Published in final edited form as:

Psychol Women Q. 2008 ; 32(4): 454–468. doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.2008.00458.x.

THROUGH THE LENS OF RACE: BLACK AND WHITE WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF WOMANHOOD

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Abstract

The intersection of race and gender may create unique experiences for Black and White women in terms of work, family, domestic roles, and interpersonal relationships. Dissimilar gender-role norms may foster different perceptions of gender for these two groups of women. In the current study, we examined similarities and differences in Black and White women's perceptions of their gender using qualitative focus group methodology and grounded theory data analysis. The results identified five themes that were common to Black and White women: Gender-Based Mistreatment, Perceived Advantage, Friendships and Community, Caretaking, and Work and Family Options. One additional theme, Inner Strength, emerged only for Black women. Although many of the broad perceptions of womanhood were similar for Black and White women, analysis of the content within each theme highlighted important differences. We discuss the results in terms of how they may reflect socio-historical factors, gender discrimination, stereotypes, and gender-role norms.

Gender is socially constructed, and how women conceptualize their own gender is shaped by numerous factors, such as gender-role socialization, interpersonal interactions, media messages, and personal experiences as women (e.g., Abrams, 2003; Baker, 2005; Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2003; Witt, 1997). Some of these external forces and personal experiences may create similar perceptions of gender for women of different backgrounds. Yet, women's perceptions of their gender reflect significant within-group heterogeneity (e.g., Abrams, 2003; Boies, 2003; Rederstorff, Buchanan, & Settles, 2007). One factor that may contribute to these differences is race. Specifically, socio-historical differences in Black and White women's options for work, family, and domestic labor, as well as experiences of discrimination and stereotyping, have created a set of race-related gender norms that are likely to influence how women from these groups perceive and value their own gender. Employing focus-group methodology to attain rich, detailed, qualitative data, we drew upon an intersectional theoretical framework to examine how race influences Black and White women's perceptions of womanhood.

Conceptualizations of Gender and Race

Gender and race have sometimes been described as master statuses or superordinate groups that influence other group memberships and identities (Frable, Blackstone, & Scherbaum, 1990). As a result of the prominence and visibility of race and gender, individuals may be especially likely to think about themselves in terms of these groups (Cooley, 1922; Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi, & Ethier, 1995; Frable, 1997; Mead, 1925), and others are likely to categorize and stereotype them based on their membership in these groups (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Lott & Saxon, 2002). In addition to their importance singly, gender and race intersect to place individuals into unique positions based on the combination of these groups (e.g., Black women, White men, Latina women; Crenshaw, 1995; Hurtado, 1989; Settles, 2006). This joint social position is sometimes referred to as “ethgender” (Ransford & Miller, 1983) and is theorized to create experiences and perceptions that are distinct from those of individuals with other combinations of group memberships (Hurtado & Stewart, 1997).

Further, individuals’ understanding and experience of one identity (e.g., gender) may be shaped by the context and experiences created by the other (e.g., race). For example, although both Black and White women may experience sexual harassment, Black women are more likely to experience sexual harassment that has a racial component (racialized sexual harassment; Buchanan, 2005; Buchanan & Ormerod, 2002). Another example of intersectionality is the finding that feminist attitudes buffered psychological outcomes for sexually harassed White women, but exacerbated psychological outcomes for sexually harassed Black women (Rederstorff et al., 2007). Thus, we regard gender and race as often internalized group memberships (i.e., identities) that intersect in many ways; one way is that women’s racial group membership creates a unique lens that informs how their gender is viewed.

The Role of Race in Women’s Experience of Womanhood

For all women, gender is devalued and ascribed a low status (Katz, Joiner, & Kwon, 2002; Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999) and such experiences can impact one’s own value and perception of womanhood (e.g., feminist consciousness, internalized sexism; Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz, & Owen, 2002). As a result, women of different ethnic backgrounds may face similar forms of gender-based mistreatment, such as gender discrimination and sexism. For example, research has found that Black and White women report similar experiences of sexist treatment (Lott, Asquith, & Doyon, 2001) and pay inequity compared to men (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). Overt sexism, in which women are expected to adhere to traditional gender roles, persists, and subtle forms that tend to discount the existence of gender inequality may be increasing (Glick & Fiske, 1997, 2001; Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995). The ambiguity and subtlety of modern-day sexism may present additional challenges to women by creating uncertainty about whether they have been the target of mistreatment.

These and other types of gender-based mistreatment of women are prevalent. For example, a large national study found that 48% of women attributed their perceived daily discriminatory experiences to their gender (Kessler et al., 1999). Similarly, studies suggest that at least 50%

of women will experience sexual harassment (i.e., unwanted sex-related behaviors and comments; Fitzgerald, 1996) during college and their working lives (Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1993; Huerta, Cortina, Pang, Torges, & Magley, 2006; Ilies, Hauserman, Schwochau, & Stibal, 2003; Paludi & Paludi, 2003). Because gender-based experiences such as sexism, discrimination, sexual harassment, and rape are associated with numerous psychological well-being and job and/or academic outcomes (e.g., Buchanan & Fitzgerald, 2008; Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997; Gutner, Rizvi, Monson, & Resick, 2006; Settles, Cortina, Malley, & Stewart, 2006), they are likely to affect profoundly how women see themselves, regardless of whether they have been directly targeted.

Although Black and White women are both devalued on the basis of their gender, *double jeopardy theory* (Beal, 1970; King, 1988) suggests that Black women may face additional challenges because their race is also devalued. This double marginalization of Black women makes them targets of both sexism and racism (Hurtado, 1989; King, 1988; Perkins, 1983; Reid & Comas-Diaz, 1990; Smith & Stewart, 1983; St. Jean & Feagin, 1997) and creates a unique social space for Black women (or other groups with multiple devalued identities). Consistent with the idea of double marginalization, studies have found that, compared to White women, Black women experience higher rates of sexual harassment (e.g., Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Bergman & Drasgow, 2003; Buchanan, Settles, & Woods, 2008; Mecca & Rubin, 1999; Nelson & Probst, 2004), report more systematic discrimination and barriers to their career goals (Browne & Kennelly, 1999; Lopez & Ann-Yi, 2006), and experience greater disability and mortality due to health care disparities, even controlling for socioeconomic status (Andresen & Brownson, 2000; Green, Ndao-Brumblay, Nigrant, Baker, & Rothman, 2004).

