerful; this middle child wants to become a pediatrician. Like Danielle, she does not live with her father, but sees him occasionally.

### **Segue to the Analysis**

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which race, class, and gender affected the self-described identity of African American adolescent girls and how media influenced this description. Previous studies have discovered resiliency as a dominant aspect of the African American girls' character (Leadbetter & Way, 2007; Paul, 2003; Stevens, 2002; Ward, 2000). However, this character trait has primarily been found to exist in the limited landscape of where research and African American girls intersect: educational success and achievement, and the African American adolescent girl's role in the family setting. The results of this study do not negate African American girls' resistance to challenges in these areas of their lives, but rather highlights areas where African American adolescent girls are vulnerable and perhaps naive about their life possibilities and the ways that race, class, and gender can work against them. This chapter will discuss the results of the study and how race, class, gender, and media work within and around the lives and identity development of African American adolescent girls.

### **Focus Group One**

In the first focus group, the participants were formally introduced to each other using their chosen pseudonyms. Crystal expressed some concern with understanding how the interview process would take place. "I've never done an interview like this before. I'm sorta nervous about what I'm supposed to say" (CFG1). Candice and Michelle were a bit quiet at the onset but grew more comfortable as the icebreakers were introduced. As the youngest, Crystal, despite her nervousness, jumped into the conversations easily. Danielle's disposition throughout

the process remained somewhat removed, but this did not affect her willingness to share and interact with the other participants. The initial focus group proved to be beneficial as the participants became familiar with one another and learned the expectations for the interviews and second focus group. During the first focus group, an icebreaker was presented in which each girl was asked to describe herself in five words.

Candice, who likes to stay in her room, openly shared her description of herself as she vocalized her thought process. She described herself as outgoing, athletic, a clown, intelligent, and beautiful. Crystal described her personality, smile, eyes, attitude, and mind as what she liked best about herself. Danielle, while reserved, quickly relayed her descriptors as smart, talented, loving, generous, caring, and awesome, adding in an extra characteristic. Michelle, the chatty one, talked through her thoughts and described herself as “Bossy, uh, intelligent, I’m driven, talkative, and I’m kinda like, if I’m not having a bad day, I’m pretty bubbly, like I’m always smiling” (MFG1). Once the girls became familiar with one another, a conversation about likes and dislikes of music artists, movies, and things they share in common (e.g. sports played in school) ensued. The participants were informed of the movie selection for the second focus group and were excited to watch *Bring It On* (2000) as a group, as each girl was familiar with the movie’s plot and characters. The participants’ familiarity with the film, which will be discussed later in the chapter, set the tone for how these girls perceive themselves and their environment.

### **Focus Group Two: *Bring It On***

One of the research questions posed in the study addressed how African American adolescent girls interact with media as a group. The goal of the second focus group was to answer this question through observation of the participants as they watched a movie. The film *Bring It On* is set in San Diego where two high school cheerleading squads compete to win the

title of best cheerleading squad in the country. The Toro squad has held this title for six consecutive years. The Clovers, from East Compton are a squad determined to have their moment in the spotlight. Both teams have headstrong and determined captains, one of whom is white, the other Black.

Torrance, the captain of the Toros discovers that her predecessor has stolen their choreography from the Clovers. Torrance is confronted by Isis, the Clover's captain, and the conversation insights a duel at the national championship. While Torrance and the team attempt to create a new dance routine, the Clovers face not being able to compete because of lack of funding to travel to the championship. Torrance convinces her father to sponsor the Clovers, who reject the offer and accept financial support from an Oprah-like character. The teams face off for the title, with the Clovers winning the championship.

Despite the stereotyped representation of each high school (white upper class "preppies" and low class "ghetto" inner city youth), there are several ways in which race, class, and privilege affect the dynamic of this plot. Critical race theory makes a connection between opportunity and social class. As in the film, the Toro's school, which is White and upper class, is represented as one with privilege. The Clovers' school is represented as one situated in a poor, lower class, African American environment. "Racism is a means by which society allocates privilege and status" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 17). Class differences between Blacks and Whites are further exacerbated by media representation, as evidenced in this film.

The Black squad would not be in the position to receive the benefits of White privilege because they are not White and their position in society serves a purpose in the social hierarchy, which is to validate the privileged existence of Whites. The socioeconomic dichotomy in this film is an example of what gives race power. When Whites are represented in the media as more

privileged than persons of color, the power of racism is reproduced. When Blacks are represented as stereotyped, lower class individuals, society's notions of Black inferiority are reinforced. This film became a national sensation, producing several sequels. Its popularity can not only be catchy cheers, an engaging plot, and exciting dance moves, but to the normalcy of racist thought. Imagine the film if the economically and socially privileged squad was Black and the lower class squad was White. This movie may not have been as successful if the both cheer squads were Black or if both squads were White. Critical race theory posits that racism is normal (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), which provides an explanation for how a movie with such a classed, Black and White binary, could be so entertaining.

*Bring It On* was chosen due to its depictions of race, class, and gender, and its popularity in the culture at large. The movie's depictions of race, class, and gender were the focal points for the discussion throughout the movie viewing and afterward. As the girls watched the movie, they recited entire pieces of dialogue between characters, sang the songs, and performed the cheers that appeared in the movie. The girls appeared more excited when the African American cheerleading squad was on screen. When reciting the dialogue or cheers, the participants became just as animated as the characters in the movie, adding "... tell her, girl!" and "uh huh" in response to what was said. The tension displayed in the movie between the African American cheer squad and the White cheer squad could be felt in the girls' demeanor as they watched the movie.

"I know she didn't!" and "She's stuck up" were phrases interjected by the participants in response to the actions and dialogue of members of the White squad. The participants were asked questions throughout the movie at scenes that represented the Black and White cheer squads as individual groups and at scenes where the two cheer squads interacted and exchanged

dialogue. The participants described the White squad as being “snobbish” teenagers that were “spoiled” with little respect for their parents. They mocked and laughed at the White squad for being “silly” and “clueless to the real world.” Their response to the African American cheer squad was more empathetic and supportive. The participants verbally expressed their thoughts of acting similar to the Black squad if they were in the same situation.

“If someone stole something I worked hard for, I would have an attitude too!” (MFG2). Michelle is referring to one of the conflicts in the movie where the White squad was using cheers created by the Black squad as their own. The Black squad discovered this and was angered at the White squad for not showing remorse for the situation. Not only did the White squad steal the Black squad’s cheer material, but they used it for several years to win national cheerleading championships. In essence, Michelle affirms the behavior of the Black squad due to the situation.

Critical race theory refers to this situation as one where the dominant group in society seizes opportunities to exploit subordinate groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The Toros seized an opportunity to exploit the Clovers and claim the cheers for their benefit. Danielle, who was particularly bothered by this concept, said “Black people are talented and can do a lot of different things, no matter what anyone says” (DIFG2). Danielle’s comment calls attention to African Americans’ ability and skill. The way her comment is phrased suggests that she feels Blacks are a people who can creatively express themselves or that she has possibly doubted the ability of Blacks to have something meaningful to offer others and the fact that the White squad wanted to use the cheers of the Black squad gives credibility to the Black squad’s talent.

Despite having seen *Bring It On* numerous times, the participants still expressed their joy for the movie. “I love the cheers, the dancing, the action. It’s a really fun movie” (CFG2). “I

just like cheerleading. I like to watch the routines” (CaFG2). Overall, the underlying issues of race, class, and gender as represented in the movie did not impact the participants’ abilities to identify with the film or to be entertained by it. The participants were very aware of the stereotyped way African American girls were represented in the film.

“The Black girls, like have attitude, and are all in the White girls’ faces. I mean, that’s the way some Black girls are, but then some of them are not. They look like that on tv a lot.” (MFG2).

Black girls on tv always seem to have this attitude. I know all Black girls aren’t like that because I have friends who are very down to earth. I think it’s more entertaining for people to see the Black girl who’s real sassy and will say anything. (CaFG2)

By comparing the film portrayal of African American girls to their real life experiences with friends and other Black girls, the participants compared the portrayal of Black females on the screen to their experiences with other Black girls in reality. They were very aware of the difference in lifestyle appearance between the two squads. “The White girls looked like they had money and the Black girls didn’t” (CrFG2).

The White girls went to a nice school, drove nice cars to school, and just looked like they were doing well. The Black girls’ school didn’t look as well taken care of, like the school had no money. (CaFG2)

The participants seemed insightful when it came to recognizing the way the White squad was portrayed and the way the Black squad was portrayed.

While the movie and its sequels are popular, they reinforce the concepts of racism, capitalism, and patriarchy. The African American characters from the inner city are attitudinal



and loud, while the White characters from the suburbs are preppy and proper. The aforementioned stereotypes are consistently reproduced in American cinema and in life (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Hentges, 2006). Viewers who know groups of ‘others’ only through the media base their perceptions of and interactions with those others on the media stereotypes. The White characters work to maintain their social position through confiscating the ideas of the Blacks and using them as their own. As pointed out by Delgado and Stefancic (2001), Tatum (1994), and hooks (1992), dominant groups in society use and exploit the ideas of those in subordinate positions. What remains is the privilege and power that allows White men to write and produce such a film, utilizing racism as a means to prosper financially. The film also reproduces notions of social class and its association with race: being poor is connected to Blackness and being wealthy is connected to Whiteness.

### **Themes**

The analysis of the focus groups and the interviews yielded four major themes: (a) school, career, and peers (b) the influence of media on Black adolescent femaleness, and (c) identity: young, Black, and female. The primary data source for the themes is the individual interviews. The focus group data primarily contributed to the theme of Black femaleness in the media, but was most beneficial in providing insight into how African American adolescent girls interact with media while together. Some of the data from the focus groups and the interviews are not included in the analysis because they did not fit into a theme (e.g. questions about the interview process, an exhaustive list of the participants’ favorite movies). The unused information does not add to or remove any insights from the results or discussion.

## **School, career, and peers**

As young adolescent girls, the participants are self-described busy young ladies, who maintain busy schedules both in and out of school. Between spending time with friends, extracurricular activities, and family obligations, the participants lead full and busy lives. These young girls have begun to conceptualize their futures beyond high school and consider themselves to have high aspirations to do well in anything they attempt to accomplish.

**School.** Each participant emphasized the importance of school in her life. Their families stress the importance of education and support them in their endeavors toward academic achievement. From a young age, the participants have been told that education is the key to success. Their parents' mantra seems to be, "The better you do in school, the better your chances of graduating from high school, attending college, and getting that dream job." Michelle describes her experience in school.

My parents expect a lot out of my grades and they see Bs on a report card and we'll have discussions and so it's structured and I want to do good for myself and I know that I can push myself and I have to try and make the right grades so that I can go to college. (MI1)

Michelle's idea that good grades will get her into college is a notion reinforced through schooling. High academic performance is associated with being competitive to gain admission into quality colleges and universities, and possibly receiving a scholarship. Michelle's notion may be right, however the idea of economic determinism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) holds that racism and class play more of a role in who has access to what resources.

Racism is a means by which society allocates privilege and status. Racial hierarchies determine who gets tangible benefits, including the best jobs, the best schools, and invitations to parties in people's homes. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 17)

Candice echoed sentiments similar to Michelle's.

With my family, well like my mom is like a B is okay but an A is better but with my dad it's all A's. Mainly my stepmom really cause she's like stuck on school. She's in college for soo many different things. It's confusing, but she's like, I want A's. This is a 91 but I want a 100. She's always got to be the best. (Ca11)

Through her father and stepmother, Candice sees the importance of education, but also the importance of the grade. While Candice stated that she likes school, she did not comment that she feels pressure from her family to get A's. Her comment does express her family's desire to achieve high grades, which may inadvertently affect Candice's motivation to get A's in school instead of B's.

Danielle was proud to share her educational accomplishment. "I'm very academic. I keep up with my grades. I'm a straight A student to be exact" (DI1). She's been a straight A student for the past two years. Much like the other participants, Danielle's family associates academic achievement with A's. Making good grades in school was a common thread among the participants. Most parents want their children to score high academically.

Girls such as the participants support this notion and also believe that good grades are the key to access to better colleges. Like many families, African American families tend to place high pressure on their children to make the highest grades possible to increase their chances of getting into quality institutions of higher education. The idea that good grades, regardless of race and class, will lead to admission to college, reinforces hegemony (Hilliard, 2001) and

meritocracy, ideas which critical race theory suggests are produced with the White, upper class male in mind.

