

Feeling Invisible and Unheard: A Qualitative Exploration of Gendered-Racist Stereotypes Influence on Sexual Decision Making and Mistreatment of Black Teen Girls

Youth & Society

1–20

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DOI: 10.1177/0044118X221075051

journals.sagepub.com/home/yas



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Abstract

Gendered racism can impact how Black teen girls perceive themselves in relation to the world and influence their behaviors. This form of discrimination tends to manifest in stereotypes that promote the victimization and mistreatment of Black teen girls. This qualitative study, using Black feminist thought through a Black Girlhood lens as a guiding framework, aims to understand how Black teen girls are affected by gendered-racist stereotypes and how these stereotypes impact sexual decision making among this group. Using a sample of (N=27) Black teen girls, three major themes arose: (1) experiencing the effects of racist-sexist stereotypes, (2) feeling powerless

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and invisible due to stereotypes, and (3) navigating the pressure to have sex due to stereotypes. Implications for this study include incorporating elements of Black Feminist Thought through a Black girlhood lens within prevention programming while also providing Black teen girls with the tools to challenge negative stereotypes with support from adult allies in school and family settings.

Keywords

black girls, racism, sexism, sexual health

Introduction

Black teen girls often face a double jeopardy due to their intersecting identities (e.g., race and gender) that affect the way they are viewed and treated by society. The intersection of racism and sexism experienced by Black teen girls has been coined as “gendered racism” (Essed, 1991; Thomas et al., 2008). Gendered racism is described as a form of racial and gender oppression that intertwines to create a unique experience for women who occupy, simultaneously, racial and gender identities that are often both marginalized (Essed, 1991). As Black teen girls belong to multiple identities that are often discriminated against due to gendered racist stereotypes, negative internalization of self can emerge within Black teen girls and impact their behaviors. Such internalization leads to lowered self-esteem and higher levels of depressive symptoms which can increase engagement in sexual risk behaviors (Hope et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2015).

There is evidence to support the impact of gendered-racist stereotypes on sexual decision making such as increasing the likelihood of engaging in sexual risk behaviors (Robillard, 2012; Townsend et al., 2010). However, very few studies have explored, from a qualitative stance, how Black teen girls perceive the ways that specific gendered-racist messages and stereotypes affect their overall sexual health. Since Black teen girls have the highest rates of sexually transmitted infections (STI), compared to White and Hispanic/Latina teen girls in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021), understanding the role of gendered-racist stereotypes and their impact on sexual decision making, treatment, and behaviors may be essential in HIV and STI prevention for this group.

Black Feminist Thought and Black Girlhood

Black Feminist Thought acknowledges that stereotypes that target Black women are an outcome of gendered racism. Sexual scripts specific to Black

women such as Jezebel (a promiscuous Black woman) are also applied to Black teen girls, requiring them to navigate these sexual scripts through their identity formation process during their developmental period (French, 2013). For the purpose of this study, it is essential to acknowledge the unique experiences of Black teen girls, who face an additional marginalized status due to their age, which may cause their experiences to be either minimized or dismissed by adults (Clonan-Roy et al., 2016; Opara et al., 2019). Black girlhood is defined as “the representations, memories, and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female” (Brown, 2009, p. 1). Black girlhood theorists have acknowledged specific responsibility for Black female scholars to deconstruct, intervene, and present the social experiences of Black teen girls (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Nunn (2018) created the Super-Girl metaphor which was developed from Black feminism and argues that the “Super-Girl” has an intimate experience with gendered racism and uses her feminine strength to adopt resilience and balance both strength and sadness in the face of regular social battles, decision-making and ongoing self-reflection. Due to the preservation of gendered-racist stereotypes from the days of slavery in the United States, Black girls have been forced to endorse and internalize higher negative stereotypes attributed to adult women, which often leads to the adultification and oversexualization of Black girls (Morris, 2016).

Purpose of Study

Sexual health and prevention research often lays the burden on Black teen girls to navigate their romantic relationships and engage in healthy sexual behaviors (Towner et al., 2015; Zurbriggen & Roberts, 2013), but often does not prioritize listening directly to Black girls’ experiences. Black teen girls can provide insight to the challenges they face around sex and relationships. Therefore, this study seeks to understand the unique experiences of Black teen girls in relation to decision-making around sex. This qualitative study explored the complex social location of Black teen girls in the U.S., where they must also challenge stereotypes as a result of gendered racism.

Methods

Researcher’s Positionality

Throughout the research process, we gave care to our own identities in relationship to our participations and its implications for the study (Milner, 2007). The first author identifies as a Black woman and is a faculty member at a large university. She has been involved with Black girls in her clinical

work as a licensed social worker and facilitates community-engaged research with Black girls. The first author was not involved in the data collection due to schedule conflicts however was involved in development of focus group questions, data analysis, and a member checking session with a subsample of the participants after analysis was completed. The second author identifies as a queer White woman and is an early career researcher at a large university where she is receiving training in qualitative research methods. She aspires to amplify underrepresented voices through her work. She was involved in data collection, analysis, and member checking. The third author identifies as a Black male and is a clinical research assistant. He regularly advises current and former Black male university students from his alma mater on the preservation of Black male identity in institutions of higher learning and is also a proud member of a traditionally Black fraternity with a long-standing expectation of protection of Black girls and women within the community through allyship and advocacy. He was involved in data collection, analysis, and member checking. The fourth author identifies as a White woman whose parents are immigrants, is faculty at a large university, specializes in qualitative methodology, and practices as a licensed professional counselor. She is a student of the Tavistock method, an approach that explores the role of unconscious processes among group dynamics with a focus on race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and culture. She was involved in the development of the study design. The fifth author identifies as a Black woman, a graduate student and research assistant for a project, directed by the 1st author, that focuses on developing an HIV and substance use prevention intervention for Black girls and currently leads the project's youth advisory board, which consists of Black teen girls. The senior author (KH) identifies as a White woman and is an assistant professor of pediatrics. Her research focus has been on the development and evaluation of game-based interventions for adolescents and young adults with a specific focus on race/ethnicity, age, gender, sexual identity, socioeconomic status, and disability.