Within the United States, socio-historical factors have created differences in the gender-role norms typically held for Black and White women. Many of these differences grew out of the *cult of true womanhood* (Perkins, 1983; Welter, 1966), a notion of womanhood that emerged for White (middle-class) women in the mid-1800s. This ideal emphasized modesty, purity, and domesticity for White women and identified wife and mother as their primary and most important roles. Historically, Black women were viewed in contrast to this norm for middle-class White women. Black women were not seen as “true” women, but rather as animalistic and hypersexed, which was then used to justify their enslavement and rape (Collins, 2000; West, 2004). There is evidence that these historical ideals persist in the stereotypes of Black and White women. For example, compared to Black women, White women are stereotyped as more nurturing, domestic, dependent, submissive, and emotional (Baker, 2005; Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Kilbourne, 1999; Landrine, 1985). Thus, White women continue to be seen in terms of domestic ideals and as objects of men’s sexual desire. In contrast, stereotypes of Black women (e.g., Jezebel, Mammy) tend to present Black women as hypersexual yet hypofeminine, which further reinforces the perception that White women are the norm (Bell, 2004; Collins, 2000; Fuller, 2004; West, 2004).

These historical differences in gender-role norms and ideals have led to the stratification of Black and White women in multiple domains. For example, historically, White middle-class women were expected to end their work or schooling after marriage so they could devote themselves to their domestic roles. Today, White women have significantly increased their

presence in the labor force, but frequently work in sex-segregated occupations (Reskin, 1999; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006) and are still primarily defined by their family and caretaking roles. In contrast, since slavery, Black women have been expected to work while taking care of their families (Davis, 2002; Pascale, 2001). Compared to White women, Black women with young children are more likely to be in the labor force (75% of Black women vs. 63% of White women with children under 6 years old; 71% of Black women vs. 59% of White women with children under 3 years old) and are more likely to be employed in jobs with less flexibility (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). Further, discrimination has limited the economic opportunities for many Black men, which may contribute to Black women's greater likelihood of being single parents (White & Cones, 1999). Thus, Black women commonly combine their work and family roles.

Further, Glenn (1992) described that, although paid and unpaid "reproductive labor"—maintenance of the household and relationships and care of children and other adults—is perceived as the responsibility of women, this role is also "racialized." Specifically, whereas Black women have been, and continue to be, relegated to the "dirtier" and least valued aspects of reproductive labor (e.g., cooking and cleaning), White women have traditionally held more skilled positions related to this work (e.g., supervisory, technical, and administrative support roles). As a result of these differences in work and family norms, Black and White women may come to view womanhood as having different requirements related to work and domestic roles.

The Current Study

The current study seeks to examine similarities and differences in the perceptions of womanhood for Black and White women. Because this study was largely exploratory, specific hypotheses were not proposed. However, the previous literature does suggest some areas in which we might observe both similarities and differences between the Black and White women in our study. For example, Black and White women might both express concerns about issues related to their roles as mothers, spouses/partners, and workers, but White women may perceive themselves as having greater role flexibility for managing work–family responsibilities. In addition, Black and White women may both describe experiences of sexism and sexual harassment; however, the nature of their gender-based mistreatment may differ according to the stereotypes of the groups (e.g., Black women may report more sexualization; White women may report being patronized more).

Although there is extant research on differences in the experiences of Black and White women (e.g., sexism, sexual harassment, health outcomes), there is little or no empirical research that focuses simultaneously on Black and White women's thoughts and feelings about their experiences as women and how those perceptions shape their sense of self and the world. Further, past research has tended to ignore issues of race or to focus exclusively on racial differences; the current study seeks to identify both similarities and differences in Black and White women's conceptualization of womanhood. Thus, we used qualitative focus groups to encourage women to speak about their lived experiences rather than our imposing preconceived notions upon them (Madriz, 2000; Wilkinson, 1999). Additionally,

we used an intersectional theoretical framework because, by considering how race and gender depend upon one another for meaning and uniquely position individuals within the social structure, we are able to gain a fuller picture of how racial contexts shape experiences of gender for Black and White women (Crenshaw, 1995; Settles, 2006; Stewart & McDermott, 2004).

METHOD

Participants

Black ($n = 14$) and White ($n = 17$) women took part in one of six focus groups in which they were asked about their positive and negative gender- and race-related experiences. To maximize the diversity of experiences and responses, women of varying ages and socioeconomic backgrounds were included. Participants for four of the focus groups were recruited from a mid-sized community in a Midwestern state through newspaper advertisements and flyers. These materials invited women to participate in a study in which they could share their experiences related to being a member of their gender and racial group (e.g., being a Black woman), as well as through referrals from other participants (snowballing). Participants for the remaining two focus groups were recruited from a psychology subject pool comprising students from several undergraduate classes at a large Midwestern university. Community participants received \$20 and dinner, and subject pool participants received course credit.

Table 1 provides sample demographic information by racial group and the results of significance tests comparing Black and White women on these variables. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 84 years ($M = 35.61$; $SD = 20.44$), and their modal level of highest education completed was “some college.” Thirty-two percent of the women were mothers with one to four children ($M = 2.22$, $SD = 1.20$). Significance tests yielded no differences between the Black and White participants in age, education, sexual orientation, having children, or number of children, although, because of our small sample size, we may lack sufficient power to detect differences. However, Black women were significantly more likely to be single, and White women were more likely to be married. Further, although not reaching significance, a pattern emerged such that White women were more likely to be unemployed, whereas Black women were more likely to be working part-time. We also noted that White women were more likely to self-report being middle or upper middle class, whereas Black women were more likely to report being working class/lower middle class; however, this did not reach statistical significance.

