Empirical Article

"They Told Me What I Was Before I Could Tell Them What I Was": Black Girls' Ethnic-Racial Identity Development Within Multiple Worlds

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Abstract

Current research on ethnic-racial identity (ERI) development among Black youth derives primarily from studies that focus on the impact of parental racial socialization from a racial/monoidentity perspective without accounting for the roles of youth's other worlds (i.e., schools, classrooms, and peers) and the intersection of their social identities in their identity development experiences. In using Phelan, Davidson, and Cao's Multiple Worlds model as a framework as well as Black girls' own words, we explore the beliefs and attitudes Black girls hold about race and their own racial categorization, as well as the processes that contribute to their learning about race (and racism) during early adolescence. We find that the Black girls in the present study are making meaning of their ERI, in part, in response to stereotypical and biased messages about their identities within their multiple worlds (i.e., schools, classrooms, families, and peers). The findings support the need for an expanded view of the messages and experiences that influence the ERI development process by illustrating that schools, classrooms, peers, and families are important socializing environments that influence the ERI development process for Black girls.

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Keywords

African Americans (U.S.), early adolescence, gender, identity issues, qualitative methods, education/school

Indiya,[1] *a biracial American Indian and African American girl in sixth grade, was instructed by her teacher to go home and learn about the origins of her first and last name. Once home, Indiya learned from her parents that her last name is "like, a slave last name." During the talk with her parents, she also learned her dad's side of the family: "they, like, they, like, they, some of them were slaves—but some were, like, light enough to, like pretend that they weren't slaves—and then, my mom's family was, like, they were all slaves. Yeah." Although she felt "comfortable because you get to learn more about what happens," she also felt "sad and stuff" that her family members had been enslaved. The next day, Indiya had to tell the class about her "slave last name" in an environment where she had previously heard her classmates say that "African Americans deserved [slavery]" and the most frequent images of African Americans in history have been "a slave with, like, whips on his back—the welts or whatever—and it, like, made me—I don't know." Instead of feeling a sense of pride or affirmation in sharing the origins of her name with her peers, Indiya "felt like, I don't know, that my family was, like—there was something wrong that they were, like slaves."*

Many Black youth, like Indiya, must navigate the questions of "who am I" and "what does it mean to be a Black youth in contemporary society" within a sociocultural context of racism and prejudice. Starting in early adolescence, when many Black youth begin to consider what being their race means to them, they must simultaneously negotiate social challenges such as perceived racial stigmatization and discrimination (Phinney, 1989; Swanson et al., 2003). These challenges can inform their perceptions of self and group identities, as well as academic outcomes (Coll et al., 1996; Wong et al., 2003 Yip, 2008). Young people's own understanding of themselves as a member of a particular racial or ethnic group has been investigated through theory and research on ethnic-racial identity (ERI) development. ERI is defined as "a multidimensional, psychological construct that reflects the *beliefs and attitudes* that individuals have about their ethnic–racial group memberships, as well as the *processes* by which these beliefs and attitudes develop over time" (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014, p. 23). Intersectionality theory suggests that ERI is connected to other identities, such as gender and age. Therefore, identity must be explored through a multi-identity perspective that accounts for the interrelations and embeddedness of identities within a system of oppression (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 2008; Velez & Spencer, 2018). In this

article, we adopt an integrative approach to understanding dimensions of identity, informed by multiple theoretical frameworks grounded in developmental and social psychology (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Cross, 1995; Phinney, 1992; Sellers et al., 1998; Williams et al., 2012).

During the ERI development process, Black youth often take actions to learn more about their ethnic or racial group through exploration (Phinney, 1992; Phinney & Ong, 2007). Families also provide support as youth develop through a process of racial socialization, which is defined as "the transmission of parents' world views about race and ethnicity to children by way of subtle, overt, deliberate and unintended mechanisms" (Hughes, 2003, p. 15). A large body of research has found extensive benefits of parental racial socialization (see Anderson et al., 2018, for a comprehensive overview of the current research on parental racial socialization and stress alleviation); however, further research is necessary to learn more about the views transmitted in other social microsystems (i.e., worlds) such as by peers, in classrooms, and within schools (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Phelan et al., 1991) and how they relate to the beliefs and attitudes Black youth develop about race, ethnicity, and their own ERIs. In the present study, we explore the beliefs and attitudes of Black girls in early adolescence, who inhabit a social position different from Black boys of the same age due to different race-gender experiences (Lopez, 2003), hold about race and their own racial categorization, as well as the processes that contribute to their learning about race (and racism) during early adolescence.

ERI Development

While ERI processes generally refer to the kinds of actions a young person takes to learn more about their ethnic or racial group (Phinney, 1992; Phinney & Ong, 2007; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014), the beliefs and attitudes youth have about their ERI membership are reflected in a number of ERI dimensions, including a youth's sense of group pride, affirmation, and belonging, and their views on how others feel about their group (i.e., public regard; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Sellers et al., 1998). ERI dimensions also include labels youth apply to themselves (Nishina et al., 2010), the level of centrality or importance placed on ethnic-racial group membership (Sellers et al., 1998), and one's sense of resolution about being a member of their group (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004).