Schools serve as a place for assimilation, socialization, and segregation (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Watkins, Lewis, & Chou, 2001). Schools reinforce hegemonic ideology, which leads to a curriculum where race is nearly invisible (Ladson-Billings, 2003). As society becomes more ethnically diverse, the role of schools in socializing African American students to learn to live and work with people of different races and cultures will become more difficult, as most Black students attend school with other Black children (Hudley, 2001). Race, as a social construct, is influential in the quality of educational experience for African American students. The participants' success in school will depend upon more than individual effort alone, as the raced and classed nature of the educational system will present obstacles for them to overcome in the struggle for success.

The socioeconomic barriers within the participants' educational experiences do not appear to have much of an effect on the participants' interactions with their teachers. For example, Crystal loves school and her teachers. She considers school a site for hard work, but also as a place to have fun. "I'm very active in class, and I answer a lot of questions" (Cr11). Crystal did not comment about focusing on making good grades although it may be important to her. Crystal, being the youngest of the participants, seems to believe that being active in class and answering the teacher's questions contributes to educational success. Crystal's family may not reinforce the notion of good grades as much as the families of the other participants, however, she feels making a contribution in class is important.

Despite the fact that each participant, except Crystal, has younger siblings, Michelle was the only person who spoke about keeping a watchful eye on her younger siblings to help them stay focused in school.

My little sister doesn't take school seriously and I tell her you need to do better you can do better. My little brother, he's smart. He might mess up and start clowning in class, but other than that he knows that school is the number one priority for us in our family. (M11)

Michelle is speaking of reinforcing the importance of education to her younger sister and brother. Her mother and father have instilled the value of education upon her, and she is in turn doing the same to her siblings. According to Janie Ward (2000), Michelle is conforming to her role as family supporter. Ward states that many young Black adolescent girls become the center of emotional support and financial support for their families. African American adolescent girls are groomed through truth telling to prepare for dealing with issues of racism and economic oppression. The fact that Michelle was the only girl to comment on advising her younger siblings could be related to having both parents in the household. Since the mother plays both parental roles in the other participant's families, they may not have as much time to be truthful with their daughters about their role in their family's survival, as they are busy with trying to maintain the household.

When asked about their relationships with their teachers, the participants overall felt they had a positive relationship with their teachers. Danielle said "I'm a teacher's pet. I love all my teachers. They love me" (D11). Danielle may not have meant that she and her teachers actually love each other, but she clearly feels that she and her teachers share positive feelings toward one another. Crystal said her teachers "Treat me, um, really good. They pay attention to what I have

to say and I pay attention to what they have to say, so we pretty much have a good relationship (CrI1). Crystal also remarked that she “doesn’t get into much trouble,” (CrI1) thus her relationship with her teachers is really good. Both Danielle and Crystal highlight the concept that behavior in class is important to the student teacher relationship. The well-behaved students are the most liked students.

Danielle and Crystal’s comments inadvertently spoke about respect, which was a theme among Michelle and Candice’s responses. Candice replied that her teachers treated her “Fine, I guess. I really don’t have any teachers that are like, mean, all my teachers pretty helpful and respectful to me, so” (CaI1). Michelle said,

Um, I think they’re respectful. Sometimes if they have a class that isn’t respectful to them they tend to like treat everybody with a little attitude, but I mean, nobody has a perfect class and you always have a class clown, and so, but there’s only so much a teacher can take. But they treat me just fine. (MI1)

Both Candice and Michelle responded similarly to the question. Candice appears to associate respect with meanness. Since her teachers were not mean to her, they must be respectful. Michelle recognizes that teachers at times can become disrespectful to the class when people misbehave; however, her teachers are not purposely disrespectful to her. Despite literature that says African American female students feel a lack of support from administration and teachers (Stevens, 2005), the participants have observed the opposite in their educational experiences thus far. These four girls appear to have constructive, not destructive relationships with their teachers. Since the way teachers interact with students from ethnic backgrounds different from their own is important (Hudley, 2001), this researcher feels it is significant to

recognize that the participants' experiences are different from those of other Black adolescent girls, as the participants have both Black and White teachers.

The participants are fortunate to have positive interactions with their teachers, as the literature paints a different picture of experience and possibility for African American adolescent girls. "In the classroom context, adolescent black girls' connection to a stigmatized racial status – blackness- and an inappropriate femaleness (i.e. confidence, high self-esteem), jeopardize their academic achievement goals" (Fordham, 2001, p. 148). Race and gender define the school and life experiences of African American students and their teachers' perceptions of their abilities (Watkins, Lewis, & Chou, 2001). Class also plays a major role in the quality of education for African American children. Bourdieu's notion of field and habitus (McRobbie, 2005) places this concept into perspective.

The field represents the larger society in which systems of power and privilege are managed and conserved. Habitus refers to the individual environment and smaller social circle in which people live (McRobbie, 2005). Not only can one's habitus be empowering or impeding, based on class, race, and gender, but a person rarely moves beyond the habitus into which he or she is born. Many African American adolescent girls exist in an underprivileged habitus where race and socioeconomics are the primary barriers; gender should not be neglected as a factor affecting the habitus. These factors can prohibit Black adolescent girls from moving into fields that are primarily accessible through existing in a privileged habitus (e.g. White, male, upper class). Therefore, African American adolescent girls, because they are not White, male, or living at a level of financial stability, will most likely not encounter the opportunities afforded to White men and women who live middle and upper class lives. Hard work alone rarely moves individuals beyond their birth habitus (Pruitt, 2004).

Regardless of socioeconomic barriers that may face them, the participants expressed grand expectations for their career aspirations. Crystal wants to become a pediatrician. “I like to help kids. I like to see them smile” (Cr11). Danielle aspires to become a lawyer “Mainly because of my aunt. I love what she does and how she does her little business or whatever and I watch like *Law and Order* and I like what they do and it interests me” (DI1). Candice has not yet solidified her career goals, but described what interests her.

Every since I was little I like watching CSI and stuff like that, so I really want to do stuff like that. I like doing things with my hands. I remember my auntie taking me to the obstetrician one time and there was this thing that you could see the parts of the body and it moved, and that stuff has always fascinated me. I think I would like to cut on people, dead or alive. (Ca11)

Michelle provided a detailed anecdote of how she became interested in her career choice.

I want to be an interior designer. I just, I remember the first time I went to Pottery Barn and I went through and like I saw this furniture and like, I was like “Mom look at this paint color!” and I just was like soo excited. I like shows like *Trading Spaces* and *Flip This House* and I love HDTV cause I love to see what they come up with, so I just like to see homes and make them better. Like when I was getting bedroom furniture, I had such a hard time because I went through thinking this looks really nice or this would go well with that color and just all these things. I guess I’m just an artsy person. I see stuff and want to make it prettier. (MI1)

The participants have a variety of career interests. Candice, Michelle, and Danielle link their career aspirations to a television show. Danielle associated her interest with *Law and Order*, a primetime drama that features the aspects of solving crimes and the prosecution of



criminals. Candice mentioned *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, as helping to drive her interest into forensic science-based activities. *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* is a primetime drama that provides insight into how crimes are solved from a scientific standpoint. The reality shows Michelle mentioned, *Trading Spaces* and *Flip This House*, feature professionals designing rooms and renovating homes. I believe that Crystal did not reference a television show because currently no show focuses on the duties of a pediatrician.

The participant responses suggest they watch these television shows to gain a perspective on the reality of what is required of a lawyer, interior designer, or forensic scientist. However, the shows they watch may not accurately represent what it is like to work in that particular profession. George Gerbner (1992, 1997, 2002), Stuart Hall (1981), and Darnell Hunt (2005) describe media as a tool, used by those in power, to reinforce hegemonic ideology among the masses. Since media are known to cultivate perceptions of reality (Gerbner, 1997), it is likely that the participants have been affected by watching the aforementioned television shows. The nature of the television shows present a glamorous portrayal of these professions, but give no indication of the educational requirements, financial costs, or barriers that a person would experience in trying to reach these professional goals. Thus, the television shows the participants are watching for career insight provide a false sense of reality about the professions.

The principle of meritocracy, the notion that anyone can fulfill their dreams if they choose to work for them, is embedded in media representations of middle-class African American life. The participants identify with these portrayals through their desire to be successful women. The participants spoke without concern about their futures. The idea of going to college was unspoken, but implied, as they talked about the careers they wanted to explore. As each participant named a television show in which an example of her career interest

was displayed, it confirmed the power of the middle-class media image to cloud the reality of opportunities and possibilities for those who are poor. The “American dream” of hard work paying off does not guarantee or predetermine success, especially when race is always in the background (Peck and Gershon, 2006). The participants do not recognize that being poor has effects on one’s potential to change their circumstances.

**Peers.** Aside from describing their career aspirations, their academic achievement, and their relationships with their teachers, the participants shared their thoughts on their peers in school, specifically other African American adolescent girls. Described by Danielle as “messy and nosy,” these girls “cause problems for school staff” and are “always in other people’s lives and they can’t live their own. [The girls] are always in someone else’s business” (DI1).

Michelle describes the other Black adolescent girls at her school in comparison to herself and her friends.

You have your Black girls like me and my friends, that I would say kind of like control it. We don’t go around talking loud and drawing a crowd, we just like stay focused on school and stuff like that. Then you have your other half that are like “I’m gone fight her and I’m gone...” and it doesn’t matter to them. When you like see them out like, they got two inches of material on, and this and that is hanging out everywhere, and it’s just like... it’s different. They have that loud, ghetto thing about them. (MI1)

Michelle’s comment regarding the ‘ghetto thing’ about other African American girls in her school is aligned with Signithia Fordham’s (1997) work on African American females in the academy and the continuous perpetuation of stereotypes through the media. In addition, ways in which media cultivate popular perceptions about African American women (Gerbner, 1992;

Hall, 1981) can be seen through this description, especially through the use of the term *ghetto*. While Merriam-Webster defines ghetto as “ a quarter of a city in which members of a minority group live especially because of social, legal, or economic pressure” (Merriam-Webster, 2009), is primarily used in popular culture as a stereotype in social settings. In the social sense, the way Michelle referenced the term ghetto is slang expression meaning “acting Black.” Acting Black refers to the stereotyped way in which African Americans behave and appear (e.g. talking loudly, speaking improper English, sagging pants, etc.). Not only is ghetto used by African Americans to describe other African Americans has been adopted by Whites as a means to describe Blacks.

From a social class standpoint, ghetto also refers to individuals, primarily African Americans who live at or below the poverty line. Poverty has been and continues to greatly affect minorities (Danziger, 2000). Three out of the four participants live in a single parent household, which financially places the girls and their families at an economic disadvantage. The median income of the community in which the participants live is roughly \$26, 097, where 27.4 percent of the population lives below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). Thus, the term ghetto carries a connection to African Americans both socially and economically.

While media don't actually use the term ghetto in reference to African Americans, it has become somewhat synonymous with the way African Americans are scripted and projected in hip-hop culture and motion picture films of the 1990s (e.g. *B.A.P.S.*, 1997). Through the use derogatory terms such as ghetto, African Americans' inferiority to Whites is reinforced. In turn, some Blacks have internalized this derogatory language, which is used as a means of oppression, and use it towards their own ethnic group. The effects of this concept seem to have manifested into a reversed stereotype ideology. During the watching of *Bring it On*, the participants cheered

for the stereotypical Black girls in the movie. The characters in the movie act similarly to the girls they disassociate with at school.

The participants' difference in response to the *Bring It On* characters and the Black girls at school could be explained by examining the damaging effects of racism and media's cultivation of perceptions of minorities. Racism may account for the participants' oppositional gaze towards their ghetto counterparts at school. The ghetto girls at school may also be Black, but the participants see the stereotype more than the girl. This way of perceiving is related to the media's ability to carefully package messages, using real life, to appeal to certain audiences. The characters in *Bring it On*, may represent a type of hero to participants because of their struggle to achieve a goal; the participants see their family members struggle to provide every day. However, the power of racism combined with media's distortion of reality, causes the participants' perceptions of the movie characters and the ghetto girls in school to be convoluted.

Candice also describes the girls at her school as divided.

“Well, they are like half and half. Smart, compared to the girls that are all crazy, don't care about school. But like most of those that really don't care like they act that way at school just to fit in, but when they get home it's like they're the good child, go home, do their homework, get ready for school the next day, but when they come to school it's just like, “Oh my friends act that way, I want to fit in so I'm gonna act this way.” (Ca11)

Candice's description of the other Black girls in her school provides an alternative view from Michelle's description. Candice's comment refers to both the girls' academic ability as well as their behavior in and out of school. She refers to one portion of the Black adolescent girl population as smart and focused on school, and the other portion as crazy and not focused on

school. Interestingly, the same girls she defines as crazy and not focused on school in public, she also describes as playing an alter ego that does pay attention to school (e.g. does her homework). Based on Candice's description, these girls do care about their academics, but their reputation at school takes precedence at school. Peer pressure seems to play a role in the behavior of the girls who act as if school is not important.