Data Collection

In total, six 2-hour focus groups were conducted for Black and White women (three groups each). Each focus group was limited to a maximum of 10 participants, and the actual size was dependent on participant availability (Black group sample sizes: 2, 5, and 7; White group sample sizes: 5, 6, and 6). To increase group comfort and cohesion, the facilitator and assistant were women of the same race as focus group participants; the same facilitator-assistant pair led all three sessions for their race-gender group. The facilitator was responsible for reviewing the study guidelines and posing questions to participants. The first

and second authors served as focus group assistants; their role was to set up audio/visual equipment and take notes. As participants arrived, they completed a demographic questionnaire and consent forms for participation and video and audio recording. At the start of each focus group, the facilitator reviewed the general purpose of the study, the rights of participants, and ground rules for the discussion. Participants were told that there was no correct answer to any question, and they were to speak freely but be respectful of differences. To further increase participants' comfort and to help them get to know one another, each focus group began with a brief icebreaker in which participants described something important to their sense of self (e.g., being a mother).

Questions asked about participants' experiences as women and followed a protocol to ensure consistency across the groups. Initial questions were very broad and included the following: "How has being a woman positively (negatively) influenced your life? What are some of the advantages (disadvantages) of being a woman? Does being a woman help you to know more about who you are or give your life a sense of purpose? Are there things that you find special or valuable about being a woman, even if they make life harder?" Follow-up questions were more specific, either to stimulate discussion or to encourage participants to elaborate on their responses. For example, "Do you have home or caregiving responsibilities? If so, what types? Are there unique, different, or special things about being a woman? If so, what are they?" Questions related to positive aspects of being a woman preceded those focused on disadvantages. At the end of the focus group, participants were debriefed, compensated, and thanked.

Data Analysis

Focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim from the audio and video recordings and checked for accuracy by a second independent transcriber. Grounded theory was used to guide the present analyses because it is recommended for analyzing data where theory has yet to be established or validated with a new population (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Within a grounded theory framework, data collection and analysis is an iterative process, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than imposing theory a priori. Eight trained student and faculty coders (2 Black women, 2 Latinas, 2 White women, and 2 White men) conducted a line-by-line analysis in search of salient categories. These salient categories were then examined via a conceptual ordering analysis and discussed among coders at weekly meetings until a consensus was reached on the themes generated from these procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After emergent themes had been identified, two coders (both White women) conducted a second round of coding (interrater reliability = 89%) to determine the number of participants who endorsed each theme. Participant sentences or statements could be coded for multiple themes. Disagreements were resolved through discussion with the first author.

RESULTS

Five primary themes emerged for both Black and White women: Gender-Based Mistreatment, Perceived Advantage, Friendships and Community, Caretaking, and Work and Family Options. An additional theme, Inner Strength, emerged only for Black women. A

summary of the number of Black and White women discussing each of the themes and subthemes can be found in Table 2. We are presenting quotations with minor edits (e.g., removed “ums” or “uhs” or “like”) for the sake of clarity.

Gender-Based Mistreatment

Black and White women described experiences of sexism, harassment, or gender-based discrimination. Such experiences were diverse and affected participants' lives in a variety of ways. White women, more than Black women, expressed having been discriminated against at school. Most often, they described not being offered the same number of options and level of encouragement they felt men received, especially in male-dominated areas of study. For example, a White 24-year-old law student said about her mathematics education:

People really weren't pushing me and I really had the feeling it was because I was a woman. And I saw there was another guy who was in my grade, they let skip a couple of the classes and skip a couple of levels and go to the college ... and take advanced classes and I was as smart as this kid and they never afforded me these opportunities.

Black and White women shared experiences of gender discrimination in the workplace. They discussed the “glass ceiling,” the pay discrepancy between men and women, difficulty being hired or promoted, and a preference for men over women in positions of power and authority. This latter experience is illustrated by a White 48-year-old woman who said:

My first experience with being a woman negatively impacting me was the first job that I ever had at a jewelry factory that was owned by cousins of mine. ... They hired a man who I was supposed to teach everything that I was doing. From the start he was making more money than me [becoming angry], and after I taught him my job that I'd been handling, he was gonna be my boss And bein' treated like that just on the count of I'm a woman even though I was capable to do the job, that they thought that they were gonna give a man more money than me and I was gonna teach him how to do his job and he was gonna be my boss, it was like two things right on top of each other. That really set the course....You know, I didn't really trust anybody, 'cause every time I turned around I was being betrayed and it was usually by the men folk.

Some women felt that even if they held the same position as male employees they were still treated differently. For example, a Black 23-year-old woman described her previous experience as a used car salesperson:

I knew those cars good, but they didn't take me seriously until my numbers got serious. When I first put on my suit and went out on the floor it was a joke... but I didn't get their respect until later. Whereas, when guys start they're respected immediately.

Four White women articulated their belief that discrimination against them was due to employers' expectations about their likelihood of becoming mothers. A White 54-year-old woman said, “I was passed over for a promotion because they said, ‘Well, you're just going to be quitting and having kids.’” A 24-year-old White law student agreed, recounting

admonishments she received from an older male mentor about the dangers of being put on the “mommy-track.”

He said, “If you interview for a position—don’t let them just put you into like some kind of a supportive role. Make sure you’re on a partnership track. Otherwise they’re gonna look at you, and they’re going to say, ‘Oh she’s 25, she just wants to have kids. She just wants to raise a family. We’re not gonna put her on a partnership track’”—which is where you make the big money—”because she’ll just be leaving us in a couple years.”

Some White women also described sexual harassment in school and the workplace, sometimes with lasting effects on their career and educational choices:

When I was in graduate school I was sexually harassed by a professor I was working for, and it was probably the worst experience of my life.... It changed the course of my career. I got a Master’s degree instead of a Ph.D. because I wanted to leave the program. I decided I didn’t want to be an academic anymore and it definitely changed my view of men in positions of power at future jobs that I had.... It was just this very horribly emotional traumatic thing for me. (32-year-old White woman)

Both Black and White women described experiences of sexual harassment in the community, concerns about their safety, and fears of rape. Black and White women both described being approached or groped by strangers, as illustrated by a 21-year-old Black student, “... Every single time I walk to the store, I get hit on.... Now I live four houses from the store.... Some of them come back around, park, get out. Man, it just gets sickening.” However, only White women described being harassed and groped by acquaintances or in social settings (e.g., bars, parties). A White 22-year-old student said, “One of my friend’s friends grabbed my butt and I was just disgusted. I didn’t think that people still really did that.”

