



Taking a Critical Look at Adolescent Research on Black Girls and Women: A Systemic Review

“We celebrate the magic of Black girls and Black women, acknowledging their humanity and brilliance” (p. 14).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This paper asserts that the pervasive nature of white supremacy is:

- a) not only a characteristic of a *neoliberal society* – one in which there exists a preference for markets over government, economic capital over cultural and social capital, and individuality over collectivism – but also
- b) evident in *developmental psychology* – the study of the growth and change of humans over their lifespan.

Specifically, this research argues that **the methods for collecting and analyzing data when studying Black girls and women advance whiteness**. The authors advocate for the use of nontraditional research methods in developmental psychology, including critical frameworks that expose and challenge dominant structures and an intersectional lens that is asset-based.

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

This study took place in the United States, focusing on research published in U.S.-based developmental psychology journals between 2010-2020.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about Black girls and women in the United States.

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

This research was a **systemic review** – a review of existing literature on a particular subject that focuses on findings and identifies gaps – of developmental psychology literature exploring the experiences of Black girls and women. The authors chose four leading U.S.-based psychology journals that are considered the ‘gold standard’ for scientific research publications (the best, most reliable, most prestigious journals in the field). This was key to exploring how research on Black girls and women is represented in the field of developmental psychology.

The time frame of 2010-2020 was chosen to incorporate national campaigns and movements that affect the current climate for Black girls and women; these movements include *#sayhername*, which raised awareness of Black women who had been killed by police brutality; *Black Girl Magic*, which celebrated the resilience and ingenuity of Black womanhood; and *pushout*, which looked at the pipeline from school expulsion to imprisonment of Black girls and women.

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

The study surfaced **five recommended approaches** to more inclusive and equitable research with Black girls and women:

i. Incorporate critical theoretical frameworks.

The study found that despite a wealth of existing critical frameworks for use in research, such as Critical Race Theory and Latina & Latino Critical Legal Theory, developmental psychology researchers often revert to dominant theories when researching racialized youth and women. One of the strengths of utilizing critical theories in research is that they affirm the importance of reflective assessment and societal critique, while also seeking to create actual change from theoretical development. The authors propose

that the best framework for centering Black girls and women is **Critical Race Feminism**, which considers power and oppression in the context of both race and gender, and is able to highlight the **resilience, power, and brilliance of Black girls and women through its analysis.**

ii. Use intersectionality when examining the experiences of Black girls and women.

The research found that only a small percentage of literature defined ‘race’. Most of the studies reviewed did not centre the lived experiences of Black girls and women in their research. By applying the theory of **intersectionality** and understanding that **neither gender nor race alone can capture the experiences of Black girls and women**, researchers can begin to understand how these **interlocking systems of power function** and unpack the disempowerment of Black girls and women. The study found that racialized girls and young women with intersecting identities will experience maturation differently than others and find it even more trying to navigate adolescence.

iii. Use clear and precise language and centre race and gender identity.

Studies have shown that there are varied and often problematic approaches for incorporating race in research or only focusing on one aspect of a subject’s identity. For example, researchers often conflate race and ethnicity, which does not showcase **how power can be weaponized and fails to centre Black experiences.** By using precise language and defining race explicitly, researchers can properly contextualize the experiences of Black girls and women.

iv. Shift from an overreliance on deficit perspectives to an asset-based approach.

Much of the literature uses harmful tropes that emphasize negative behaviours and adverse outcomes. This deficit-based language does not consider adolescent strengths. Using asset-based language, on the other hand, **focuses on potential and highlights competencies.** There is a wealth of knowledge and lived experience that exists solely in communities of colour that can be important to include when considering adolescent development.

v. Use qualitative and mixed-method research approaches, not just quantitative designs.

The study proposes that the voices of Black girls and women can be amplified by broadening methodological approaches when conducting research to include **qualitative methods** – collecting data that describes qualities, characteristics, processes or experiences – and mixed-methods approaches. The current research mostly relies on **quantitative methods** – collecting data that can be counted or compared as numbers – which fails to capture the full intersectional experiences of subjects.

Although all studies have **positionality statements** (by which they locate themselves within a larger scientific context), positionality is less evident in research that prioritizes quantitative approaches. These reflexive statements not only declare **what influences their research and interpretations, but what their ‘truth’ is based on**, which is critical for readers to understand.

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

This study suggests that research properly accounting for the experiences of Black girls and women **must incorporate critical theories**, such as Critical Race Feminism, and **use an intersectional lens, asset-based language that highlights competencies and strengths, broadened research methodologies, and nuanced definitions of race and gender.** These suggestions can be particularly beneficial for youth workers interested in anti-racist work with Black adolescents. Black adolescence is characterized by significant physical, psychological, and social transitions, and it is vital that researchers, and youth workers, are aware of these experiences to support the health and wellbeing of Black youth.

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