Advancing cognitive capacity in early adolescence enables youth to think more abstractly, which facilitates growth in ERI (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014); however, growth is not necessarily linear and can vary widely across youth (e.g., Huang & Stormshak, 2011). Some studies show increases in exploration

occurring after early adolescence (French et al., 2006); in contrast, feelings of racial/ethnic-group connection and pride tend to be high and/or increase in early adolescence (French et al., 2006). Nishina and colleagues (2010) found that while most middle school students had constant ethnic self-labels over time, other youth in their ethnically diverse sample were less consistent. Youth often move from literal meanings of race to more abstract definitions that account for the social realities of being their race (Quintana, 2008). While labels are only one aspect of ERI, to some extent the labeling process may be tied to ERI exploration (Nishina et al., 2010; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

Research on racial regard in early adolescence shows that Black youth who have positive views of their own group and who feel others' see their group as positive report higher self-esteem, fewer depressive and somatic symptoms, positive coping, less stress, and less antisocial behavior (see Rivas-Drake et al., 2014, for a review). Thus, among Black youth, ERI dimensions have generally been associated with positive indicators of psychological, academic, and psychosocial well-being; however, there have been some gender differences documented in the associations between ERI and outcomes. For instance, Chavous and colleagues (2008) found racial centrality was a less consistent moderator of the association between discrimination and academic attitudes for Black girls compared with Black boys. Other studies have documented positive associations between a strong ERI and indicators of psychosocial well-being among Black adolescent girls (Buckley & Carter, 2005; Butler-Barnes et al., 2018; Mandara et al., 2009). Overall, however, gender differences in the associations between ERI and developmental outcomes have been inconsistent.

Intersectionality and ERI

One reason for a lack of consistent findings related to race and gender may be because ERI theories and the associated measures tend to focus on ERI at the exclusion of other aspects of identity (Cross & Cross, 2008; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). ERI scholars readily acknowledge that ERI gets integrated as one element of identity that is not separate from others and is shaped by experiences in context (Cross & Cross, 2008; Neblett et al., 2012; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Despite this acknowledgment, quantitative measures assessing ERI constructs (e.g., centrality, regard, exploration) are not designed to capture the intersectionality of youth's identities or lived experiences. Crenshaw (1997) argues that Black women and girls, in particular, have been marginalized by research that either focuses on race or on gender because focusing on either race or gender does not account for intersecting marginalized identities.

Youth make meaning of the direct and indirect messages they receive about race in their daily interactions, and their interpretations get mediated by

a number of other factors (e.g., other salient dimensions of identity, cognitive maturation, phenotype, etc.; Spencer et al., 1997; Tatum, 2017). A race-gender experience perspective (Lopez, 2003) emphasizes that although race and gender have no biological basis, there can be different experiences and outcomes among boys and girls of color based on how society is "race(ing)" and "gender(ing)" youth. In contrast to monoidentity perspectives that only focus on race, a race-gender experience perspective asserts that youth of color are constantly being viewed through gendered *and* racialized lenses, and that shapes their lived experiences and outcomes at a micro-level within social relationships, as well as at a macro institutional level in convergent and divergent ways. To address a lack of focus on the experiences of Black girls and the need to understand their unique ERI development processes, we focus exclusively on Black girls in the present study; while we examine their understanding of race in alignment with a race-gender experience perspective.

Black Girls' Multiple Worlds and ERI

Phelan et al.'s (1991) "Multiple Worlds" model identified four microsystem settings (or "worlds") that are central in adolescence: families, peer groups, classrooms, and schools. Although these worlds are often studied individually, consistent with the concept of mesosystem, Phelan and colleagues posit that the worlds are interrelated, and youth's movement within and between these settings has implications for development. In particular, Phelan and colleagues (1991) note that messages received in each setting may or may not be consistent or congruent. A student with congruent worlds and smooth transitions between worlds may discuss the same things with teachers, peers, and friends and transition easily between worlds. However, a student with different worlds must manage the crossing between worlds by developing strategies to cope with feelings of dissonance, such as between family and school worlds. For example, Indiya, the student in the introduction, must cope with feelings of dissonance between family and school worlds about her heritage. While the Multiple Worlds model emphasized implications for academic experiences, the concept has relevance for considering the myriad of messages youth receive about race across their microsystem and the implications they may have on development, which are discussed next.