Black and White women also noted various forms of sexism. A Black 20-year-old student shared an experience at work, when her ability was questioned because of her gender:

This summer I was workin’ at [a warehouse]... everything is in bulk, heavy boxes you have to train to lift. And there was this one particular guy that works there, and every time he walks by he makes it a point to just harass me ... he always makes it a point, “Oh you can’t lift that. I don’t even know why they let women work in here, transporting this and lifting this. Little ladies can’t handle this. Let me get this for you, little lady.” Just because I don’t have muscles rippling all down my body does not mean that I can’t lift this. He got on my nerves, my last nerve ‘cause every day, every day it was something.

Slightly more Black women than White women expressed frustration with experiences that might be termed “benevolent sexism” (Glick & Fiske, 1997, 2001), which they described as men acting as if women need to be protected. A Black 19-year-old student said, “Sometimes people want to shield you from the truth when they think you can’t handle it. Or they want to go easy on you.” Often this protection was from parents and contrasted sharply with the treatment of brothers; a White 22-year-old student said:

My dad will tell me to be careful when I cross the street to get the mail, but my brother can do anything—and he's younger than me....That irritates me so much cuz I can take care of myself, but my dad definitely protects me and my sister more than my brother.

Both groups also described other more common forms of sexism and unequal treatment. These included feeling bullied by men who perceive women as weaker and more vulnerable than they are. Others talked about being cheated by service providers and the need to have a man around to prevent this mistreatment, placing men in the dual roles of protector and perpetrator and women in the role of being dependent on men to protect them from the abuses of other men. The sexist portrayal of women in the media—on magazine covers and on television—also emerged as a concern, especially for Black women. In its totality, the discussion of gender-based mistreatment was the most extensive theme that emerged and covered a wide range of experiences, contexts, and consequences for both Black and White women.

Perceived Advantage

Despite their awareness of gender discrimination and harassment, many participants also felt that as women they had certain benefits and freedoms that made their lives easier than men's. Although Black and White women described similar types of advantages, more than twice as many White women than Black women discussed this topic, suggesting that White women may perceive more benefits of gender than do Black women. Some examples of relative advantage included female-only scholarships, accessibility to certain jobs (e.g., sales and restaurant jobs, jobs where “pretty girls” are desired), protection from male relatives and friends, and acts of male chivalry (e.g., men opening doors and buying drinks for women). Women's ability to express their emotions was also perceived as an advantage, but it was primarily raised by White women. A White 60-year-old wife and mother of three elaborated on this idea:

Men of my husband's generation didn't show emotion, and they don't show emotion, and I've seen him only a few times ever cry, and that's gotta be really hard.... I can cry at the drop of a bucket, you know. ... I know he wants to sometimes but he can't do it. And I feel like that's really a bad thing for men that they can't, you know, let that out sometimes when they need to.

A few Black and White women talked about being afforded more leniencies from men in power (e.g., supervisors, police officers) than their male counterparts. Further, two White women perceived that women were particularly advantaged now because they have greater equality with men, while retaining benefits traditionally given to women (e.g., chivalry from men).

We can do a lot of things that they [men] can't get away with. Being a woman we can still use that to our advantage, as well as being completely equal, so I think we have a lot of edge on them. (White 22-year-old student)

Thus, many of the women felt that, compared to men, some aspects of life were easier. Some of these advantages provided economic benefits (e.g., scholarships, free drinks, avoiding traffic fines) and others related to freedom of expression (e.g., being able to cry or make

“smart ass” comments). Finally, two White women felt that women were especially fortunate in modern times due to a combination of “old-fashion” privileges and newer postfeminism benefits. However, whereas over three-quarters of White women identified sources of advantage, fewer than one-third of Black women did so.

Friendships and Community

A theme related to women’s friendships and sense of community with other women emerged for both groups; however, whereas only half of Black women discussed issues related to this topic, every White woman commented on this theme. Of them, more than half of White women, but only one Black woman, noted that, compared to men, women value and nurture their same-sex friendships, leading to deeper relationships than those between men. This closeness was attributed, in part, to women’s sense that some things (e.g., emotions, romantic relationship issues) can be shared only with other women. Similarly, nearly all of the White women, but only one Black woman, talked about the sense of emotional support and encouragement they receive from their female friends. A White 32-year-old married woman said:

Emotional support is the biggest thing that women give each other.... I get a lot of emotional support from my husband and have in the past from male friends. But when someone has been through the same things you’ve been [through] and... there’s things, major parts of identity that all women share, it’s easy to give emotional support and help.

Although many women (mostly White women) expressed the importance of their same-sex friendships and connections with other women, both Black and White women discussed some difficulties in their relationships with other women. For example, a White 22-year-old student described her lack of female relationships this way:

I think the hardest thing about being a woman, for me, is relationships with other women. Even from being young, my mom and I didn’t get along at all. We couldn’t ever get along and so I was raised by my dad from when I was 13. It was just my dad and I, and I only had guy friends in high school.... I don’t trust women. I think they’re really catty and gossipy and they all stab you in the back for a man they’re dating. So I have my roommate and a couple other close girlfriends, but not many I can relate to well.

Other women, even those who easily formed and valued their friendships, shared this participant’s sense that female friendships can have a dark side. One negative aspect of female friendships mentioned by a few White women was related to the pressure to stand by and support friends, no matter the reason. Illustrating this point, a White 20-year-old student said:

I think that kind of goes back to the bond we have with each other. If someone, one of your best friends, doesn’t get along with somebody then you’re automatically like, “Oh well I don’t get along with them too.” It’s my best friend and I don’t want to go behind her back or something like that.