Education is important to the participants. Being a good student academically and having a positive relationship with their teachers were highlights in their educational experiences thus far. The participants are encouraged by their parents to maintain high standards of educational achievement. The girls seem optimistic about their future career aspirations and watch television shows they feel provide insight into the professions that interest them. The participants set themselves apart from African American adolescent girls at their school, whom they describe as messy, ghetto, and uninterested in school.

### **The influence of media on Black adolescent femaleness**

The participants' interests in television shows varied in range from drama, to cooking, to whatever is on at the time. Prior to the discussion of favorite television shows and films, the participants also discussed characters with whom they identified on television or people considered celebrities whom they admired or considered a role model. The participants shared their thoughts on the ways African American women are portrayed on television and in film. The girls also described what they have learned from the media about being African American. In order to better understand the analysis, a brief description of the shows is provided.

*Gossip Girl* is based on a book series with the same title and inspired by the author's lived experiences attending an all-girl's private school in New York. The characters are all wealthy, White, and live in the elite Upper East Side of New York City. The show is narrated

through a girl using a blog to “gossip” about the events of the student’s lives. This teen drama casts adults in the role of adolescent teenagers. There are no African American characters on the television show. The series airs on the CW Network.

*One Tree Hill* is also a teen drama that airs on the CW Network. The show is set in a Tree Hill, a fictional town in North Carolina. The show follows the lives of two half-brothers, who began the show as enemies and eventually develop a caring relationship. In addition to shadowing the brothers’ lives and romances through high school, the show follows the brothers after college. Antwon Tanner, the sole African American actor on the show, plays the character “Skills.”

The participants were asked to name their favorite television shows. Michelle has certain shows that she watches on certain days.

On Monday there’s *Making the Band*, and *One Tree Hill*, and *Gossip Girls*.

Tuesdays there’s *Road Rules-Real World Challenge*, then I watch Comedy Central. When I don’t want to watch anything else I watch Comedy Central.

(MI2)

When Michelle was asked why she preferred the shows she watches, she replied

*Gossip Girls* cause I read the book first and when I heard it was going to be made into a TV show I was like woo-hoo, and like there’s just soo much drama and like ooh what’s going to happen next and with *One Tree Hill*, I don’t know, I just like watched it and loved the characters. Over the summer, I like watched seasons 1, 2, and 3 all summer. I had to go back and see everything since it started. (MI2)

Crystal watches “The Food Network, um, *Hannah Montana*, um *Zoe 101*, and *BET’s 106 and Park*” (CrI2). Her reason for watching *Hannah Montana* and *Zoe 101* was “They keep me

laughing.” With regards to the other mentioned programs, Crystal commented “On BET [106 and Park] I love the music, and I love to watch and learn on the Food Channel because I love to cook” (CrI2). Danielle watches *Law and Order*, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, and *The Cheetah Girls*. “I watch like law and order and CSI and I love the things that they do and it interests me” (DI2). Her interest in watching *The Cheetah Girls* comes from “The singing, the dancing, and some, like, little conflicts that they have in there they get over and talk it out” (DI2). Overall, she says she watches television for the entertainment.

Candice has no great interest in any particular show. She stated, “I watch whatever is on mostly. I like *One Tree Hill*. I flip through the channels to find something on that’s good. Basically, I just watch” (CaI2). Candice credits suspense for keeping her interest in the shows she watches.

Most of my shows are drama based. I like stuff that keeps you wondering what’s going to happen next. Like when a show ends you’re like ooh, I’ve got to watch the next one to see what’s going to happen. That’s what I like. (CaI2)

The participants were asked to describe their favorite characters in the television shows they watch and also to determine if they identified with their favorite characters.<sup>1</sup> Danielle did not name a character on a television show she liked and could not see any similarities between her and the show characters. “I’m my own person, I guess. I can be silly and people compare me to Raven, but, I don’t compare myself to them” (DI2). Danielle was adamant about not comparing herself to anyone on television. Her response indicates that she does not look to media to make comparisons between herself and her counterparts, whereas some people view to conduct a self-evaluation, measuring themselves to those on screen of similar race, age, or gender (Van Era, 2004).

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<sup>1</sup> The participants were asked if they saw any similarities between themselves and their favorite characters.

Michelle relates the authoritarian nature of two young females on her favorite shows to her own personality.

Well, on *Gossip Girl*, I'm like Blair because she's kinda bossy, but she wants to be nice and like she's focused on school. She just wants to keep it all together, but sometimes like she cracks and just falls apart, but she knows how to pick it back up and keep on going. On *One Tree Hill* I definitely love Brooke because she's like do what I say, do it now, and I'm very bossy. (MI2)

Unlike Danielle, Michelle's comments do imply that she conducts a self-evaluation when she watches television. She identified characteristics of two television characters, played by White women, whom she finds similar to herself. Michelle may be comparing herself to White characters because there are no African American characters to compare herself to. Since the characters are supposed to represent adolescent life in high school, based on the age the characters represent, this comparison would be normal. However, the fact that both *Gossip Girl* and *One Tree Hill*, have all White cast members says that White adolescence is privileged in society.

Crystal loves the "smart, nice, and talented" attitude of Hannah Montana. "She represents herself well," says Crystal (CrI2). Candice identifies with a character on *One Tree Hill* that she describes as a girl "...who doesn't know what to do, then she finds out what to do, like sorta kinda too late" (CaI2). Candice says she often feels like she learns what to do in situations "too late." The types of television shows the participants watch prove to be most salient with regards to their interests, aspirations, and providing insight into what it means to be an adolescent girl.



While the participant connects to her show for her own specific reasons, each show sends an obscure message about the significance of African American adolescents in society – out of sight, out of mind. The lack of inclusion of African American adolescents in primetime television shows is a reflection of the importance Whites ascribe to African American adolescent life, especially African American adolescent female life, which is virtually little to none (Hentges, 2006). The consistent portrayal of adolescent life by White characters reinforces hegemony and continues to reinforce Blacks' position in the social hierarchy. White standards of beauty are also reinforced by the constant portrayal of White women in primary roles in television shows. With the exception of the show *That's So Raven*, the opportunities for African American adolescent girls to see African American female adolescents represented are minimal.

In addition to sending a message that White adolescence is superior to Black adolescence, the media use representations of African Americans to paint an unrealistic picture of possibility. It is the assumption of the researcher that today, media use the appearance of middle-class African Americans in television to give the illusion that African Americans are doing well as a people and that there is no need to look at race as a factor in individual or group success. Since the rise of *The Cosby Show* in the 1980s, there has been an upsurge of shows that feature majority African American casts (e.g. *Family Matters*, *Martin*, *Girlfriends*, *My Wife and Kids*). The occupational range of the characters on the new shows exceeds those of the characters on the first African American sitcoms, such as *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons*. For example, the show *Girlfriends* portrays Black women as lawyers and successful businesswomen. On *Family Matters*, the main male character's occupation is a police officer. These roles represent more of a middle-class lifestyle than the roles of salvage yard owner and housekeeper on *Sanford and Son* and *The Jeffersons* respectively.

These newer shows represent African Americans maintaining a stable life and career, being homeowners, and interacting with other middle-class African Americans. Accompanying this illustration is the entry of more faces of color in commercials, on cable network television (e.g. Lifetime, Home Box Office), and as spokespersons for a variety of products (insurance, beauty care). To the uncritical eye, this would infer that African Americans are not struggling anymore as a people. To the contrary, African Americans are struggling, especially at the working-class level. African Americans living in poverty has increased and decreased over the past 25 years, but has hit all-time low percentages since 2000. Twenty two percent of African Americans lived in poverty compared to 7 percent of Whites in 2001 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). For Blacks, the poverty rate (24.7 percent) and the number in poverty (9.4 million) in 2008 was not statistically different from 2007 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

The participants would have no reason to think that any obstacles would prevent them from achieving their career goals. However, the media's influence on the perception of African Americans and economic determinism do have some influence on African American's ability to obtain quality jobs. The following passage reflects this idea.

A White owner of an apartment complex, for example, who wants to change the all the locks, may give the contract to a White locksmith. Is he or she racist? The owner may be scared that a Black locksmith will retain a master key to rob the tenants. Somewhere in his or her mind the idea that Blacks are criminals may lurk. But are there no White criminals? There are dishonest people of every race, but the emphasis, according to the media, is not White crooks but Blacks. And people remember what the media consistently shows and tells them. (Pearson, 1995, p. 36)

Media stereotypes and perceptions, combined with the long-lasting and cyclical effects of poverty are potential barriers to the participants achieving success in the fields of their choice.

**African American women in the media.** The participants were asked to share their views of African American women in the media. The negative tone of their description of the way the media portray African American females, particularly in hip-hop music videos, is evidenced in their responses.

I think of something where her butt is out, she's all over a man, throwing money, drinking, stuff like that. Like there's hardly ever a video where she's covered up, and if she's covered up, it's coming off and that's how I see black women. (CaI2)

Candice's response describes Black women in music videos similar to the way in which scholars (Emerson, 2002; Hill Collins, 1990; hooks, 1992) describe the dominant ideology of the African American woman. Objectified, hypersexualized, and commodified are used to identify the ways in which society has been conditioned to view the Black woman. As an object of desire and lust, the African American woman has been a commodity since slavery (Paul, 2003) and that viewpoint is still reinforced today. Candice's comment is similar to the reflections of the other participants. Crystal's commented on the positive and negative aspects of music videos featuring African American women.

Some of it's okay, but most of it's not okay. Like, just being, just dancing and having fun. That's okay. What's not okay is half naked dancing in the background. (CrI2)

Crystal's comment not only addresses Black women in music videos, but highlights the music and dancing as parts of the video that are not exploitative. However, her comment does echo Candice's description of Black women in videos. The attire of women in music videos is

one of the tools used by video makers to reinforce the Black woman's identity as an object for White men to lust after. Danielle's comment, while similar, is more reflective of what the music video image says about the Black women who choose to present themselves in that fashion. Danielle described Black women in music videos as "Trashy, unsuitable for children, disgusted that they could put themselves out there like that for money and fame" (DI2).

In this comment, Danielle questions why Black women would represent themselves in such a derogatory manner for financial gain and recognition. This is an example of critical race theory's notion of interest convergence. Both the White, male, video makers and African American women have something to gain in this situation. White males are interested in making money and so are Black women. Black women may also be interested in the notoriety that accompanies being on television, regardless of the type of role. Some African American women may even feel that being in a music video may help them become famous.

The women in music videos are there primarily because their presence serves a benefit to the White men who create the videos. The men creating the videos recognize greater potential for their success if African American women will play the video vixen role. Therefore, they allow Black women to assume this role in order to increase their profit. Black women in turn receive the financial payoff they hoped to receive. Both parties achieve their desires. However, if the White men creating the videos did not want African American women in the music videos for financial profit, Black women would likely not have the opportunity to make the money that comes from the job.

The theme of Black women half dressed in music videos was reinforced in Michelle's comment.

You wonder what is going on because she's wearing half her shirt or half a skirt, like she just got some material wrapped around. Like, go put some clothes on! You rarely do find a music video where like a woman's not all over a man, and like the man's not like, yeah, this is my woman, look at her and she looks like a piece of property. (MI2)

Here, Michelle echoes the sentiments of the other participants. African American women always seem to appear half dressed in a music video, clinging to a man in an objectified manner. White elites have an interest in maintaining the social hierarchy that ensures their position to maximize social and financial gains. Since the civil rights movement, African Americans have fought for access to the same opportunities that come easier to Whites because of the importance race plays in the distribution of material possessions (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Participation in music videos as the sexualized woman, whose body is the object of desire, serves a purpose for both parties. Individual African American women have the opportunity to capitalize financially by using their bodies and sexuality, while the White men who produce the music videos are compensated through increased record sales because the video enhances the popularity of the song.

Michelle also commented on how this image of the African American women affects the way a woman should view herself.