Schools and Classrooms

Schools are a critical social context for socialization. Collins (1991, 2016) argues that there is a system of dominant ideologies within institutions based on a combination of racism and sexism that function to justify race, gender, and class inequalities between White and Black women and girls. Within this

system, socially constructed "stereotypical" and "controlling" images dehumanize and invalidate the lived experiences of marginalized people, particularly the experiences of Black women and girls (Brittan & Maynard, 1984; Collins, 1991). These ideologies are ingrained within institutions and reflected in decisions concerning classroom structure, academic content, and school norms (King & Swartz, 2015). Therefore, curriculum and instruction may serve as a form of socialization by influencing students' beliefs and orientations about topics related to race and gender (Banks, 2007; King & Swartz, 2015). Swartz (2013) and Swartz and Goodwin (1992) argue that educators teach history through a Eurocentric frame that perpetuates the "master script": a Eurocentric "agreed upon version of knowledge" that centers on topics such as exploration, settlement, and colonization that elevate the controlling images of the elite "founding fathers," while obscuring and erasing the knowledge and experiences of African Americans as well as Indigenous people (e.g., describing enslaved Africans as if they had no homeland, describing "enslavement without enslavers," and excluding the voices and works of African American and Indigenous people during that time period).

A nationwide survey of 525 elementary, middle, and high school teachers surmised that only —one to two classes, approximately 8% to 9% of the total class time, is devoted to Black history (King, 2017). Furthermore, in surveying 1,000 high school seniors, 1,786 social studies teachers, 10 state standards, and 12 popular textbooks, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC, 2018) found that high school seniors do not have a basic understanding of American enslavement, teachers have difficulties in teaching the subject, and textbooks fail to discuss the history in complicated and meaningful ways. In conducting a content analysis and compositional interpretation of three widely used history texts, Woyshner and Schocker (2015) found that Black women, in particular, were marginalized in history textbooks. For example, in one textbook titled "The Americas," only 53 of the 306 images of women were Black women and 232 were images of White women. An additional 686 images were of men (see Woyshner and Shocker, 2015, for a discussion of additional findings).

While prior research has not examined the effects of excluding the contributions of Black women and girls in classroom materials on the ERIs of Black girls, many studies have found positive benefits of centering the contributions of Black women and girls throughout history. For example, Black girls who participated in Young Empowered Sisters (YES!), a 10-week culturally relevant school-based after-school intervention that teaches African American history and contemporary culture through critical pedagogy and holistic learning, had higher levels of centrality, racism awareness, collectivist orientation,

liberatory youth activism, and Africentric values at the end of the program (Thomas et al., 2008). Similarly, Black girls who participated in Sisters of Nia, an in-school rites of passage program aimed at cultivating ethnic identity and school engagement for African American girls, had significantly higher levels of racial centrality, private regard, and humanism than the control group six weeks after the intervention (Jones et al., 2018).

Peer Groups

Collective identity and peer group membership for youth of color become more meaningful during adolescence and can play a role in adolescents' subjective meanings of race. Crosnoe (2011) observed that schools function as mini "adolescent societies," complete with their own shared rules, customs, and guidelines. These rules, customs, and guidelines mirror macro-societal norms and images as they relate to race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability status and, therefore, students may hold stereotypes and biases about marginalized groups of students. In turn, social interactions are affected by status and hierarchies (i.e., social position, Coll et al., 1996), where some students and groups are teased and ostracized on the basis of their social identities (see Mulvey and colleagues, 2018, for a greater discussion of non-bias-based bullying and bias-based bullying). Accordingly, Suárez-Orozco (2004) and Lei (2003) found that peer group norms can reproduce stereotypical or controlling images as they relate to race and ethnicity and reinforce the pattern of marginalization by peers.

Black girls may experience a unique form of peer racial marginalization due to their social location. For example, while Seaton and Tyson (2019) found no gender differences in the reported experiences of racial discrimination from peers for African American boys and girls, African American girls discussed different discriminatory experiences than African American boys, such as hair scrutiny (e.g., White kids in class touching Black girls' hair) and romantic desirability (e.g., White boys not being open to dating Black girls). Through interviews and observations, Holland (2012) found stark differences in the social experiences of African American and Latinx youth, with African American and Latino males occupying a higher social status and describing more positive schooling experiences. African American girls were often low on the status hierarchy, and reported being underestimated by teachers and peers, and stereotyped as loud, hostile, or otherwise unapproachable. In another qualitative study of Black girls' experiences at a California High school, Wun (2016) documents how anonymous students at the school developed a faux Instagram account and posted photos of adolescent girls, mostly Black female students, without their consent. While many of the Black girls

were upset by the faux account, many of their non-Black peers were dismissive and reductive, saying it was just "drama" and a form of attention-seeking (p. 11). Their peers also discussed how Black girls 'pull out each other's weaves' for attention (p.11). Combined, these studies suggest that the social experiences of Black girls in predominantly White schools may be negative due to peer hostility.

Families

There is robust literature on the ways that families socialize youth in relation to racial beliefs and ideologies (e.g., Hughes et al., 2009). As stated in the introduction, racial socialization refers to "the transmission of parents' world views about race and ethnicity to children by way of subtle, overt, deliberate and unintended mechanisms" (Hughes, 2003, p. 15). As Hughes and colleagues' note, "Some parents teach group differences, discrimination, and disadvantage; others teach history, culture, and traditions; others emphasize the value of diversity and egalitarian perspectives; still others do some combination or all of these" (p. 10). A large body of research has found extensive benefits of parental racial socialization on children's well-being and development throughout childhood (Anderson et al., 2018; Hughes et al., 2006; Neblett et al., 2012). During adolescence, in particular, experiences of racial bias can often serve as a catalyst for youth to engage in discussions of race with their parents (Hughes & Johnson, 2001).