These themes suggest that friendship is relevant to both groups, although White women discussed both positive and negative aspects much more than did Black women. Positive aspects of friendships with women included emotional support, encouragement, and a sense of understanding that relationships with men often do not provide. Impediments to the formation of such friendships included female “cattiness” and deviations from traditional female roles (e.g., being a tomboy). Women also discussed drawbacks of female friendships, such as having one’s reputation damaged by friends and obligatory loyalty.

Caretaking

Being a caretaker within the family was a theme that emerged for large numbers of both Black and White women. Although most participants talked about this theme in terms of being a mother, the roles of wife, grandmother, and foster parent were also discussed in much the same way. In the quotations below, we note statements by child-free women (those who are past childbearing age or those who say they will not/cannot have children) and women who have not yet had children but intend to do so, because these groups of women likely have different perceptions of motherhood.

To a large extent, women described caretaking as a positive, desirable aspect of their womanhood; however, this positive conceptualization of caretaking was more common for White women than Black women. For some of the White women, being a caretaker (e.g., being a wife and/or mother) was a meaningful role that created psychological changes in their sense of self, by giving them a sense of purpose in life or creating a new identity (usually mother). Along with this new role of caring for others came personal growth and a shift in focus from the self to others. One woman captured many of these ideas, stating:

Just having the ability to get pregnant and go through the whole experience of having a child and being the primary caretaker has been the most dramatic thing that’s ever happened in my life. And it’s because I’m a woman. It makes me feel like I have some sort of new identity now that I never really thought about before and a new social group that I wasn’t a part of before. So that has been very positive.
(White 32-year-old mother)

Some of the transformational aspects of caretaking were also described by women without biological children. For example, a White 48-year-old woman with older stepchildren spoke of the love she perceives that other women receive from their young children, saying:

I don’t have any children to hang on to my leg going “mommy, love you,” ...
You’ve got that unconditional love that a kid will just hug ya and love ya no matter what, and I think you miss out on something not doing that.

Some of the Black and White women who did not yet have children, but who intended to, spoke about that role being important in how they envisioned their future selves. A Black 19-year-old student stated that “I think part of my purpose, not the whole entire purpose, but a little part of it, is to have some kids or one kid [group laughs].”

Although many of the women described caretaking as including things they wanted and desired, participants also described some of the burdens of caretaking. Black women, more than White women, described the difficulties and challenges associated with this role. One

such burden younger women reported was the pressure they felt from other women (especially older women) to be mothers and homemakers. As a Black 20-year-old woman without children put it:

From my grandmother's point of view ...every woman's purpose should be to have kids, be a mother, you know, take care of your husband and I believe that is not all I'm here for. I believe if I want to be an attorney, I'll be an attorney. If I want to be a doctor, I'll be a doctor. Whatever I aspire to be, that's what my purpose in life should be. ... But, my grandmother is like, "This is the only reason you're here on this earth is to take care of a man and kids," and I do not believe that at all.

Other women who were wives and mothers (or wanted to be someday) noted that this role was accompanied by many other expectations that were less than desirable, such as cooking, cleaning, and organizing events with extended family. Although many women noted that more men now take on caregiving and housekeeping roles than in the past, some expressed frustration with the ways in which household labor is often divided between men and women. A Black 23-year-old student with no children said:

Love labor is not considered work. Child rearing, washing, cleaning up the house, maintaining the house, paying the bills, errands, cooking, that's harder than any man is going to work.... It's hard work watching kids and maintaining a house. You're on autopilot at work. You don't have to think. Kids, you gotta be looking. And I think men don't have that. They don't have division of labor. They come home from work and go in the room. Women can come home from work and immediately they on second shift.

As can be seen by the caretaking themes, many women see this aspect of womanhood as rewarding and providing purpose in life, while at the same time noting ways in which it can create a strain, in terms of added responsibilities and limited options. These observations were made not only by women who were mothers, but also by women without children. Although both Black and White women discussed positive and negative aspects of caretaking, White women spoke more about the gratifying aspects, whereas Black women spoke more about the associated challenges.

Work and Family Options

The work and family options theme focused on women's decisions to work or stay at home (and not engage in paid labor) and emerged much more frequently for White women than Black women. Further, the nature of the discussion of work and family was different for Black and White women. For White women, the discussion was focused on the decision-making process related to work and family choices. Two Black women discussed this theme (each mentioned it only once) and, despite being aware of the option to stay at home to care for family or to work for pay, they did not describe thinking about which of these options they would follow. Instead, both indicated that they intended to work regardless of their caretaking roles.

Some White women discussed valuing their work and family choices, noting that recent generations of women have more career options. Further, they contrasted their work-family

choices with those of men. A 48-year-old White woman said: “Guys never go through all of that mental stuff.... They never have the options. The guy goes to college, gets a job or just gets outta high school and gets a job.” Further, some women felt that they could more easily choose to stay home with their children than men, as society views stay-at-home moms more positively than stay-at-home dads. Nevertheless, some White women felt that having to choose work, family, or a combination of the two was difficult and often led to conflicting emotions and desires. A 32-year-old White stay-at-home mother illustrated both of these points, saying:

I think for me what’s been hard is having to make the choice of giving up your career to be a mom. I’m lucky that I can do that and I have that choice... but that’s not a choice a man usually makes. ... I think a lot of men feel that sense of obligation to be the ultimate provider.

Similarly, a White 60-year-old mother of three described the mixed feelings she had about returning to school:

I was a stay-at-home mom just because that was what a lot of women did. ... And I went back to work after I got my degree, and that was very difficult because I wanted to be at home with my kids. ... I felt good and I felt bad because I was doing something I wanted to do for the first time in a long time—probably for the first time in my whole life—and finally I got a chance to become my own person, and that was exciting. But the negative part was, “Am I doing the right thing? I’ve got this little girl who’s eight years old.” And I kept thinking, well, maybe if I show her, “Hey look mommy’s going to college,” that’ll influence her. It all worked out okay, but it was a very negative period for me.

A few White women commented on the effort required to work for pay and care for children. Given these difficulties, one 73-year-old White mother suggested that attempting to combine the two is simply too much for women to handle successfully:

When we stayed home and raised the children, I think that is a full-time job. And I think now women think it’s a big mistake. Well, I’m sorry, but I’ve never been for women out in the workforce and having children. You can’t have it all.