I don't like it because I definitely keep everything covered up. I wouldn't dare. Then, like, it's kinda sad cause like now the boys are like oh yeah you should dress like that and when you do have the girls that do go around and treat themselves like that, that's not what a woman should really be like. That's not proper and they get caught up in what they see on TV and the girl wants to be like

what they see on TV so it's just kind of a confusing battle between how a woman should carry herself. (MI2)

Michelle's comment refers to the complexities involved in identity shaping when media portrayals play a role in the process. She is speaking of how young boys expect young girls to dress in the same fashion as women in music videos and how some girls feed into the negative image portrayal. This comment reinforces how young girls are influenced by media images of women dressed provocatively, flaunting their sexuality. It also describes how young girls are also influenced by images of women who portray themselves as less sexualized. There is a war between conflicting images of the African American female in which adolescent Black girls are caught in the crossfire. The conflicting images are causing Black adolescent girls to struggle to align with a particular image.

Candice also noticed the way images of African American women affect young boys. She described a situation watching television with her brother.

I was like I flipping through the channels and like I saw my little brother, and he was just like ooh turn that back, like just cause you see some girl shaking her booty all girls not gone be like that. You not gone get that. Like men call women bad words, b words stuff like that, like I don't want him thinking he can do that to other women and you shouldn't call any woman that or any person at all and like boys here like they see that and they want to holler at girls using all these slangs, momma, or whatever you want to call it. Everyone doesn't respond to that. They want to be treated, well not like some video chick. (CaI2)

Candice points out the effect of stereotyped and hypersexualized images of African American women on her younger brother. Media images cultivate a sense of reality (Gerbner,

1997). The young boys the participants encounter, including Candice's brother, have internalized the media's representation of Black femaleness. The way in which young boys and young girls respond to media images of African American females is consistent with Patricia Hill Collins' (1991) work on Black female epistemology. Black females have been the subjects and objects of White males since slavery (Paul, 2003). The way Black women are represented in the media coincides with the White male's ideology of Black females. Because the images of African American women are so consistently sexualized, the repetition becomes reality.

Candice was not the only participant that seemed agitated about the impact of negative portrayals of Black women.

I think like *Flavor of Love* and *I Love New York* kind of made Black women given a bad name in the media, and like it casts a shadow on like everyone that's doing good cause you see them on TV just acting so ridiculous and like the media focuses on all the negative stuff. Like if it's something bad they're going to tell that instead of telling something good. So, I guess that makes it bad, but I mean there's still women that are strong in the media and the focus is on them too.

(MI2)

Michelle seems to contradict herself in this statement. She describes two television shows as examples that reinforce the stereotypes of African American women and how media focus on the damaging portrayals of Black women, then says that the media focus on strong women or women who don't fit the stereotype. Indeed the television shows Michelle referenced are prime examples of how Black women tend to live out their stereotypes. *Flavor of Love* was a reality TV show that featured well-known rapper Flavor Flav and his attempts to find a mate among a host of women who competed for his affection and attention. The African American women that

participated in this reality show fought each other, were vulgar, loud, and appeared extremely promiscuous.

*I Love New York* was also a reality TV show that was designed in the same manner as *Flavor of Love*, except the primary character was a woman named New York, who actually appeared as a competitor on *Flavor of Love*. Like Flavor Flav, New York was looking for love among a host of men who competed to be her beau. New York was portrayed as a sassy and highly sexual woman. She was extremely flirtatious with the men vying for her attention. On several occasions, she became sexually physical with the men she found interesting as a potential mate.

When asked to name some of the women she saw as strong that the media portray in a positive light, Candice mentioned actress Jada Pinkett Smith and singer-musician Alicia Keys. She referred to Jada as someone who faces what the media says about her with a head strong attitude. She credited Alicia Keys with bringing awareness to America about problems overseas, such as children's education in Africa (MI2). Michelle may have contradicted herself because of the media's mixed images of African American females.

African American adolescent girls' identity development is a particularly complex process because of the roles that dominant ideology and media maintain in society at large. The literature informs us of the sexualized and racist nature in which African American women are conceptualized and treated (Fordham, 1997; Hill Collins, 1991; hooks, 1992; Paul, 2003; Ward, 2000). The participants' descriptions of African American females as sexual objects reaffirm these ideological notions. The theoretical perspective of how African American females are described and discussed in society stems from the sexualization of Black women slaves during slavery (Paul, 2003) and is constructed by and reinforced through mainstream media. The



participants' responses also confirm what is known of gender representation in media, which is stereotypical of women's role as limited to a sexual object, with little focus on other potential personas (Perse, 2001; Van Era, 2004).

What makes dominant ideology on the position of the African American woman in society potentially confusing for the participants is not only the mixed messages about just who the African American woman really is, but the way in which media covertly work to assimilate the girls' thinking to White standards of womanhood (standards created by Whites for African Americans, stereotypical or not), elevating Whiteness and degrading Blackness. Fordham (1997) stated that African American females have a culturally distinct route to womanhood, however, women of color in general are "compelled to consume the universalized images of White American women, including body image, linguistic patterns, styles of interacting, and so forth" (Fordham, 1997, p. 86). Gender representation maintains its stereotypical nature while its power to create the image still resides with White males. The permanence of racism is embedded in the way popular television shows are watched by the participants, which primarily feature young White girls with African American girls being virtually nonexistent. Racism is also evident in movies, such as *Bring It On*, that depict young African American females as confrontational and brash towards others and White girls as having a more proper attitude. The messages embedded within these media are that Whiteness is superior to Blackness. In addition, the omission of African American women and girls from media shows their lack of importance and status in society.

Previous research on the concept of African American femaleness expresses that African American women experience a dual oppression because of race and gender (Paul, 2003; Fordham, 1997). The results from the data analysis show that African American adolescent

females are aware of the sexualized gendered representation of African American women. However, what is not clearly expressed is their understanding of how race works in the stereotyping process. They know the women in popular music videos are African American; that is evidenced with the eyes. Yet, the connection to why most of the hypersexualized women are African American is unclear.

The participants' description of the girls within their schools that prefer to subscribe to the objectified representation versus the more wholesome descriptions of themselves shows that African American adolescent girls are caught between resisting sexualization and conforming to it. Unaware of the complex motives behind African American women's participation in the commodification of African American femaleness, African American adolescent girls may be more likely to imitate the commodified role because of its glamorization of sexuality and materialness.

All four participants spoke with disgust at the notion that women could parade their bodies in such an objectified manner. The participants are subjected to half-clothed African American women in the media, who may be belittling themselves through their actions, or are belittled by men through their treatment. These images are in opposition to how the participants view themselves. Therefore the participants are torn between their own concepts of who they should be and how media represent Black femaleness. A time of what should be innocent curiosity is overshadowed by the ongoing, unseen war between the elite oppressive ideology of the working-class woman who stands strong for her family and the expression of the video whore who allows herself to be portrayed as a sexual toy in exchange for paycheck.

The continued perpetuation of African American women in stereotypical roles - sexual objects, caretakers and mummies, hyperattitudinal - is consistent with the critical race theory

notion that those in power seize opportunities to exploit disadvantaged populations when the circumstances permit. However, the acceptance of the stereotyped views of African American women and the idea of resistance toward the stereotyped roles are in conflict. This appears to have created confusion among the participants about how to make sense of the portrayals. They believe they should represent themselves respectfully, yet boys their age, influenced by images of African American women, allude to them that they too should behave and represent themselves as Black women in the media. To compound the issue, the fact that representation of the Black female is a concern primarily in the Black female community is evidence that media perpetuate racist ideology.

Race is a social construction in America that does double duty. It is an expedient ideological device, a social wedge that the racially privileged exploit in calculated ways to divide and conquer those beneath them; but it is also a potent social representation that people, both dominant and subordinate, routinely embrace and (re)circulate in their attempts to understand the actions of others and in their own ongoing rituals of identity affirmation. (Hunt, 2005, p. 5)

Media also have a dual purpose. Media, as patriarchal tools of control and manipulation, substantiate racism as a part of everyday reality through their agenda of classifying and stereotyping people of color, while strengthening elitist philosophy. Media also serve as a mirror through which concepts of one's identity are constantly interpreted and negotiated. As the image of African American femaleness continues to contradict itself, the participants are apt to have more difficulty negotiating between the two stereotypes presented as role models. This notion confirms the power of race as a social construction is used to divide and keep separated the marginalized from the privileged.

**Identity: Young, Black, female**

The final theme stems from reflection questions on how the participants described themselves as raced, gendered, and classed beings. This section provides insight into how the participants deemed the media as affecting their identity. In other words, how do media affect the ways they feel about themselves and who they are personally? This section also describes the participants' thoughts on what they have learned about being Black and female. Prior to answering these questions, the participants contemplated who in their lives or in the media is a role model. What person or persons have the characteristics that they would want to embody as a woman?

The participants did not list any television show characters that were role models, but discussed their female family members as their most important identity influencers. For the participants, role models are women who possess strength and a sense of self-reliance. Michelle has two role models: her grandmother and singer/actress Jennifer Hudson.

My dad and my uncle thought she could do better, but she did the best she could and she took what she needed to take to make sure her kids were taken care of, and she just keeps going. She doesn't want to be taken care of, she wants her own, like she keeps herself and her money in order and she's not depending on anybody to take care of her. When she has problems like, she's strong in her faith and she's like, if I can't do it, God will take care of it. And I've always seen that she tries and she like, if she falls short she'll let God come in and let him work it out. (MI3)

I really like that she [Jennifer Hudson] didn't try to like slim down to play the role and she won an Oscar and I was like so excited, because I'm not slim myself. I

look up to her because she's comfortable in her skin and she knows what she can do. (MI3)

The African American woman has always been associated with having strength to endure difficult situations. For many Black women, being independent and not relying much on others to help take care of the family business is an unspoken rule. The African American woman is known to singly maintain a household, raise children, and work (Sudarkasa, 2007). This notion of being self-sufficient derives from the Black woman's status in society. As the person at the bottom of the social hierarchy, African American women have to work harder to make the same achievements that come easier to White women. Being oppressed by gender, race, and class cause the African American woman to take a determined standpoint, as social forces work against her success. Some Black women also turn to a spiritual power for strength and support as stated in Michelle's comment. Michelle's grandmother characterizes a representation of identity that does not conform to the dominant ideology of the African American woman.

One of the factors that works against Black women is society's standard of beauty. Images of the White woman set the criteria for what is determined as beautiful. This standard is reinforced through hegemonic ideology and the media. Michelle admires Jennifer Hudson because she represents opposition to the standard. As a woman of larger proportion, Jennifer Hudson did not conform to White standards of beauty to be successful. Hudson's role in the film *Dreamgirls* won her an Academy award, an award which is usually given to the typical, thin White actress. Hudson, being Black and not thin, gives credibility to resisting hegemonic ideals.

Similar to Michelle, Candice views the women in her family (mother and stepmother) as role models.

They're both like, okay, I did it good this time, but I want to do better. It's like I know I can do this, I'm going to try it and if I fail I'm going to keep trying until I succeed. My stepmom, she's in college and has like 3 degrees already, but she's like okay, I like this also and I want to do that, let me see if I can do that, or I can do this. She's just always doing something and trying something new.

Similar to Michelle's description of her grandmother, Candice's mother and stepmother represent opposition to the dominant forces of racism and class. Thirty-five percent of young African American women attend college and only 13.5% are high school dropouts (Cose, 2003). Black women are not outsiders to education and despite any economic hardship, the Black woman continues to work towards advancing herself in order to advance her family. The examples of Candice's mom and stepmother create an oppositional stance toward the stereotyped representation of African American femaleness. This representation affects the Black adolescent girl's notions of what it means to be an African American female.

In addition to her mother and stepmother, Candice noted actresses that also served as good role models.

Vivica Fox, because she's always playing a strong character who's like, I want it I'm gone get it, stuff like that. Gabrielle Union, she's always, like, I don't know, playing the smart woman, who's educated and gets what she wants too.

On one hand, these actresses are another example of African American women who defy the stereotypes and position themselves in opposition to dominant female ideology. However, these actresses have also played roles which portrayed the stereotypical, loud, Black woman. Gabrielle Union's most stereotyped role was in *Bring It On* as the captain of the Black cheerleading squad. Her role projected a loud, attitudinal African American female. In one of

her more notable movies, *Two Can Play That Game*, Vivica Fox plays a brazen, quick-tongued businesswoman, with attitude. While Candice may feel these actresses have taken on roles that portray women as smart and strong, the roles are more stereotypical than not. For the participants, this may muddle their identity work as the roles they admire reinforce negative labels placed on Black females.