The nature and the content of the socialization messages Black youth receive from their parents may differ by gender. For example, Chavous and Cogburn (2007) argue that while many Black families endorse egalitarian views of gender, patriarchal perspectives may persist more broadly within the Black community, leading to differential socialization of boys and girls. Importantly, more research is needed that explores how Black girls receive or interpret the socialization they receive from caregivers. In other words, how a Black girl interprets her parents' messages in relation to her own identities is an important avenue for understanding ERI, just as much as a report from parents about their practices (Chavous and Cogburn, 2007). Therefore, both the level and the type of socialization Black girls receive, as well as the meaning they ascribe to those messages are important considerations in understanding the role of parents in Black girls' ERIs.

The Present Study

In the present study, we use Phelan et al. (1991) Multiple Worlds model as a framework to explore the beliefs and attitudes Black girls hold about race and

their own ERI, as well as the processes that contribute to their learning about race (and racism) during early adolescence. Consistent with previous research, we believe that the beliefs and attitudes Black girls develop through the process of ERI development has important implications for their sense of group pride, affirmation, and belonging through the identity development process. First, we present definitions of how Black girls define race and what their own ethnic-racial identities mean to them. Then, we present Black girls' discussions of where they learned about race and what messages they received in those settings. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of how the beliefs, attitudes, and processes are important to the development of Black girls.

Method

Participants

Data for the present study were drawn from a longitudinal, mixed methods study of more than 200 middle school students. The larger project was focused on how racial/ethnic diversity plays a role in students' social experience and included participants from two racially diverse public middle schools in the Southeastern United States. Oak Forest Middle School had a student body that was 5% Asian American, 19% Black/African American, 20% Hispanic/Latinx, 7% Multiracial, and 48% White. In contrast, the student body at Mountainview Middle School was 4% Asian American, 9% Black/African American, 7% Hispanic/Latinx, 7% Multiracial, and 72% White. Just under half (45%) of students at Oak Forest and about one third (31%) of students at Mountain View met state-determined criteria for economic disadvantage (i.e., eligible for free/reduce lunch, receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), eligible for Medicaid, migrant or homeless). Based on initial survey data, only 11 girls in the sample self-identified as Black or African American (including both mono-racial and multiracial identities) in the study. See Table 1 for girls' self-identification during the current interviews. All 11 Black girls in the larger study were included in the analysis. The 11 Black girls were divided fairly evenly across the two schools (six and one and five at the other), and nine of them qualified for free or reduced-price lunch.

Procedure

All procedures and materials were approved by and in compliance with the university's Institutional Review Board. Students were recruited in the cafeteria and their homeroom class and a letter was sent home to participate in this

Table 1. Black Girls' Self-Identified Race.

Pseudonym	Self-Identified Race
Aaliyah	"Um, African American [pause] basically. That's it."
Desiree	"Um, well, I'm mixed with White, American Indian, and African American, but I'm—I really don't have nothing to do with American Indian and White."
Esther	"Uh, I'm Black."
Ezra	"Um, well, I have a lot [of cultures]. I'm a mutt. So, like, I have a lot of races. I'm um, Indian, French, Puerto Rican, Black, White, I forget the rest."
Indiya	"Well, I would choose mine as American Indian and, like, African American—because I'm both."
Jasmine	"I'm, uh, I'm mixed. And then on my dad's side, it's—like part Indian."
Melissa	"Like, Black American. Um, yeah."
Mya	"African American and, um, hum, I don't know"
Naomi	"Uh, like African American?"
Shara	"Um, [pause] African American."
Terry	Terry does not define her racial background. She describes how she avoids using racial descriptors "because I think, like, if you think of it, like, race and culture might be relate something bad and stuff like that. That's why we use, like foods [oreo, caramel, dark chocolate], to talk about it."

study. Students and their caregivers who were interested in participating in this study were asked to sign and return assent and consent forms. In the current study, face-to-face individual interviews and friend group interviews conducted during the 2016–2017 academic year were analyzed. This data collection process took place in schools, with the race and gender of the interviewers matching the race and gender of the youth. Friend group interviews were organized based on students' friend nominations. Among the eleven Black girls, five of the six Black girls in School 1 and three of the four Black girls in School 2 were interviewed together as a friend group. The other two students at each school were interviewed with friends who did not identify as Black/African American. The face-to-face interviews took approximately 15 minutes, and the group interviews took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Interviews

As part of the larger study, interviews were designed to guide students through a set of questions on social relationships as well as their sense of

belonging in school. In the group interview, students also collaborated on drawing, labeling, and discussing a "cafeteria map" of peer groups in their grade. In the cafeteria map activity we developed, students identified and labeled where different student groups sat using a mockup of the school cafeteria. Then, students were asked to answer questions about the student groups on the map like "which groups get along and which groups may not get along and why?" All group interviews were both audio and video recorded.