As demonstrated by the work–family options theme, Black and White women were aware of their options regarding work and family, yet White women elaborated on this far more than Black women. White women noted that the career options available to women have increased substantially in their lifetimes and provide them more work and family choices than men. Despite appreciating these freedoms, many White women also noted that career and family choices are often difficult to make and combining both roles could be stressful and challenging.

Inner Strength

A final theme of inner strength emerged only for Black women. For Black women, discussion of their personal and emotional strength combined their race and their gender, that is, they explicitly attributed their strength to being Black women (rather than attributing

it to their race or gender alone). Half of the Black women spoke of learning to be strong women through the example of their mothers and other Black women around them.

Basically, I grew up in a household with my mother, and my grandmother lived around the corner. So I was around women. And so that's all I know is to be a strong woman. That's all I was raised around. So I think it comes naturally for me.
(19-year-old Black student)

In some of these cases, women explicitly noted the role of single mothers as models of strength. An 84-year-old Black grandmother said, "My father died when I was three, so my mother raised me.... I guess naturally my mother was a strong person and she worked every day and so therefore, by her being a strong woman it made me that way, too."

Black women described strength as having the courage to stand up for oneself, persevere, and refuse to be taken advantage of by others (specifically men or White people). That is, strong women were defined as those who are self-reliant, able to withstand the challenges placed before them, and unwilling to depend on others to take care of them. A 21-year-old Black student said "My mom raised me never to... ask or need a man for anything, and that has made me a better person, has made me a stronger woman than a lot of friends and people I know."

Some Black women felt that their strength was necessitated by the challenges presented to them in a racist society. Further, a few participants perceived that Black women needed to be strong to fill the void created by Black men, who were viewed as being especially harmed by discrimination against Black people in the United States. And although participants largely accepted their perceived role in maintaining the Black community, there was also acknowledgement of the pressure this creates.

Being a Black woman, I feel like we are the backbone. I really honestly think that Black women are the only thing that is really kind of keeping this race together right now. And I think that is a huge burden. (26-year-old Black law student)

Thus, inner strength was a personal characteristic that most of the Black women in the study felt they possessed. The idea of inner strength was not raised by any of the White women, suggesting that this trait is unique to Black women's self-conceptions. Although Black women reflected on the importance and necessity of their strength, some of them simultaneously noted that the need to always be strong could be emotionally difficult.

DISCUSSION

The current study examined our assertion that race is a marker for certain types of life experiences that shape how women view their gender. The data suggested that Black and White women view womanhood as comprising many of the same broad components: gender-based mistreatment, perceived advantages, community and friendships, and caretaking. However, there were more substantial differences in the importance and nature of subthemes for each group. Further, two themes were relevant primarily to only one group. Specifically, it was principally White women who described how being a woman encompassed having to make decisions about whether and how to combine work and family.

Further, Black women perceived inner strength to be an important characteristic common to many Black women. Following, we will discuss the similarities and differences in the themes and subthemes that emerged.

Gender-Based Mistreatment

For both Black and White women, the most detailed discussion of what it is to be a woman centered on experiences and concerns about gender-based mistreatment, reflecting both the frequency of such events (e.g., Ilies et al., 2003; Kessler et al., 1999) and women's perceptions that they may be potential victims. Women described ways that men attempted to assert their power and control through bullying; overprotection from friends, brothers, and fathers; sexist comments about women's abilities and competence; and multiple types of sexual harassment. Gender-based mistreatment occurred in a variety of contexts, including families, schools, workplaces, and the community. Thus, it seems that women are vulnerable to being mistreated in most domains of their lives, which likely intensifies the negative impact of such experiences. Women described the practical consequences of gender-based mistreatment for their lives personally, academically, and professionally. Further, the psychological impact of gender-based mistreatment included feelings of fear, anger, and mistrust.

Although there were far more similarities than differences between Black and White women's discussion of gender-based mistreatment, one notable difference was that some White women, but no Black women, identified part of the discrimination they experienced at work to being put on the "mommy-track." That is, they were not placed on the career track that would lead to the most advancement because of assumptions by employers that they would leave the workforce when they had children. Because Black women are less likely to stay at home with young children than are White women and are less likely to be employed in professional jobs in which there are multiple tracks for advancement (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006), such tracking by employers may be less common for Black women. Given that the majority of White mothers remain in the workforce (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006, 2007), this tracking of White women (and perhaps all women of childbearing age) is inconsistent with their employment trends and harmful to their long-term career options and success, lifetime earnings, and sense of equal opportunity in the workplace (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998; Maume, 1999).

In addition, White women, but not Black women, described experiences with coworkers and acquaintances in social settings that could be defined as sexual harassment, perhaps reflecting men's inappropriate and sexualized attempts to form relationships with them (Adams, 1997; Baker, 2005; Fuller, 2004). More Black women than White women expressed concern about the negative sexualized portrayal of women in the media. Because most of the representations of Black women in the media are negative (e.g., sexually promiscuous, welfare queen; Collins, 2000; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; West, 2004), this group may be particularly conscious of how all women are depicted.

Perceived Advantage

In contrast to the discussion of gender-based mistreatment, women, particularly younger women, asserted that, compared to men, some things were easier for them because they were women. However, many of the examples provided reflected sexist beliefs and practices. In particular, women described characteristics of benevolent sexism, which refers to being taken care of by men (Glick & Fiske, 1997, 2001). They also described ways in which they could use their femininity and sexuality to “get away with things” when dealing with men. These behaviors may reflect the internalization of sexist beliefs or they may be deliberate strategies to redress a relative lack of power in many life domains. However, a potential cost is that such behaviors may reify the belief that women will use their sexuality to gain power over men. Such actions are conceptualized as a component of hostile sexism, and both benevolent and hostile sexism are status-legitimizing ideologies that satisfy men’s and women’s notions of men as protectors and women as in need of protection (Glick & Fiske, 1997, 2001).