The dominant ideology surrounding the African American female is controlled by White males, in positions of power. The media and popular culture are the primary sites for the construction and dissemination of ideas of Black womanhood (Emerson, 2005). The representation of Black femaleness in *Bring It On* serves to continue the notions of Black females as loud and attitudinal. Candice may conceptualize being loud and having attitude as being strong and confident. However, the aforementioned actresses have reaffirmed this stereotyped ideology through the portrayal of characters with this demeanor. Bell hooks attributes the act of a Black actress taking a role as a stereotyped Black woman as passively absorbing the dominant ideology (1992). Young girls, like Candice, may interpret these roles as a normal way for African American women to exist or behave.

Danielle did not describe any celebrities as role models, but did describe a maternal figure of the family as a role model, similar to Candice and Michelle.

My mom is a role model because she stands on her own two feet. She needs no one to help her. Like if we need anything, she don't go to anyone. If she doesn't have it she will get it eventually. I admire her for that and being her own person and not depending on anyone else.

The participants admire the women in their families for their perseverance through struggles of all kinds. Generally, they seem to appreciate the way the women in their families

practice self-reliance; the African American woman and independence are often associated. However independent African American women may be or appear to be, the fact remains that racism and economic means play a larger role in their success than the mentality of independence.

“A proper understanding of the strengths of African American families, the difficulties they face, and the ways in which they are affected by public policy is confused and clouded by several commingling issues, among which the most prominent is racism” (Nobles, 2007, p. 69). Nobles makes note that researchers, through sophisticated methods of highlighting African American middle-class and well-to-do families, purport the socioeconomic gap between Whites and African Americans has closed. Not only does this convolute the degree to which African American families are affected by poverty and racism, but it prevents a real examination of the state of African American families. Within African American family structures, there are individual family units that work together as a larger extended family (Sudarkasa, 2007). These units are generally managed by women and work together to create a network of emotional support, child-rearing support, spiritual support, and financial support.

Despite the promise of financial opportunity in the 1930s, the African American family found itself hindered by racism, discrimination in access to housing, and government programs designed to provide equal access to opportunities for Blacks and Whites (Durr & Hill, 2006). These are issues that continue to impact the quality of life for Blacks today. While high school and college completion rates for African American women rose from 51.3 percent to 66.5 percent and 8.1 percent to 10.8 percent respectively from 1980 to 1990, their earning potential decreased due to recessions; there was a decrease in marriage rates in the African American community, and out-of-wedlock childbearing (Newsome & McADoo, 2006). For decades



racism and government politics caused working-class African American women to accept substandard pay to sustain her family. Because the participants observed hardships experienced and overcome by their female family members, they seem to covet the ability to endure and persevere and would aspire to adopt these characteristics to handle situations in the same fashion. However, the participants may not fully understand the sacrifices of long work hours at low pay made by the women in their families to provide for the most basic of needs.

From a critical race perspective, economic determinism is hard at work in the lives of the African American family. Race determines who gains access to the best: the best education, the best employment, the best housing opportunities. Government programs such as welfare may have been created to close the socioeconomic gap between Blacks and Whites, but once initiated, had the opposite effect (Kilty & Segal, 2006). Blacks are now unemployed at a rate twice as high as Whites, and residential segregation continues to drive Whites into more White neighborhoods and Blacks into more Black neighborhoods (Powell, 2007). Racism is embedded within the structures and institutions that work together to create opportunities for advancement.

Despite the challenges that face the Black family, the participants admire their female family members for their perseverance. Crystal, instead of describing one particular role model, listed the qualities a good role model should have.

A good education, someone who likes to be around, who is likeable, who has a good personality, and someone who has a lot of real friends who are a good influence on her life also. (CrI3)

Crystal is simply providing the characteristics of a woman who in her opinion would make a good role model. She notes that having positive people around you who are a positive influence is important. She also believes that someone who is educated can provide a good

example of someone with model character. In Crystal's opinion, someone who likes to be around people and is well-liked also has the qualities to be a good role model.

Upon considering whom the participants saw as adult role models, they were asked to think about how they conceptualized themselves and describe how they feel about who they are as adolescent Black females. Largely, the participants had a positive belief about and in themselves. They were happy with who they believe themselves to be at this stage in their lives. For example, Danielle stated, "I have a good head on my shoulders and I'm a good person. I like who I am" (DI3). Candice stated, "I'm loving me and I'm a good person" (CaI3). These two participants seem confident in themselves and feel positive about who they are.

Crystal's self perception mirrors the previous self descriptions. "I really like myself. I know I have some growing to do, but I try to be a good person and be nice to others all the time" (CrI3). Here again, there is a positive self description. Like Crystal, Michelle also noticed that she will grow into some aspects of her identity.

I realize that as I talk about me I'm bossy and there are some things that are just me and I can't change to make everybody happy. And I'm going to keep talking loud, and telling people what to do, so like um, I'm growing into myself and like, whatever makes you successful, you can do it with who you are now. (MI3)

While the participants stated they feel good about who they are as persons as this stage in their lives, their descriptions did not include race or gender. When prompted, they were able to describe what they learned from the media about being African American and female. However, those facets of identity never emerged in their description of themselves. Due to their age, they have not yet connected race and gender as central part of themselves. Older Black adolescent girls, as in previous identity studies (Shorter- Gooden & Washington, 1996) solidified who they

are with race and gender because of their stage of life development, as the girls in the aforementioned study were college students, ages eighteen to twenty-two. Their descriptions of how they felt about themselves were raced and gendered. The participants may not have had enough encounters with Whites or people from different backgrounds to realize that in society, their identity is wrapped up in their race, gender, and class. The discussion of what it means to be Black and female is separated, just as the participants conceptualize these parts of identity.

Following the discussion of how the participants conceptualized themselves, they were asked to describe what they've learned about being female. Double standards, difficulty, and confusion are thematic within the participants' responses. The media's influence on girlhood surfaced several times through the conversations. While the participants' responses share some things in common, the way they conceptualize girlhood is unique.

Boys can do certain things and the media doesn't even care but um, girls do it and it's a big deal. I see how they like, pick at different stuff and like, this is how she should act and they make a big deal out of it. Even like, just other people in town that if they saw me act a certain way, you know, I wouldn't want them to think of me as that kind of girl, but it just really makes you aware of like how you are acting, like you know people are always looking at you. You have to tell yourself to do the right thing. (MI3)

Michelle observes the double standard in the way media portrays women and girls. Women, especially African American women, have been sexualized and stereotyped by the media. This method of representation allows White elites and institutions of power to maintain control over the public perception of Black women. Michelle recognizes that as a female, her behavior is being observed by society. Race must also be connected to the reason she is

observed by society, as those two facets of identity intersect. She is fearful to act any other way they appropriate due to the labels placed on girls who perhaps dress provocatively and are loud and attitudinal. Michelle's fear is unique to African American women because of the way dominant ideology and hegemonic thought work to control the images of Black femaleness (Hill Collins, 1991).

Danielle simply stated that being a girl is "I don't know. It can be hard, confusing. I don't know" (DI3). Danielle may have trouble explaining the rationale for girlhood being difficult due to the complex nature in which African American femaleness is conceptualized. "The vast majority of representations of Black women in popular culture are firmly grounded in the dominant ideologies surrounding Black womanhood in American society (Emerson, 2005). These ideologies provide distorted views of Black women's sexuality and overall identity (hooks, 1992). If Danielle is surrounded by the women in her family trying to represent Black femaleness in a less stereotyped manner, and she sees herself as having a good head on her shoulders, then the fluctuation between commodified images of African American women in popular culture and the women in her family, would cause her to be confused about what it means to be female and Black. The difficulty arises from having to negotiate through the diversity of images.

Crystal's description of what it means to be a young female does not mention a struggle with representation. For Crystal, being a girl means

To be happy, fun, outgoing, having a good personality and to learn how to get along. I've learned that girls should, you know, be educated, but also keep their heads in a book while having fun. They should also be well mannered and balanced. (CrI3)

This traditional description of girlhood is associated with the viewpoint that girls should always be nice (Bettis, Montgomery, & Jordan, 2005). Girls are expected to behave properly, to be pleasant, and non-aggressive. As the youngest participant, Crystal may not realize that the popular culture image of adolescent girls has shifted from just niceness to include a host of other images, such as mean, manipulative, having sexuality, and as popular culture influences (Harris, 2004). Watching shows like *Hannah Montana*, which feature the life of a musically talented young White adolescent girl, Crystal would be inclined to believe that girls should behave in that fashion. However, that one representation shields Crystal from the other images that portray adolescent femaleness as more complex, with intersecting issues of race and class, as in *Akeelah and the Bee*, a film which portrays a Black adolescent girl living in poverty who struggles to become the next national spelling bee champion. Representations such as these show how race, class, and gender can be oppressive.

Unlike Crystal, Candice's notions on what it means to be a girl align with the other participants' ideas. This is what Candice shared about being female.

Problems come along with the package. Like, girls have to be watched and she's the one who brings babies home and stuff like that. I was talking to one of my teachers earlier about a trip and he was like, okay all the girls have to have a chaperone, but boys could be in the room by themselves. But they [boys] can also be bad. It's like the boys won't bring anything home, but the girls can.

Candice references a double standard among boys and girls, similar to Michelle. Both participants share the notion that adolescent femaleness is more problematic than adolescent maleness; girls are more likely to be looked at negatively for their behavior than boys. Candice's perception centers on the sexuality of young girls. The result of adolescent girls being sexual is

pregnancy. While having a child at a young age would affect the lives of both parents, the female usually becomes the primary caretaker. Thus, there is more concern to curtail or control an adolescent female's behavior due to potential consequences.

The participants' statements denote a connection between the way Black women in and Black adolescent girls are viewed in society. Currently the critique at large of the construction of Black femaleness in popular culture does not include Black adolescent girls. The construction of Black femaleness is very adult centered. However, there is a sexualized undertone in the description of Black adolescent girlhood that is aligned with the dominant ideology of the Black woman. Adolescent and teen girls are now portrayed by the media, in shows such as *Gossip Girl* and *Hannah Montana* as more physically mature, therefore having more of a sexual appeal. Thus, people such as the teacher Candice spoke with may perceive young girls as more of a problem because of the representation of girls in popular culture.

Interestingly, both Candice and Michelle also credited the media as playing a role in society's perception of young girls. When asked why she felt girls were seen as problematic, Candice stated,

Well, like on the news lately a lot of girls are getting kidnapped and abused and murdered and stuff like that, and a lot of pregnant teens are coming home. With boys, you don't have to worry about nothing. Boys do get abducted but it's like rarely a boy; it's almost always like teens and women. You don't have to worry about your son saying "Mom, I'm pregnant." That won't happen. But when a girl goes out, you're like okay, hope she's not doing this, hope nothing is going to happen to her.

While Michelle described the media as just focusing on the negative behavior of girls, Candice refers to both the sexual nature of girls and focuses on more national concerns for girls such as their safety in the communities in which they live. The fact that Candice's thoughts on the media's portrayal of girls shifts from safety concerns to sexual concerns, demonstrates the media's ability to control and manipulate people's perceptions. Despite the shifting messages about adolescent femaleness, the media still racializes and classes young girls. The media's focus on girls being kidnapped, abused, and murdered, according to Candice, are primarily represented from a White, middle-class point of view. Rarely do the media focus on missing or abducted poor Black children or Black children in general.

**Thoughts on Blackness.** The responses in this section are derived from questions pertaining to the participants' reflections on how African Americans are represented in the media. As previously stated, while Blackness and femaleness are interconnected from an identity standpoint (Hill Collins, 1991), the participants did not connect the two aspects together. Therefore, the participants' comments on race and gender are separate. This indicates that the participants have not reached a point in their identity development where they intertwine race and gender as central to their identity.

Crystal and Michelle's responses have a positive outlook on what it means to be African American.

I see most Black people are caring, um, most of them would like to live in a better place, most of them want the best for themselves and others, and most of them work hard and trying to get what they want. (CrI3)

We have to use our voice, we have to be strong in what we're doing and we have a mind of our own. We're strong and we are really intelligent and we have jobs

and can make as much money as any White man and we have to stop telling ourselves that we can't do it. We can do it, we will do it, and nothing is going to stop us. We're growing stronger. (MI3)

Blacks may indeed want a better lifestyle for themselves and will work hard to achieve some level of financial stability. However, Blacks making just as much money as Whites is a notion more difficult to conceptualize given social class, its connection to race, and its power as a systematic way of distributing materials and opportunities. Media portrayals of middle-class African American families on television shows such as *The Hughleys* and *My Wife and Kids*, which represent Black families (both mother and father in the home) living in a house and maintaining financially stable jobs, tells society that Blacks can be successful and that race is no longer an important factor in that success, despite evidence to the contrary. Research shows that in settings such as education and housing, socioeconomic status plays a major role in gaining access to fair and equitable services (Kilty and Segal, 2006; Pruitt, 2004; Rosenberg, 2004; Sudarkasa, 2007). The median income of the community in which the participants live is roughly \$26, 097, where 27.4 percent of the population lives below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999).