In the individual interview, students were asked to reflect on their experiences with topics related to cultural diversity. Data from this article came from a series of questions about race, ethnicity, and culture. Sample questions included "Can you tell me what the word "race" means to you?" "How do you define your own racial [ethnic/cultural] background?" "How did you learn about race/ethnicity/culture?" and "What does being [your race] mean to you?" All individual interviews were audio recorded. Following data collection, all group and individual interview transcriptions were transcribed, cleaned to ensure transcription accuracy, and preliminarily processed by a team of researchers using a standardized form to promote data familiarity.

Positionality

The first author identifies as an African American woman and the second author identifies as a biracial African American woman. Both authors worked closely together on the larger project for years (e.g., meeting twice a week for over 4 years). The second author was the principal investigator of the larger project and the first author worked alongside her throughout the process of designing, collecting, and analyzing data. Both authors have also led and been involved in research projects that focus on girls of color in schools for over a decade. Our identities as Black women, deep connection to the larger project, and experiences working with girls of color in the past undoubtedly shaped our data analysis process. For example, as a result of our positionalities as Black women researchers, we approached this research with a commitment to highlighting Black girls' voices and experiences. Like Collins (2000), we believe in centering the voices of Black women and girls in research and, in turn, acknowledging both their marginalization and their resilience in educational settings. With this in mind, we chose to include direct quotes and rich descriptions that include temporality, social context, complicating events, and an evaluative conclusion to ensure that the voices and experiences of Black girls were centered, while still conveying key themes and processes across girls.

Data Analysis

Qualitative methods can "provide a window into the process of identity construction" (Riessman, 2008) by allowing individuals to "form and re-form who they have been, are presently, and hope to become" (McAlpine, 2016). In the current study, an inductive analysis process via mapping and writing around data was used (Bhattacharya, 2017). Inductive analysis refers to "approaches that primarily use detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data by an evaluator or researcher" (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). The data analysis process involved an iterative process of reading, writing, reflecting, visualizing, and debriefing with peer and subject matter experts.

First, the first author wrote analytic memos for each individual in the study. These memos were discussed with peer and subject matter experts, which included graduate students, faculty members including the second author of this article, practitioners, and educators. Second, story arcs (Saldaña, 2017) and visual maps were drawn for each individual to better depict the events and ERI development (Bhattacharya, 2017). Each visualization was compared to learn more about the similarities and differences between individuals. The first author wrote additional analytic memos about the similarities and differences and held additional discussions with peer and subject matter experts. The first author documented what was discussed and integrated knowledge garnered from the discussions into the data analysis process. She also returned to the raw data to resolve additional questions about the data that were brought up in the debriefing sessions. After repeating this process of visual mapping, memo writing, and debriefing, the authors organized the findings below.

Findings

Descriptive Definitions of Race

Table 2 presents Black girls' definitions of race. Black girls' definitions were consistent with previous studies showing that youth often begin with literal meanings of race before moving to more abstract definitions that account for the social realities of race (Quintana, 2008). There was not a great deal of variation among the responses in our sample. Most girls reported concrete, literal definitions of race that only referred to physical characteristics. For example, Mya and Shara only described race as skin color. Indiya also focused on skin color, saying that race "means to me—it means to me, like, what color you are." Some girls included culture in their definitions of race. Esther, for instance, began to expand the definition to include culture but had

Table 2. Black Girls' Definitions of Race.

Pseudonym	What does race mean to you?
Aaliyah	"So one's when you're running or, like, your culture and stuff."
Desiree	"The first term means like if you-like in a competition, you're racing. The second term means like different people, like Black, White, Indian, and all of that."
Esther	"Um, like, your ethnicity—your eth-eh, okay. I can't say that word today." "Um, so, like, the color of your skin and stuff like that."
Ezra	"Um, someone's, like, heritage of where they come from. And, like, a mixture sometimes, like, some biracial, some African American and some Caucasians—and Hispanics."
Indiya	"So, race, it means to me—it means to me, like, what color you are."
Jasmine	"What type of culture you're from and, like, mostly like your skin color."
Melissa	"Um, it doesn't really mean anything to me because I don't make fun of people's race, like, I don't care what they are. I'll still be their friend and stuff."
Mya	"Skin color"
Naomi	"Uh, race means [pause] I don't know. Um, basically, I guess, comparing whites versus blacks or different—maybe different races like different types of people like African-American, White, Hispanic, all that."
Shara	"Different colored people"
Terry	"Um, so pretty much what color you are. Like, who, like, what race your family is. So, like, if you're, like, African American, White—be like, European, Canadian or something like that. And I guess, like the way you act. I mean, like, at our school there's two types of Black . . ."

a difficult time with terminology. She said, "um, like, your ethnicity—your eth-eh, okay. I can't say that word today" followed by "um, so, like, the color of your skin and stuff like that." Jasmine's definition, "what type of culture you're from and, like, mostly like your skin color," also began to expand the definition beyond physical characteristics. However, only two students began to link the definition of race to the "social realities" of race (Quintana, 2008). Melissa did not provide a definition because she felt like race "doesn't mean anything to me because I don't make fun of people's race" and Terry described race as a physical characteristic ("Um, so pretty much what color you are,") part of your culture ("Like, who, like, what race your family is)," and a set of behaviors ("the way you act").