Because sexism serves to maintain the status quo and women’s lower status and power (Glick & Fiske, 1997, 2001), it is particularly troubling that these women perceived benefits of womanhood as including behaviors that might be defined as sexist. Similarly, women identified some areas of employment that were more readily available to them as a type of privilege; however, these were typically low-wage and low-prestige jobs with little opportunity for upward mobility, such as retail and service positions. By comparing the gender-based mistreatment and perceived advantages themes, we can identify some ambivalence in the gender-related worldview of young women. For example, the idea of being protected by men was raised in both themes; women appreciated being cared for and made to feel safer by men while also resenting men’s attempts to restrict them. This ambivalence may occur because many of women’s perceived advantages actually reflected sexist practices rather than any real advantage.

Friendships and Community

Within the theme of friendships and community, only half of the Black women in the sample discussed related issues, whereas all of the White women did. Further, only one Black woman noted the positive, supportive aspects of friendship. It may be that, when Black women think about their friendships and community, they think about other Black people or Black women, rather than women generally. For White women, thinking about women generally likely brings to mind relationships with other White women.

White women described valuing their friendships with other women and perceived them as providing emotional support, camaraderie, and a connection to others. Nevertheless, both Black and White women, even those with close female friendships, described negative aspects of their relationships with other women, although this segment of the theme also seemed more salient to White women. Participants mentioned acts such as gossiping and the exclusion of others, which reflect relational aggression, an indirect form of aggression that is achieved through the manipulation of social relationships (Bowie, 2007; Crick, 1995). Further, women spoke of feeling pressure to provide unquestioning support and loyalty to their female friends, often by participating in relational aggression (e.g., excluding a

common friend). Thus, although friendships provided women with support, in some cases this support was conditional.

Caretaking and Work–Family Options

Caretaking was another significant aspect of womanhood raised by participants. Rewarding aspects of caretaking included the positive emotions and personal growth gained from holding the role of mother and grandmother. In contrast, caretaking was also linked to less desirable role requirements, including pressure from self and others to have children (because this is seen as defining womanhood), as well as the psychological and practical burden of being responsible for others in terms of housework, childcare, and the maintenance of extended family relationships. Women attribute some of their sense of burden to their caretaking responsibilities being seen as “second shift” work that often was not shared equally by male partners (Hochschild, 1989).

Despite the many similarities in the caretaking issues raised by participants, White women described more of the rewards of caretaking, whereas Black women noted more of the burdens. This contrast may reflect real differences in the lived experiences of these two groups; Black women may be more likely to do “second shift” work because they are more likely to work while having young children, and Black women’s extended family networks may create more ties to maintain (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004). Further, these differences may explain the finding within the theme of work and family that White women, much more than Black women, discussed work and family in terms of having options about integrating the two roles. That is, because of the employment patterns of Black women, considerations of combining work and family responsibilities may not be salient or relevant. Many White women valued having the option to stay at home, rather than work for pay, yet noted that making work–family balance decisions sometimes created internal conflicts. Thus, objective differences in the lived experiences of Black and White women have important psychological effects on their perceptions of one of the roles that is typically thought of as most defining womanhood—caretaking, and especially motherhood, and the integration of that role with their work lives.

Inner Strength

The final theme, inner strength, emerged only for the Black women in our study. Participants discussed the idea of inner strength in terms of the image of the “Strong Black Woman” (Romero, 2000; Wallace, 1978), thereby explicitly linking this concept to their intersected gender and racial status. Consistent with the stereotyped image, being a strong Black woman entailed certain behaviors (e.g., caring for one’s family while working and supporting the family economically) and certain personality characteristics (e.g., resolve, persistence, and self-reliance). For the participants, these traits acted as a sort of armor against a society in which Black people have been historically mistreated and where racism is expected as a matter of course. Further, some participants felt that racism directed toward Black men has made it more common for adult males to be absent from Black households, furthering the need for Black women to be strong and self-reliant.

At the same time, some participants noted the emotional burden they experienced as a result of always having to be strong. The idea of the strong Black woman has also been termed the “Superwoman” stereotype and is associated with emotional and psychological costs. For example, endorsement of the Superwoman stereotype has been linked to unhealthy overeating (as a coping mechanism) and lower self-esteem for Black women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003; Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004). Thus, the internalization of the strong Black woman stereotype may be a practical defensive strategy for dealing with daily hassles and challenges; yet, this inner strength can have negative psychological consequences for Black women when their caring for others is done at the expense of attending to their own needs.

Other Findings, Limitations, and Future Directions

Although not the focus of the present study, we found interesting generational differences in perceptions of gender-based mistreatment across racial groups. Specifically, some of the younger women in the study expressed surprise and disbelief about personal experiences of sexual harassment and discrimination. They commented that prior to their negative experiences they believed that women had gained equality in most areas and that discrimination was no longer a societal problem. Thus, they suffered a disruption to their worldview that required them to revise their notions about the place of women in society and their relationship to men. Older women were more likely to have noted that women’s social position had improved during their lives, but without the belief that women had achieved equality with men.

There are some limitations of this study that should be noted. One pertains to the generalizability of these data, given the sample and nature of focus group methodology. Caution should be exercised when interpreting a group’s failure to discuss a particular theme as an indication of its lack of importance. Although this may be the case, such an absence may alternatively reflect idiosyncracies in the nature or direction of a group’s discussion or that other issues are more salient (in general or during the group discussion). With a larger sample size, we would have greater confidence that all relevant themes had emerged. Additionally, because of the small sample size and participants’ limited geographic diversity, the generalizability of the perceptions and experiences of the women in this study is unknown. However, we took steps during the recruitment of participants to obtain a diverse sample in terms of age, education, marital, and work status.

One area in which we observed little variability was in the sexual orientation of the women in the study (90% were heterosexual). Lesbian and bisexual women may have more negative experiences because of the heterosexist bias that exists in our society. Additionally, White women were of a higher social class than Black women, which may explain why they perceived having more advantages as women than did Black women. Although race and social class are confounded in our study, these differences reflect actual economic disparities between racial groups (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006), thereby increasing the ecological validity of the results.

