

Negotiating Motherhood and Intersecting Inequalities: A Qualitative Study of African American Mothers and the Socialization of Adolescent Daughters

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Abstract

African American middle-class mothers have been understudied in research on contemporary motherhood and African American families. To address this gap in the literature, this dissertation uses an intersectional theoretical framework to document the raced, classed, and gendered experiences of African American middle-class mothers raising adolescent daughters. Data collected from thirty-six qualitative interviews revealed that mothers find themselves trying to reconcile cultural definitions of motherhood with their present-day social and economic realities. Due to persistent race and class segregation in the United States, African American middle-class mothers and their families spend a considerable amount of time in predominantly white settings. Because African American middle-class mothers do not assume their class status will insulate their daughters from racist encounters with peers and adults, mothers in this study engaged in distinctive types of care work to promote their daughters' educational, emotional, and social development. This included managing and monitoring their daughters school environments, helping their daughters develop resistance strategies to protect against the psychological and academic costs of discrimination, and constructing culturally affirming social support networks to provide their daughters with a racial-ethnic community often unavailable through their schools or neighborhoods. Mothers also reported that a primary goal of their socialization practices was to instill in their

daughters a sense of self worth despite the pejorative images of African American women that pervade American society. For example, mothers adopted a range of strategies to promote a positive body image and create opportunities for their daughters to connect with other African American women. However, although mothers utilized gendered racial socialization messages of self-definition and empowerment with their daughters, the need to resist racial stereotypes led mothers to endorse social scripts of middle-class respectability that depend on the sexual modesty and gender conformity of African American women. Indeed, mothers' sexuality-related communications, and perspectives on interracial relationships in particular, revealed broader concerns about their daughters' futures in a racialized society. Findings from this study offer insight into the interpersonal and contextual factors that influence the socialization strategies African American mothers use with their adolescent daughters, and can inform the development of culturally relevant family support programs.