The Influence of Socialization Experiences in Shaping What It Means to be Black Among Black Girls

While Black girls' definitions of race tended to be more abstract, Black girls' responses to what being their race meant to them was grounded in their own social realities. In other words, the attitudes and beliefs about their own race was about more than the color of their skin. Desiree, for example, said that being her race meant "having a darker skin," but she also tied it to where she once lived, adding that it also meant "um, [pauses]—maybe the projects, maybe." She made this connection because she once lived in a "bad" neighborhood with her family and had to move.

Terry began her definition by discussing how her and her friends used food names, like "chocolate truffle" or "dark chocolate" to discuss the color of people's skin, but she also described the social implications of being African or African American in school. Terry described how there are "two types of Black" at her school—the "ghetto one" and the "African one." In using the mock-up map of the cafeteria provided during the interview, Terry pointed to where "pretty much all the people that were Black sit"; however, she distinguished between the spot where Black students with one or both parents who are from Africa sit (where she sits) and where the other group where "the ghetto, like African Americans sit." She continued to say that she thought her group was more approachable by non-Black peers because "when they think of ghetto, then you relate that to, like, bad stuff, like shootings— and like braids and stuff like that." Aaliyah also reflected on the negative stereotypes associated with being African American held by peers, saying that being African American was "um, being something people don't like, and yeah." She continued, describing how being African American has been used as a means to "disrespect people" and enslave them and it is associated with "how, like, we act bad and, like, all that stuff."

According to Ezra, "having a lot of races" meant that she would be misunderstood by peers. She said that people often think she is "fully Black" and make assumptions about her race that make her "uncomfortable" because people "expected me to be something I'm not." She elaborated, saying, "because, like, like, if you like . . . it bothered me because, like, they told me what I was before I could tell them what I was." Notably, only two girls provided positive beliefs and attitudes about their own ethnic-racial identities. Mya defined being African American as "what I am and what my parents are" and Naomi defined being Black as "uh Black and proud, I guess." Another student, Shara, said "I don't know [what it means to me]."

What is surprising about the difference in how Black girls defined race and what being their own race meant to them is that while Black girls' definitions

of race focused on concrete definitions, such as physical appearance, their own self-understanding focused on the interactions they had within their microsystems. Therefore, we believe it is important to distinguish between students' knowledge of the definition of race and their application of that knowledge to their own lives. The large number of Black girls who described negative social incidents associated with being their race indicate that social experiences play an important role in the self-understanding of Black girls in early adolescence.

Exploring the Specific Messages Received in Black Girls' Multiple Worlds

Next, the girls were asked how they learned about race. Black girls' responses fell within the four central worlds (i.e., families, peer groups, classrooms and schools) as outlined in Phelan et al. (1991) Multiple Worlds model. Black girls most often reported that they learned about race in school, specifically in history class. In alignment with previous findings about the racial social-ization process within families during adolescence, the discussions of race and racism in school often served as a catalyst for additional discussions about race within families (Hughes & Johnson, 2001). Peer groups played the second largest role, with classroom discussions of race and racism influenc-ing the nature of the bullying and teasing of Black girls by peers. It is impor-tant to differentiate the worlds and the messages and experiences that occur within that world because each setting may hold a different level of impor-tance and influence. Therefore, the following paragraphs explore each setting in detail, exploring the messages and experiences described by the girls who identified that setting as a place where they learned about race.

Schools and classrooms. Many girls described learning about race in school starting in early elementary school. For example, Shara said she started learn-ing about her race as early as first or second grade. In describing what she learned, she said, "well, we do it like in between because it's like back in the 18s and 19s and stuff like that, that they were—maybe racism and stuff. But yeah, we mainly do it in history." She continued to describe the last time she learned about race being in the current school year when she learned about "slavery and stuff." She commented that she does not remember learning anything else about race.

To Shara, learning about race was associated with learning about slavery. Other girls in the study had similar responses, describing memories of learn-ing about race that centered on enslavement, replying that they learned "how slaves be—like, how did—how slaves, like began," and viewed images in

history books like "a slave with, like whips on his back—the welts or whatever—." Desiree described how learning about race in school was important, but acknowledged the limited scope of what she was taught, saying

> [Pauses] Like when I was little, I already knew I was Black, but I didn't really know the meaning. But at school, like when we started talk about slaves and all that, that's what I really learned it from. But they never really talked about what Black people did. They just talked about how they were slaves.

Family. Although most of the girls responded that they learned about race in history, some students described the role of family in addition to school in teaching them about race. Families were infrequently mentioned as the main socializing agent; however, this may illustrate the change in racial socialization practices, with youth often engaging in conversations about race after experiencing incidents of bias in adolescence (Hughes & Johnson, 2001), or it may signal the increased salience of the external world in the lives of early adolescents. For instance, Naomi said that she learned about race from her mom, history class, and books, but she clarified that she only talked about race when she learned it in history class first. Then, after learning about it in history, she would tell her mom and discuss it further.