We focused the current study on the exploration of Black and White women’s gender perceptions. Latinas, Asian women, and other women of color may be similar to the Black

women in our study in that, as a result of their devalued racial/ethnic identity, they may also experience double jeopardy. However, it is likely that interesting differences would also emerge because of the particular stereotypes and histories of these groups in the United States. Future work should expand on our results through the study of other groups of women of color.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to examine how factors related to race influence gender perceptions for Black and White women. We used an intersectional framework to consider how the unique social position that these two groups of women occupy might influence their interpersonal interactions and self-perceptions as women. Six primary themes emerged, five of which were relevant to both Black and White women, suggesting a high degree of similarity in broad perceptions of womanhood. At the same time, important differences surfaced between the two groups, many of which could be tied back to divergent histories of labor force participation, expectations as working mothers, and racial-gender group stereotypes. The results of this study highlight the need for additional research on perceptions of self and identity across diverse people. However, it is a first step toward demonstrating not only the differences, but also the many similarities, in Black and White women's conceptions of their womanhood.

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by a B/START grant from the National Institute of Mental Health at the National Institutes of Health. We would like to thank Zaje Harrell and Branda Nowell for assistance in conducting the focus group sessions and Lindsay Dietz, Alexis Hunter, John Lamia, Brett Pearce, Mabel Ribas, and Jennifer Closson Torres for their assistance with coding data.

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Table 1**Demographic Information by Participant Race**

	Black women (n = 14)	White women (n = 17)	Tests of group differences
Age (in years)	Range: 19–84 <i>M</i> = 30.21 <i>SD</i> = 18.26	Range: 18–73 <i>M</i> = 40.06 <i>SD</i> = 21.58	$t(29) = -1.35, p = .19$
Highest level of education			$\chi^2(4, N = 31) = 6.32, p = .18$
High school diploma	2 (14.3%)	2 (11.8%)	
Some college	10 (71.4%)	8 (47.1%)	
College degree	0 (0%)	4 (23.5%)	
Some graduate education	2 (14.3%)	1 (5.9%)	
Graduate degree	0 (0%)	2 (11.8%)	
Employment status ^a			$\chi^2(2, N = 27) = 4.39, p = .11$
Not employed	3 (21.4%)	9 (52.9%)	
Employed part time	8 (57.1%)	4 (23.5%)	
Employed full time	1 (7.1%)	2 (11.8%)	
Socioeconomic status ^b			$\chi^2(2, N = 29) = 4.15, p = .13$
Working/lower middle class	7 (50%)	4 (23.5%)	
Middle class	6 (42.9%)	9 (52.9%)	
Upper middle class	0 (0%)	3 (17.6%)	
Relationship status			$\chi^2(3, N = 31) = 8.12, p = .04$
Single	8 (57.1%)	4 (23.5%)	
Committed relationship	5 (35.7%)	5 (29.4%)	
Married	0 (0%)	7 (41.2%)	
Divorced/separated	1 (7.1%)	1 (5.9%)	
Any children	3 (21.4%)	7 (41.2%)	$\chi^2(1, N = 31) = 1.37, p = .24$
Number of children ^c	Range: 0–4 <i>M</i> = 0.50 <i>SD</i> = 1.16	Range: 0–4 <i>M</i> = 0.81 <i>SD</i> = 1.28	$t(28) = -0.70, p = .49$
Sexual orientation ^d			$\chi^2(2, N = 30) = 2.08, p = .35$
Heterosexual	12 (85.7%)	16 (94.1%)	
Bisexual	0 (0%)	1 (5.9%)	
Lesbian	1 (7.1%)	0 (0%)	

Note. Percentages represent percent of the total number of participants in the group indicated in the column heading. Some column percentages do not total 100% because of missing responses or rounding error.

^aFour women (two Black women and two White women) did not report their employment status.

^bOne Black woman and one White woman did not report their socioeconomic status.

^cOne White woman who reported having children did not report her number of children.

^dOne Black woman did not report her sexual orientation.

Table 2

Frequency of Major Themes and Subthemes by Participant Race

Broad themes and subthemes	Black women (n = 14)	White women (n = 17)
Gender-based mistreatment	13 (92.9%)	16 (94.1%)
Gender discrimination	6 (42.9%)	10 (58.8%)
Sexual harassment	4 (28.6%)	11 (64.7%)
Concerns for safety	3 (21.4%)	8 (47.1%)
Sexism	11 (78.6%)	10 (58.8%)
Perceived advantage	4 (28.6%)	13 (76.5%)
Ability to express emotions	1 (7.1%)	9 (52.9%)
Leniency from men in power	1 (7.1%)	2 (11.8%)
Equality with men	0	2 (11.8%)
Friendships and community	7 (50.0%)	17 (100%)
Women value and form deep friendships	1 (7.1%)	11 (64.7%)
Friendships offer social support	1 (7.1%)	14 (82.4%)
Difficulty forming friendships with women	4 (28.6%)	8 (47.1%)
Negative aspects of friendships with women	0	3 (17.6%)
Caretaking	9 (64.3%)	12 (70.6%)
Positive aspects of caretaking, overall	4 (28.6%)	12 (70.6%)
Caretaker role is meaningful	0	4 (23.5%)
Mother role is important to future self ^I	2 (14.3%)	5 (29.4%)
Difficulties associated with caretaking, overall	9 (64.3%)	5 (29.4%)
Pressure to become a mother/homemaker	2 (14.3%)	3 (17.6%)
Unequal division of household labor by gender	5 (35.7%)	2 (11.8%)
Work and family options	2 (14.3%)	12 (70.6%)
Value having options/have more options than men	0	8 (47.1%)
Difficulty making work–family balance choices	0	7 (41.2%)
Challenges integrating work and family	0	2 (11.8%)
Inner strength	13 (92.9%)	0
Strength learned from other Black women	7 (50.0%)	0
Characteristics of inner strength	7 (50.0%)	0
Strength needed to maintain Black community	2 (14.3%)	0

^I Subtheme reported by 18% of Black women without children and 50% of White women without children.