Recent research determined that the cost of being poor is an additional obstacle to economic advancement (Peck and Segal, 2006, as cited by Peck and Gershon, 2006). Consider the following:

Having low and limited income can impose greater costs of day-to-day activities than financially comfortable families might face. For example, without enough to maintain a minimum monthly balance at a conventional bank, poor families pay



monthly fees to hold a bank account, if they can even get one. (Peck and Gershon, 2006, p. 103).

This is just one of several examples of how it costs more to be poor and demonstrates one of the many problems facing low-income families' abilities to move forward economically.

In addition to describing how it costs more to live as a poor person, the literature also discusses how middle-class African Americans experience social struggles. While middle-class African Americans move away from the urban areas populated with the poor and hold jobs as corporate business managers and faculty members at prestigious universities, they still experience glass ceilings, racism, and income disparities (Bullard, 2007; Gray, 1995). Gray also states that African American middle-class status, despite its similarities to White middle-class, depends on income, not familial wealth (1995). For African Americans, income, not wealth, is what is relied on for survival. Any break in the financial chain will inevitably cause some hardship for the family.

Michelle's notion that Blacks and Whites can achieve equal accomplishments is misguided, as Blacks and Whites, particularly low class Blacks and upper class Whites, will likely never achieve equal accomplishments. The idea that race does not matter when it comes to ideals of equality and equal opportunity encourages a liberal attitude, which allows color-blind attitudes to become a mouthpiece for racial and social equality. The color-blind mentality supports the idea that anyone can achieve anything with hard work and determination; race is not a factor. Michelle may believe that a Black man can make as much money as a White man, but the social class hierarchy, White privilege, and institutional racism will likely not allow that to happen. The liberalistic view of race relations in America fuels ambivalence to the problems that go unaddressed because race is not acknowledged as part of the problem.

We as a society seem reluctant to acknowledge [poverty's] its existence...from time to time, conditions get bad enough that we pay it some attention, but, for the most part, poverty and inequality are absent from public awareness and discussion. (Kilty, 2006, p. 109)

The White patriarchal system has used the media cleverly to maintain their elite seat in the social hierarchy by providing false insight into the overall economic status of African Americans. This does not imply that African American adolescent girls will never circumvent the obstacles that accompany low-class life. However, the representation of middle-class America as a melting pot of races does not negate the fact that many African Americans live in poverty. Ignoring poverty continues to fuel the impact of the institutions of racism and capitalism, whereby leaving African American adolescent girls such as the participants with an overwhelming struggle to move beyond their socioeconomic circumstances.

Crystal and Michelle's views discuss the economic ramifications of Blackness and Candice's view of what it means to be Black is polarized largely due to media categorization.

Like, a lot of Black people are accomplishing things right now, but everyone thinks like, okay, you're Black, therefore you're not going to make it. Like you're either educated or you're not, like you're either working or not working, you're either rich or poor, never in between where you can be like, okay, I'm not rich, I'm not poor, I'm just making it. It's like always either or. (Ca13)

This comment is laden with notions about the economic status of African Americans. Candice alludes to the media, which she calls 'everyone', as painting a picture of Blacks that appears at opposite ends of the economic spectrum. It seems that in her experience, she knows that Black people are maintaining a lifestyle, but not in the extreme way the media has classified

it. Her definition of “accomplishing things” means surviving. Blacks are doing what is necessary to provide for their families and themselves. Candice also states that the media portrays an alternative image to Blacks who are just trying to maintain, which is an image of Blacks being academically and economically successful.

Candice’s thoughts of this dichotomy in African American representation stem from the mixed messages media have created toward the perception of African Americans. On one hand, what is learned about African Americans through television and film is limiting. Denzin (2003) cites a description of the learned perception of African Americans from the perspective of a *New York Times* writer. The writer’s description lists his learned understanding of African Americans as frightening, athletic, violent, funny, angry, and loud, among other descriptors. This description of African Americans is consistent with the way dominant groups tend to describe marginalized, subordinate groups.

On the other hand, the status of the Black celebrity calls attention to this small percentage of the Black population who represent the opposite Blacks who are struggling. Singer and entertainer Beyonce Knowles is an example of the rich, Black population who receives media attention. President Barack Obama, the first African American president, is the icon for educated African Americans. Oprah Winfrey has become her own brand of success as a Black woman in the television industry. These individuals receive attention due to the assets they possess and the extent to which they represent the opposite of how Blackness normally appears in the media.

Candice’s comment about the lifestyle of Blacks in between whose stories, rarely, if ever, are heard brings credibility to the fact that White elites, institutional racism, and the media as a tool to reproduce hegemony are entities that work together for the preservation of racist

ideology. When African Americans are represented as poor and having little opportunity, it benefits and stabilizes those in positions of power. Whites can maintain their position when Blacks maintain theirs in the social hierarchy. When African Americans are represented as being financially stable and having access to better opportunities, this helps Whites circumvent real issues of class and race that affect the lives of African Americans. Here again, is the color-blind attitude reinforced. If a handful of Blacks can get a good education, become rich, or become president, then all Blacks can accomplish their goals.

Unlike the other participants, Danielle's notion of Blackness takes a different approach. From her point of view, being Black compliments being a girl.

It can be hard, but I mean its life. You've got to get over it. You're made a certain way and no one can change their way ... unless you're Michael Jackson. I love the color of my skin. People don't like it, they just don't like it. I like it. (DI3)

While the other participants associated Blackness with economic hardship, Danielle was the only girl to associate what it means to be Black with actual skin color. The "hard" part of Danielle's comment refers to the economic struggle of Blacks. The remainder of her comment takes the tone that Black skin itself is negative. The reference to Michael Jackson relates to an ongoing issue among African Americans regarding skin complexion. African Americans with lighter-colored skin have been favored over African Americans with darker skin.

Scholar Adrian Piper's (1992) essay illustrates how skin tone can be used as a tool of alienation specifically among African American women. Piper, a self-identified African American woman with "white" skin, speaks of the struggle to bond with working-class, darker-skinned African Americans because of their perceptions of her racial encounters; her racist experiences couldn't compare to theirs because of her almost-white complexion. The politics of

color complexion among African Americans has been an area of contention especially among Black women.

In recent times, a night club promoter reopened the wounds inflicted by the color complex. The “Light Skinned Women & ALL LIBRA’s” promotion brings attention to this issue, perpetuated through media portrayals of African American women (Associated Press, 2007). The title above references a night club event that offered all night free admission to Black women with fair and light skin and women with Libra zodiac sign. The promoter’s idea to host this party calls attention to the value placed on skin tone among Blacks, which is exacerbated by the media’s representations, but initiated during slavery (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992). The lighter-skinned slaves and their children were more privileged than darker-skinned slaves. This caused a long lasting tension which carried over into ill feelings among Blacks today based on skin tone.

Through a critical race theory lens, the color complex issue would be seen as another means of control and power for White elites. Using skin tone to cause animosity among Blacks is a way for the dominant group to cause dissention among the subordinate group, whereby inventing another covert method to keep Blacks and Whites on separate social levels. The media’s use of lighter-skinned African Americans is a way to reinforce White standards of beauty. By privileging certain images of Black females, the dominant ideology of the Black woman can be further controlled and disseminated. The image of the Black female is a plaything for White males to manipulate.

The image of Black women and the image of African Americans have been manipulated for the past 50 years. Throughout those 50 years, scholars have written about the impact of media on society’s perceptions of African Americans. Gray (1995), Hall (1981), and Hunt

(2005) describe media as a tool, used by those in power, to reinforce hegemonic ideology among the masses. The participants' responses about the image of the Black woman are evidence that media still function as an instrument of influence over how society perceives African Americans. In addition, the way in which African American women are represented in mainstream media is connected to the larger idea of a dominate-subordinate relationship that exists between Whites and Blacks. In this case, the connectedness of race and gender compound the effects of hegemony.

African American stereotypes began long before the *Amos 'n' Andy* show, which was the first time Blacks were seen on television. Before television could provide an entertaining visual, vaudeville shows, which began in the 1800s, were an essential part of American communities (Public Broadcasting System, n.d.). The vaudeville consisted of many interesting acts, such as comedians, dancers, and animal trainers. These shows provided humor based on ethnic groups, which highlighted Blackface performers mimicking African Americans (Library of Congress, 2005). When the shows became culturally offensive in the 1920s, the minstrel-based Blackface acts carried over to radio, which is where *Amos 'n' Andy* began. Under the guise of improving integration efforts during the 1950s (Hunt, 2005), *Amos 'n' Andy* turned to television.

Originally a 1920s radio show where two White actors mimicked Black dialect while enacting the exploits of two Black men, *Amos 'n' Andy*, was a huge success. When the show debuted on television, an ensemble of Black actors and actresses were assembled to play the roles instead of following the minstrel tradition of White actors performing in blackface. The television show was as successful as the radio show. However, the behavior exhibited on the show represented African Americans in a fashion that has haunted their portrayal every since. The show portrayed African Americans as lazy, crooked, and wanting to avoid work. Black

women were shown as “cackling, screaming shrews, in big-mouth close-ups using street slang, just short of vulgarity” (Hunt, 2005, p. 12).

The stereotypes became a fixture in the perception of African Americans. Shows that followed *Amos 'n' Andy*, such as *Sanford and Son* and *The Jeffersons*, share similarities in representations of African Americans as dishonest, ghetto, or foolish. *Sanford and Son* was a comedy about the life of a man who owned a salvage yard and towing company; his son worked for him. The lead male character was portrayed as dishonest, crooked, and lazy. The primary female character on the show was loud, unruly, and vulgar. *The Jeffersons* featured a couple who moved from the ghetto into a high-rise apartment in the city and their lives post-ghetto living. The main male character was shrewd and would take advantage of any situation for his benefit. The couple’s maid was an African American woman who would get loud and threaten physical violence regularly. The fact that the show portrayed a Black couple with a maid was contradictory to the lifestyle lived by most African Americans during that time period.

The dominant ideology of the Black woman has shifted according to the needs and desire of White patriarchs. The early representations of Black femaleness highlighted the image of the asexual mammy, who was usually represented as a caretaker. The emasculating matriarch would degrade men and appear to have masculine qualities. The jezebel image continues to be reproduced, and the most powerful image of the hypersexualized vixen, has become more of the standard depiction of Black femaleness due to the popularity of music videos in popular culture. The few images of Black adolescent girls that appear in television and film are either “whitewashed” or used as “flavor” in support of white privilege (Hentges, 2006). The Black women’s identity is dictated by sexual thoughts of White men and oppressive stereotypes that are exacerbated by the media.

**Reflections.** The participants were asked to think about what they learned about themselves as a result of this process and to describe how they felt media impacted their lives. Candice realized that the power to control yourself lies within you. “Things can influence you, but only as much as you let it” (Ca13). Candice is saying that media images do affect how people see the world and what a person believes to be true. However, it is a personal choice to let those images affect you and to what degree.

Michelle commented that if someone is looking for a person to “be like” in the media, they should be selective about the person they chose to emulate.

Like if you don’t want to be that person you see on TV, don’t be that person. Find somebody else on TV, if you have to find something there, find somebody else who’s better or who’s successful and portrays themselves correctly. I also learned that I pick up on a lot of stuff, and I see it and analyze it, and I, it really makes me think about what I see and it makes me think about what influence it has on me. (MI3)

Michelle’s notions here indicate that she may feel as though there are positive images and representations in the media that would be appropriate to imitate. While there are numerous images available to consume and re-create, a person should choose one that will help represent themselves in a favorable light. She also referenced her ability to recognize what is beyond the media image. She readily analyzes the images she consumes and questions how they impact her. These are signs of a person who will question what she sees and not always accept media images and messages at face value.

Crystal felt that watching television has a positive influence on her identity.