Another student, Melissa, described the differences between the conversations she had in history class and the conversations she had at home. In class, conversations about race were about "how it was back then and that we should be treated equally and stuff" and conversations with her dad were about "how important our race is." For her, race was "important because it's how, well, it was basically how I was born and how the rest of my life is going to be." Finally, Mya, who said that being African American meant "what I am and who my parents are" described the racial socialization practices she had received from her parents, for example, conversations at the dinner table that instilled a sense of pride as well as the sharing of stories about her parents, grandparents, and "past family members." She said she felt comfortable with talking about ethnicity with people outside of her family (e.g., peers or in school) as long as it centered on "positive things" "like, we're all equal, and we can do everything."

Peers. The previous section highlighted how lessons in the classroom on slavery played a key role in how Black girls learned about their own race. Lessons on slavery also contributed to the bullying and teasing of Black girls. In alignment with findings by Suárez-Orozco (2004) and Lei (2003), Black girls' peers appeared to be reproducing the stereotypical or controlling images

they learned about in the classroom and reinforcing the marginalization of Black girls in schools.

Much of the bullying described by the girls centered on being called "slaves" or in being told to "go back to Africa." For example, Mya described how a group of White boys who she called "the hunter boys" were "a little rude to most people . . . if your skin color is different" and told her "we don't like you because you're Black and, like, you should go back to Africa." She also shared that one time in science class, a group of boys shared that she was "not good enough" and "shouldn't really be here." Aaliyah described how other students in her school acted differently around her and her other African American friends, saying how other students "act different and, like, think that, uh, we will hit them or something like that. And we don't." She said that she could try and change other people's opinions about them, but "they probably still believe it" so it was not really worth it.

Terry described a system of how boys ranked girls in school based on appearance, particularly skin lightness. She described her rank as a three or two, on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being the highest and 10 being the lowest). She described her friend, who is "lighter skinned" and dating a boy as a two. She told the interviewer that "most of the dark-skinned girls" are "lower." In reflecting on why she thought the ranking system existed, she said,

> I feel bad. I don't feel like, I don't know why people do it. I don't see, like, what the problem is. It might just be because, like, a long time ago, how they—how we were, like slaves and stuff like that. And that might influence how it is now. And it, like, gets me upset sometimes how people think about it like that. And it doesn't really matter. We're just—we're all the same. Doesn't matter about your skin tone. It's just like—mellinus or melleniunnus in your skin.
>
> Interviewer: Melanin?
>
> Yeah. [Both laugh]

Discussion

In the present study, we adopted Phelan et al.'s (1991) Multiple Worlds model to more deeply understand the beliefs and attitudes Black girls held about race and their own ERI, as well as the processes that contribute to their learning about race (and racism) during early adolescence. Their responses underscore the social challenges Black girls must navigate in the worlds of schools and classrooms, families, and peer groups during adolescence as they are developing their ERIs.

First, we found important differences in how Black girls defined race and what being their own race meant to them. Black girls' definitions of race focused on concrete definitions, such as physical appearance. From a developmental perspective, this is consistent with Quintana's (2008) model of racial perspective-taking ability. In the model, youth move from a "literal" perspective on race (e.g., focused on foods, holidays and physical markers) to a "social" perspective as they "observe patterns associated with race that are not literally connected to racial group membership. They connect social processes with race such as social norms, friendship patterns, and also spontaneously mention discrimination and bias as being associated with race" (p. 20). However, Black girls' discussions of what being their own race meant to them indicated that they were connecting race with social processes related to bias and discrimination. This is consistent with other research showing that stereotypes frequently serve as a context for ERI development (Way et al., 2013).

Indeed, girls in the present study are making meaning of their ERI, in part, in response to stereotypical and biased messages about their identities within their multiple worlds (i.e., schools, classrooms, families and peers). For example, girls described seeing images of "a slave with, like whips on his back-the welts or whatever—" without ever learning, as Desiree commented, "what Black people did." One girl succinctly summarized what she had learning through history as "maybe racism and stuff" and none of the girls described learning that included the voices of African American and/or Indigenous persons. Student's depictions of what was learned reflected the "master narrative" of teaching about history (Swartz & Goodwin, 1992; Swartz, 2013). In turn, learning about race through the lens of slavery seemed to cause distress and highlight differences between students, particularly Black and White students, without providing students with the language and background to understand institutional and symbolic oppression.

While many girls mentioned concrete markers of race as they defined it, most also brought up negative stereotypes or historical events. Most shared these markers in a matter-of-fact sort of manner (i.e., "this is all I know right now"), although as part of the ERI developmental process, it is likely that many will engage in contestation of and resistance to these stereotypical images as they move through adolescence (Way et al., 2013). Thus, although it is concerning to know that negative images feature most prominently in girls' definitions of what it means to be Black, theories of developmental and social psychology indicate that this does not mean that girls have or will develop a negative sense of private racial regard (Spencer et al., 1997; Velez & Spencer, 2018). At the same time, the findings underscore the idea that racial categories are part of a system of oppression, and that at the individual

level, youth make meaning of racial group membership against this sociohistorical backdrop.

The messages Black girls heard about their race from their peers mirrored the main messages the girls reported about what they learned about race in history class. In alignment with previous research that "adolescent societies" mirror macro-societal norms and images, many of the messages directed at Black girls were "stereotypical" and "controlling" (Collins, 2016). For example, girls were called "slaves" or told to "go back to Africa" and attributed a social "ranking" system, where girls were judged based partially on skin color, as something that began "a long time ago" because of slavery. Notably, many girls indicated that the messages they heard within their school and peer worlds seemed equally or more important than messages they heard in other contexts. Desiree, for instance, said "when I was little, I already knew I was Black, but I didn't really know the meaning [until school through lessons on slavery]" and Terry said that ideas about race are cemented when "hanging out around people in, like, elementary school" and then "you just remember it." However, the level of congruency between girls' home, school and classroom, and peer worlds differed. Melissa and Indiya, for example, described differences in the messages they received about race in their home and school worlds. Melissa distinguished between learning about "how it was back then and that we should be treated equally and stuff" in school while the conversations she had with her dad was about "how important our race is."

Intersections between race and gender emerged infrequently and were generally limited to students' discussions of peer interactions. Terry's account of how girls were ranked by boys based on skin tone and other aspects of physical appearance illuminated one way in which a "race-gender" experience was at play. Terry also emphasized the social approachability of some "types" of Black girls compared with other types and argued that the more "ghetto" type of Black girls was associated with "like braids and stuff like that." However, most of the girls did not explicitly discuss gender in their definitions of race. Instead, the definitions and examples they gave demonstrate how they see race operating in their lives regardless of gender.

Limitations

First, this study did not explicitly ask Black girls about what they heard and learned about being a Black girl within their worlds. The larger study was designed to understand race and did not ask about both race and gender, which may have impacted the ways that Black girls described their experiences and the absence of explicit discussions of gender as well as other identities in conjunction with race. In addition, we only explored what students

learned about race within the world that they identified during the interview. Therefore, we were unable to explore patterns of contradiction or congruence between each of their social worlds. Future research should ask about what they learned about race within each of their social worlds to examine the congruence or dissonance between worlds. Second, this study acknowledges the role of institutions in shaping the education and lived experiences of Black girls; future research should explore how factors such as academic tracking, discipline, and other school-wide policies shape the educational experiences of Black girls. Finally, the larger study from which we drew our analytic sample was not designed to explore classroom-level effects; future observational research is needed to examine the role of specific lessons on outcomes.

Implications

This study took place in a Southern State, where the role of confederate history is still prominent. This may partially explain why so many of the girls brought up slavery when discussing their knowledge of what it means to be Black; however, curricular standards for middle grades U.S. history classes are also at play and may be representative of national trends across middle grades (SPLC, 2018). Bishop (2009) argues that educators can de-stigmatize slave ancestry by "placing the responsibility for slavery outside the enslaved, and by focusing on the ways enslaved people actively sought to liberate themselves, if not physically, then psychologically" through the pursuit of freedom, love for their family, and the importance of learning to read. It was evident that the girls in the present study had not been exposed to a "de-stigmatized" telling of African enslavement and were left to figure out on their own how to make sense of this history in relation to their personal ERI.

While this study emphasizes individuals' phenomenological experiences and does not claim blanket generalizability, other students may be processing the same messages in their worlds. Future studies should continue to examine ERI meaning making in context. Importantly, this study also illustrates potential pathways for the production and reproduction of "damaging" and "controlling" ideologies (i.e., through school curriculum and by peers). These pathways may be important in understanding other marginalized students experiences in schools, which may have implications for youth's sense of group pride, affirmation, and belonging, and their views on how others feel about their group (i.e., public regard; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Sellers et al., 1998).

The award-winning author Jacqueline Woodson asked herself "What am I going to do about a time of my life in which the brilliance of black girls had

no mirror?" as she wrote *Another Brooklyn*, a story about Black girlhood (Patrick, 2017). This question is also relevant for the field of education: How can we actively support the identity development of Black girls as they navigate classrooms and hallways and other spaces during the school day that convey messages that Black girls are devalued? For instance, how can educators integrate liberatory narratives of Black girlhood that serve as mirrors, reflecting Black girls' lived experiences across history? How might teachers integrate all students' personal biographies to provide windows (Bishop, 1990; Style, 1988) into the lived experiences of a diverse classroom in ways that promote inclusiveness and identity affirmation? In what ways can parents and schools work together to promote racial pride? How can educators promote critical consciousness—advancing knowledge that pushes students to challenge the status quo master narrative (Ladson-Billings, 1995)? Answers to these questions offer exciting avenues for future research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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Note

1. The names of all study participants are pseudonyms.

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