I think that it makes me a better person because the TV shows that I watch, they set good examples and they help me figure out what I should do about that problem if I had one of those problems. (CrI3)

The idea that Crystal feel that television is helping her to become a better person is likely due to her youth, as she is the youngest of the participants at 14 years old. The mentality represented in this statement reinforces the power of the media to control perceptions, beliefs, values and even one's opinion of him or herself. Crystal's response also represents the media's misrepresentation of ways to deal with real-life situations. On many television shows, real-life dilemmas are depicted as issues that can be solved in 60 minutes or less. Thus, Crystal's idea that the media provide good examples of how to solve problem is a testament to the media's ability to warp reality.

Danielle seemed to be the exception to the rule. She believed that the media did not affect who she was because she did not try to emulate anyone she saw.

No, I don't try to be like anyone in the media because like I said they're their own person and I'm my own person and I'm gone be me regardless of what people say and I'm not going to try to make myself be something that I'm not. I mean, I'm just gonna be me. I'm not going to be anyone else no matter how good their living life or anything of that kind. I'm just gone be me. (DI3)

"It was shocking to sit here and hear questions that I never really just thought of in general, but it, it was interesting, kinda tough" (DI3). When asked what made it "tough" she replied "Just the different questions about the Black society, something I just never sit down and think about. I think I'll think about it more now" (DI3).

The concept of identity is complex in itself.

Who am I? The answer depends in large part on who the world around me says I am. Who do my parents say I am? Who do my peers say I am? What message is reflected back to me in the faces and voices of my teachers, my neighbors, store clerks? What do I learn from the media about myself? How am I represented in the cultural images around me? (Tatum, 1997, p. 18)

The complexities of identity are compounded when race is added to the equation. The relationship that exists between Blacks and Whites is one that creates a hierarchy of importance. The dominant group, the Whites, makes the rules for the subordinate group, the Blacks. This hierarchy has attached to it a level of value on each position: Blacks are seen as being less than Whites (Tatum, 1997). Within this hierarchy, the subordinates have been assigned roles in society that match their status, thus leaving the most valued, most coveted positions for Whites. What is important to remember regarding this dominant and subordinate hierarchy is that without the creation of race as a social construct, the hierarchy would not exist; society's acceptance of and belief in race as a determinate of ability and intelligence keeps this system functioning.

African American adolescent girls are caught in a myriad of webs that contribute to their descriptions of what it means to be an adolescent girl of color as "confusing." Their identities have little to do with who they believe they are and as Tatum suggests, more to do with who the dominant culture says they are. If what we know about ourselves, our history, our culture, is deformed by absences, denials, and incompleteness, then our identities – both as individuals and as Americans – is fractured (Castenell and Pinar, 1993). The factors that contribute to African American adolescent girls' confusion with how to best represent themselves involves a lack of representation in the media, the process of socialization in school, the status of women in society, and social class, which will be discussed in the final chapter.

The low level at which African American adolescent girls are seen as important is reflected in the media's lack of representation of the group. They are not major characters in age-relevant television shows. If African American adolescent girls are featured in television or film, their roles are either trivial or stereotypical of the way African American femaleness is usually described, as in *Bring It On*. Since media play a key role in how individuals compare ourselves to those of similar age, race, and gender (Comstock & Scharrer, 1999, as cited by Van Era, 2004), a person may internalize what is projected about his or her respective group in society onto ourselves. Those who think critically about media's biased messaging may question the relevance and trueness of representation. Due to developmental levels, adolescent girls are less likely to do so. African American adolescent girls instead unconsciously live out the projection.

### **Summary**

The focus of this study was to use critical race theory to examine the ways in which race, gender, class, and media affect the identity development of African American adolescent girls. The data suggest that on the surface, the participants are aware that their identities are indeed shaped by what they watch in television and film. However, the depth of their understanding of the impact of race, class, and gender on their lives is still developing. Overall, the participants take their education seriously, maintain high grades, and have aspirations to attend college and maintain a career. They model themselves after the women in their families whom they consider to be strong and successful. They are regular television and movie watchers and watch television shows that give them insight into their career interests and provide entertainment.

Three out of the four participants identified a character on a television show they relate to as having characteristics similar to themselves. Three out of the four participants also identified

an African American actress they consider to be a role model. The participants expressed dissatisfaction for the hypersexualized manner in which African American women are portrayed in the media. The participants describe being an adolescent girl as difficult and challenging, but for the most, were unable to explain why. They are aware of the difference in socially acceptable behavior for boys and girls and watch their actions because of what they describe as a double standard.

The participants are bright young girls who are focused on completing high school and attending college. Despite living in an economically challenged environment, the participants and their families work hard to maintain their family units. The participants have yet to fully realize the magnitude of the impacts of race, gender, poverty, and media on their lives, current and future. However, they are positive and hopeful about accomplishing their future endeavors. As a result of this research process, each participant expressed a desire to pay more attention to the way in which media affects their identity and how media represents African Americans.

Using critical race theory to analyze the data illuminated the ways in which racism and classism work in the lives of African Americans, regardless of age. As young girls, the participants are bound by the same limiting social and financial circumstances experienced by their families. The participants suffer an educational disadvantage attending poor schools and receiving little support to be academically challenged in preparation for college. The participants are at a disadvantage economically because of living in a poverty-stricken community which limits their access to resources that could influence their life choices. They are unaware of the impact their race will have on future endeavors due to a lack of interaction with Whites in a variety of settings. The media, tools for patriarchal and capitalistic domination, have misguided their outlook about career opportunities with images of African American middle-class utopia.

African American women in music videos and their female family members provide conflicting notions of what it means to be Black and female. Critical race theory highlights the complexities of the raced and classed aspects of life for African American adolescent girls.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

During the course of this research, I have taught at two elementary schools in poor, inner city areas. For two separate schools a few miles away, they were eerily similar in demographic makeup. Each school served a predominately African American population, where less than one percent of the student body was of White or Hispanic descent. The schools swapped students often. Both schools retained an African American woman as principal.

As I walked the halls of the school each day, I was met by those “loud, attitudinal” Black girls who fussed at, disrespected, and taunted teachers. Often I would stop one of these young girls and ask her about her day. I would discover that fathers were in jail or had separated from their mothers or that they didn’t get the notebooks promised to them for school this week, or that some family member had promised them some new shoes, but the money that was supposed to come didn’t. I would place phone calls to parents who did not have working numbers in their homes; some didn’t have homes at all. When I finally spoke to these parents, I learned of unexpected illness in the family that led to working overtime or in one case picking up a third job. The institutional understanding for these young girls’ circumstances seemed nonexistent. Teachers sometimes fail to realize that a child’s behavior can be caused by a host of problems and are often a cry for help and attention that is most likely missing from home; it is not always simply a race issue, but there is a difference in the way White and Black teachers respond to Black students.

I’ve seen more attention given to boys causing disturbances in the class than a girl silently crying in the corner. There are numerous Black female students who have been promoted without mastery of the concepts needed in the previous grade. Yes, those loud Black

girls cause their share of problems for school administration, but the fact remains that many of them are already labeled the minute they set foot on campus. The way African American girls are socialized in school places emphasis on the aspects of character and attitude, not achievement or challenge. As poor African American adolescent girls develop, they will become exposed to the continued effects of racism and discrimination at the institutional and societal levels, the continued effects of gender discrimination financially and in the workplace, and possibly most invasive of all, the permanence of the media's ability to influence and control social thought and perceptions about the African American woman, which will always link race and gender as oppressive facets of identity.

I have seen first-hand the way poverty, a lack of financial and community support, and stereotypes play out in Black adolescent girls' lives everyday. The participants and girls like them attend school where there aren't enough books for each child in the class. The plumbing system in the building is beyond repair, but the community or school district won't pay for a new one. People in the community will donate time to help the school every so often, but the parents, whose support is needed the most, are generally unavailable to help with their children or don't know what to do to help their children. Teachers, both Black and White, candidly discuss students' behavior and attitude publicly in front of classmates and other teachers, which I have seen result in student withdrawal. While the boys command more attention with fights, the girls either go unnoticed or become noticed because of a bad attitude. Each day for children in poor public schools is a battle for recognition, for help, and for stability.

Poor students in low-socioeconomic communities are labeled behavior problems and their parents labeled uninvolved. The participants may not cause any problems for their school personnel, but are the casualties of an imbalanced system. There is no surprise that inner city

schools receive less funding than schools in predominately White areas (Ladson-Billings, 2003). Racism and classism are deeply rooted in the educational system and continue to maintain the achievement gap among White and Black students and students of poverty. Until there is a change in the unequal division of resources and assets provided to those in poverty versus those not in poverty, African American adolescent girls will continue to be disadvantaged in school (Ladson-Billings, 2003). Racism is a permanent fixture in the cultural landscape whereby limiting the opportunities for the underprivileged and reinforcing the reasons for the privileged to retain their control.

### **Revisiting the research questions**

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how African American adolescent girls define themselves and explore the ways in which media affect this identity definition. The primary research questions were:

7. How do African American adolescent girls describe their identities?

The participants described their identities in a variety of complex and distinct ways. Each participant described herself as possessing unique characteristics and interests. Candice, the 17 year old junior, described herself as outgoing, athletic, a clown, intelligent, and beautiful. She aspires to work in the field of forensic science or medicine. Crystal, the youngest of the participants at 14 years old, described the aspects she liked best about herself as her personality, smile, eyes, attitude, and mind. Crystal hopes to become a pediatrician because of her love for children. Danielle, the sixteen year old junior athlete, relayed her descriptors as smart, talented, loving, generous, caring, and awesome, adding in an extra characteristic. Michelle, the talkative sixteen year old junior, described herself as bossy, intelligent, driven, talkative, and bubbly on a good day.



One of the most important aspects related to their identity at this stage in their lives is their academic performance. Grades and their relationships with their teachers were highlights of the discussion about themselves. The participants are so dedicated to academic achievement that they made a distinction between themselves and other Black girls at their school. The other Black girls, described as loud, messy, and behaving inappropriately due to peer and media pressure are the opposite of how they define themselves. Overall, the participants conceptualize themselves as positive with the potential for great accomplishment.

8. To what influences do African American adolescent girls attribute their identity development?

The overwhelming response was that female family members, including mothers, aunts, stepmothers, and grandmothers, are the primary influencers of the participants' identities. The women in their family serve as the role model they've identified as having the characteristics and qualities they aspire to possess. Strength, independence, and perseverance are among the most desirable qualities. Michelle, Crystal, and Candice mentioned a few celebrities they felt were also strong role models for the roles they choose to portray in films and their character off-screen. While these celebrities have special qualities the participants like, they do not compare to or take the place of the role of the women in their families.

9. What types of television shows and movies do African American adolescent girls consume?

The participants watch a variety of shows that are tailored to their individual tastes and interests. The participants watch for both entertainment and to assess career opportunities. *Gossip Girl*, *One Tree Hill*, *Hannah Montana*, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, the Comedy Channel, HDTV, *Law and Order*, and the Food Network are among the participants' favorite

shows and networks to watch. The movie utilized in the second focus group, *Bring It On*, was one of Crystal's favorite movies. Some of the shows, such as *Gossip Girl*, *One Tree Hill*, and *Hannah Montana* are age-relevant shows, while the others are geared toward adult audiences. Among the participants favorite movies are *Love and Basketball*, *Sweet Home Alabama*, *The Cheetah Girls*, *Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins*, *Finding Nemo*, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, and *Shrek*. These movies vary in genre and picture rating. The participants enjoy these films for the humor, dancing, sports theme, and drama presented in them.

10. How do African American adolescent girls interact with media when alone?

Throughout the course of this research, this question was determined to be not as relevant to the study. While the participants stated they watched television and movies alone at times, their interaction with these media while with other adolescent girls proved to be more insightful. Therefore, this question was not thoroughly explored during the study.

11. How do African American adolescent girls interact with media in a social setting with other African American adolescent girls?

In order to access Black adolescent girls' interaction with media, the participants watched the film *Bring It On*, a cheerleading film about two high school cheer squads fighting for the national championship title. This movie was chosen because of its depictions of race, class, and gender. The cheer squads were racially and economically homogeneous. One squad was all White and came from an upper class neighborhood. The other squad was Black and represented East Compton, California, an area known violence. The character of the girls on the cheer squads was stereotypical. The White squad members were snobbish and preppy, while the Black squad members were loud and attitudinal.

During the watching of this film, the participants fed off of each other's comments and reactions to parts of the film. Their responses echoed each other. They talked to each other during the film about liking or disliking the actions of the movie characters. The participants were lively and interacted with each other. The girls' behavior demonstrated that while around each other, the messaging within the media may have a greater affect due to peer influence.

12. To what extent do African American adolescent girls attribute their current identities to influences of the media?

The participants attributed a minimal level of influence from the media on their identities. While Danielle stated that she was not influenced by media at all, the other participants admitted that the media they consume do have some impact on how they conceptualize themselves. Candice realized that media is only as influential as she allows it to be. Crystal described the media she consumes as helping her to become a better person. Michelle realized that she has been and will continue to analyze media and how they impact what she does and believes.

The participants did not recognize that their feelings towards other Black girls at school, their impressions of their career interests, and their notions of Black women, are all influenced by media in some way. The stereotypes they encounter of Black women feed into their perception of Black girls who act similar as negative. The images of Black women in the media contribute to the confusion they experience about their own selves; their personal conceptualization of what a Black adolescent girl should be is in conflict with how media defines Black femaleness. The participants rely on the media to provide insight into how they would function in certain careers. These girls may not realize that their conceptions of certain careers are also influenced by mass media portrayal and do not give an accurate depiction or representation of the nature of those careers. Overall, the participants believe their identities are

minimally influenced by the media, however, through their own comments and reflections, the media's impact on their identities is more significant.

### **Connections to Critical Race Theory**

Racism, capitalism, sexism, and patriarchy are efficient and methodical ideologies that work to preserve themselves and their roles in the functionality of everyday life. These systems are the foundation that created and preserve the lines of separation among different ethnic groups and social classes of people. These ideologies created the disparity in achievement among men and women, Blacks and Whites, and poor and rich. The status quo thrives on being able to categorize people by race, gender, and economic status and to maintain the difference in achievement; without the desire to classify, these ideologies would lose the very essence of their function, the ability to label and maintain difference as a source of power.

While critical race theory is extremely useful in examining the power of racism and classism, its major criticism from the researcher's point of view is that it neglects consideration of gender as an oppressive part of life. Females are not at the bottom of the social hierarchy by accident. Women and girls are considered less than equals to men. With a lack of social status and power, gender becomes a facet of identity that carries with it its own set of afflictions. Critical race theory's exclusion of discussions of gender and its intersection with race and class prohibit a more thorough deconstruction of how these facets affect the lived experiences of African American females.

The power of race, difference, and Whiteness can be seen through the lives of four African American adolescent girls. Born into a life of little economic means, these young girls are a living testament to the way socio-economic status, skin color, and gender affect one's social pathway. These four girls are intelligent, hard working students, capable of achieving far

more than cultural systems may allow. They believe that receiving good grades, graduating from high school, and going to college will make a difference in their lives. They speak matter-of-factly about their futures, but the real fact is, the odds are stacked against them.

Because they live in poverty, society has already labeled these young girls as potential welfare recipients or babies' mommas. They are expected to either get pregnant during high school or graduate and stay at home in minimum wage jobs to help support their families. Their White counterparts at school may be encouraged to take advanced courses to prepare for the future, but the likelihood that these girls, who are more than capable, will be encouraged to take the same advanced courses is slim. Still, their teachers are likely to pass them and they will matriculate, but not truly be ready for writing and thinking at the collegiate level because they have not been challenged. Their educational potential has already been hindered.

**Unfair fight.** These four girls are casualties of war; war between the ideologies of racism, sexism, classism, and patriarchy that are fighting for the title of greatest oppressor. They have listened to the warnings to say no to drugs. They have heeded the advice to get a proper education. They are fighting to resist the notion that African American women are more than just women who will share their body with the camera for increased financial security. Their families are as encouraging as they can be while working multiple jobs, fueled by the idea that these girls will become something they could not achieve for themselves. They are working hard to ignore the ills of their personal environments, only to meet a different set of troubles because they are Black and female.

African American adolescent girls will face challenges unlike any other group because of the historical and unending effects of racism. They will continue to face obstacles in learning because of their race and in the eyes of White elitists are not destined for high achievement,

when a racist society and educational system are to blame. They may be overlooked for a promotion because an organization would rather hire a White person with less education. They may pay a higher interest rate when purchasing a car because they are Black. At this stage in their lives, if these situations were to occur, they would not understand that racism is the root cause, not their personal failures or ill preparedness.

**Micro and macro relations.** Right now, the four participants live in a world that is shielded from the harsh realities they will meet as they continue to mature both as an African American and a woman. Before this research was conducted, the participants had not been asked to think about what it means to be a Black person or what it means to be female or how media impacts their self-images. As they were invited to think about these concepts, the looks of puzzlement and uncertainty grew; possibly from the sheer shock of never being asked questions of that nature or from the ramifications of thinking about what the questions meant and why someone would ask them. It was evident that the wheels in their heads were turning, but the extent to which they really understand the nature of their raced, gendered, and classed lives is in transition. They are coming into an awareness of how African Americans are viewed by society, but have not pieced together the larger issue of how racism performs in everyday life.

Critical race theory explains the link between the participants' lived experiences and the experiences of African Americans as an ethnic group. The participants are not encouraged to take academically rigorous classes in school, which is part of a larger social issue of inner city schools across America not providing a quality education. Some poor schools may not have the ability to attract faculty that are qualified and want to teach advanced courses in that environment, thus the graduating students are unprepared for college level academics. The

schools that service White students in middle-class communities do not have the same educational setbacks. The economics don't just affect education, but also finances.

The participants witness their families' struggle to provide a comfortable life, which is parallel to what many African American families are experiencing. As previously mentioned, the poverty rate for African Americans in 2008 (22.7 percent) was triple that of the White poverty rate of 7.8 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Blacks across the country are facing socioeconomic hardships, which are likely connected to the immense difference in the division of assets and resources determined by race and social class. White people with financial stability or the potential to be stable are more likely to have access to better schools, better resources, and better jobs (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Many African Americans are unlikely to even have the opportunities leading to socioeconomic stability. The participants' families help personalize how race and class influence lifestyle and address the larger picture of the disproportionate rate at which African Americans endure losses based on skin color.

**Preparing for the future.** A full awareness of just how racism is masked in everyday interactions in life could provide these girls with the knowledge to know the difference between racist institutions working against them and personal failures. Knowledge of the power of White patriarchal systems and the privilege associated with them could mentally liberate African American adolescent girls from feeling confused about who they are and accept that the reflection of themselves they receive from society is created for social control. This could tremendously impact these African American adolescent girls' outlooks on their identities and futures, as they prepare for the struggle that will lie ahead.

## **Connections to Black Feminism**

Just as critical race theory is helpful at providing a lens through which to view the influence of race and class on the lives of African Americans, Black feminist theory is sufficient framework with which to analyze the contemporary construction of Blackness and femaleness together. Patricia Hill Collins (1991) work sets the stage for understanding the uniqueness of the raced and gendered identity of the Black female. Being a Black female comes with oppressions that originate from being Black and being female, oppressions that no other females experience. This concept is relative to the participants lives as their identities embody the same elements. However, what Black feminist theory does not address are the inherent issues a Black adolescent female would face.

Many of the concerns of Black feminists center on global issues; health care, gender equity, creating economic stability for the family, reproductive rights, and so on. Black adolescent girls are not at the stage in their identity development where these matters are part of their everyday concerns. Black feminist theory privileges an adult-centered focus, which has little value to a sixteen year old. While Black adolescent girls have everyday concerns, such as academic performance in school and relationships with peers, Black feminist theory falls short in providing a structure through which these concerns in the Black adolescent girl's life can be deconstructed.

## **Implications for future research**

While factors such as interactions with peers and the influences of female family figures play an important role in shaping the lives of young adolescent girls, the results of this study suggest that media influences, particularly hip-hop culture, are as powerful as other factors with respects to African American adolescent girls coming into their identities as women and as



African Americans. As a result of this research, the importance of deeply exploring the ways in which hip-hop media affect African American adolescent girls emerged as an avenue to provide greater insight into not only identity development, but also into ways that women and girls cope with the sexualized nature in which females are portrayed in television and film. A need exists for research that specifically expands upon African American adolescent girls' conceptualizations of sex and sexuality. This was an underlying theme within this study that was not openly addressed, but may yield a greater understanding of how to better educate African American adolescent girls on the dangers of unprotected sex and risky sexual behavior, as African Americans hold the greatest number of reported HIV and AIDS cases in the nation (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008).

The impact of social class should also be re-examined, as this study only considered girls of low socioeconomic status. African American adolescent girls who live in the middle class and upper middle class may have different interpretations of African American women in television and film, as these girls have access to information and resources that may inform their perspectives in alternative ways. In addition, studies that involve an examination of class and/or adolescent female identity development may benefit from an examination of how African American adolescent girls in different classes perceive each other. Longitudinal and/or ethnographic studies that involve African American adolescent females and include class as a factor for analysis would expand the literature on the impact of class on mobility, educational attainment, and career success. Ideas for future research also include exploring the ways in which older adolescent African American adolescent girls define themselves in terms of gender and race. This would yield more insight into youth racial identity development and gender

identity development. Attention should also be given to examining how African American adolescent girls perceive the difference between themselves and their White counterparts.

Lastly, the results of this research indicate the need for a new theory that addresses aspects of critical race theory and Black feminist theory. The two theories by themselves are not sufficient to address the uniqueness of the lived experiences of the participants as raced, classed, gendered, and aged individuals. Therefore a perspective that would include all of these aspects of identity would provide for a more in-depth deconstruction of individuals who fall into this category of identity.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

#### Interview 1: Background

1. Tell me how you describe yourself, \_\_\_\_\_ (use pseudonym).
2. Describe your family and how you feel about them.
3. What's your family like?
4. Are there any relatives you look up to? Why?
5. What kind of work does your mom/dad do?
6. Tell me about the neighborhood where you live and how you like it.
7. Talk about your experience in school. What has it been like?
8. How do you interact with your teachers?
9. How do you feel about the way your teachers treat you?
10. Tell me about your friends at school.
11. Tell me about your friends outside of school.
12. What do you talk about with your friends at school?
13. What do you talk about with your friends outside of school?
14. What are some fun things you like to do?
15. What do you want to be when you grow up and why?

#### Interview 2: Interaction with media

1. What kind of television shows do you watch?
2. What do you like about those shows?
3. Which character do you like the best and why?

4. Do you see yourself like that character? Why?
5. Do you talk with your friends about the television shows you watch? What do you talk about?
6. How do your friends feel about the show compared to how you feel?
7. Name your favorite movies.
8. What do you like most about each movie?
9. How do you feel about the Black characters?
10. Do you see yourself like the Black women? Why? (if relative)
11. What type of movies do your friends watch?
12. When you and your friends talk about the movies, what do you say?
13. Do you watch television or movies with your mom/dad or family?
14. Do you talk about television or movies with your mom/dad/family?
15. Which do you watch more, television or movies?
16. Do you watch alone or with someone?
17. Do you like music videos? Why?
18. Which artists do you like? Why?
19. How do you feel about the women in music videos?

### Interview 3: Reflection

1. Now that you've thought about the kinds of television shows and movies you watch, tell me how you feel it affects you.
2. Tell me how the movies you watch make you feel as a Black girl.
3. How do you feel about the way television represents Black girls/women?

4. How do you feel about the way movies represent Black girls/women?
5. Do you see the Black girls/women as being like the women in your family? Why?
6. Do you feel that you see yourself in the shows and movies you watch?
7. Do you feel yourself trying to be like the Black women you see?
8. In your opinion, how do the media portray Black girls/women?
9. What do you learn about Black women from the media?
10. What do you learn about being a girl from the media?

## Appendix B

### Participant Response Code

Name	Data collection method	Date	Code
Candice	Interview 1	June 4, 2008	CaI1
	Interview 2	June 8, 2008	CaI2
	Interview 3	June 15, 2008	CaI3
	Focus Group 1	June 6, 2008	CaFG1
	Focus Group 2	June 24, 2008	CaFG2
Crystal	Interview 1	June 3, 2008	CrI1
	Interview 2	June 5, 2008	CrI2
	Interview 3	June 6, 2008	CrI3
	Focus Group 1	June 6, 2008	CrFG1
	Focus Group 2	June 24, 2008	CrFG2
Danielle	Interview 1	June 5, 2008	DI1
	Interview 2	June 7, 2008	DI2
	Interview 3	June 9, 2008	DI3
	Focus Group 1	June 6, 2008	DFG1
	Focus Group 2	June 24, 2008	DFG2
Michelle	Interview 1	June 4, 2008	MI1
	Interview 2	June 9, 2008	MI2
	Interview 3	June 10, 2008	MI3
	Focus Group 1	June 6, 2008	MFG1
	Focus Group 2	June 24, 2008	MFG2