Recruitment

This research is a part of a larger study funded by the National Institute on Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) to support the development of a multiplayer videogame HIV prevention intervention that is gender- and culturally-tailored for Black teen girls (Hieftje et al., 2019). The study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board. Recruiting was conducted using advertisements on social media that directed potential participants to a screening survey hosted on the data collection platform, Qualtrics. The recruiting ad ran simultaneously on Facebook and Instagram and was

displayed nationally to individuals who self-identified on those platforms as (1) Black, (2) female, (3) between the ages of 14 and 18, and (4) identified as heterosexual.

Participants

Teen girls who identified as Black ($N=27$) between the ages of 14 and 18 ($M=16.22$; $SD=1.25$) participated in the focus groups. Consent forms were emailed to parents/guardians of participants that were interested in being in the study. Teens subsequently assented to participate at the start of each focus group. The focus group interviews were scheduled during the 3 months following the initial posting of the recruiting ad.

Data Collection

Five focus groups were conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent stay at home orders. The focus groups were audio-recorded through the university's secured Zoom video conferencing software. A phenomenological framework (Kevern & Webb, 2001) was used to guide the development of semi-structured interview questions. The focus group guide (see Table 1) was developed iteratively and incorporated feedback from author CSFF. Interviewers VW and BS guided the discussion following the semi-structured focus group guide. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim. The focus groups ranged from 90 to 120 minutes and each focus group consisted of four to six participants. Typically, three to four focus groups yield saturation; we conducted five focus groups to enhance rigor (Kevern & Webb, 2001). At the end of each focus group, participant mailing addresses were collected through Zoom's private chat function and the principal investigator mailed all participants prepaid Visa gift cards in the amount of \$30.

Data Coding and Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed by a professional transcription service and reviewed for accuracy by the research team. The authors coded all transcripts following principles of grounded theory, using the constant comparative method for systematic inductive analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data from the interviews were first analyzed by research team using open coding, whereby concepts were identified and labeled as they emerged from the data and across the focus groups (Boyatzis, 1998). The research team read and re-read all the transcripts and developed initial codes in isolation. During the weekly research meetings, the initial codes were reviewed and discussed

Table 1. Focus Group Interview Guide.**Meeting Guys:**

1. Where do heterosexual teen girls your age meet guys?
2. How do boys typically approach girls that they like?
 - a. How do guys ask girls out?
 - b. What are some examples of what this might look like?
 - c. Where does this happen?
3. How do girls your age show that they like a guy?
4. How do girls your age ask guys out, if at all?
 - a. What are some examples of what this might look like?
5. Would you rather meet a guy on social media or in person? Why?

Communicating with guys (on Social Media):

Imagine someone you know is chatting with a guy she just met.

1. What social media platform is she using (snapchat, Instagram, tiktok etc)?
2. What would the conversations look like? Can you give me a play by play?
3. How are these conversations different depending on how she met the guy? (e.g., met in person, met through a dating app, met through a friend, etc.)

Social Media:

1. How do girls learn more about a guy they like? How do they use social media?
2. How much do you trust someone's social media presence when you are trying to find out more about them?
3. Give an example of a time you searched for information about a guy. What did you find out?

What to find out about a guy:

1. If you just met a guy, what would you want to know about that guy before you agree to go out with him?
 - a. If you could only choose three things to know about him, what would they be?
2. If you had to create a list of must-haves and deal breakers for a guy you wanted to date, what would be three for each?

Dating:

1. What do teens your age do for fun with people they like?
 - a. What does a typical date look like?
2. If you go on a date with a guy, does that mean you two are exclusive?
 - a. How might someone talk to a guy about being exclusive?

Sex:

Okay, now we are going to shift gears and talk about sex. You don't have to share anything personal that you don't feel comfortable talking about. You can always talk about general things you think are true for people your age. You can also write anything down that you want to share with me, but that you don't necessarily want to say in front of the group.

1. Do girls your age want to have sex with a guy they like?
2. Who usually initiates sex? Girls or guys?
 - a. Can you give an example of what this might look or sound like?

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

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3. What might make a girl say yes to sex? What might make a girl say no?
 4. What are some situations that teens your age might get themselves into where they make poor decisions about sex?
 5. What kind of tactics do guys use to convince someone not to use protection during sex?

Status:

1. Do you think teens your age worry about getting HIV or STIs? If so, what do they worry about? If not, why not?
2. What do teens your age think about getting tested for STIs/HIV?
 - a. How would a girl talk with a guy about HIV/STI Status?
3. Describe a few ways someone your age might talk to a partner about getting tested for HIV or another STI.

PrEP:

Something we want to feature in our game are different ways to prevent STIs, including HIV. PrEP is a relatively new way to prevent HIV.

[Before sharing PrEP info sheet]

1. Have you ever heard of PrEP, Truvada or Descovy? What have you heard?
2. What does PrEP do?
3. Who do you think would benefit from taking PrEP?

[Share PrEP info sheet]

Let's review this information sheet to learn more about PrEP.

4. Given this information, what do you think are the benefits of PrEP? What do you think are the downsides?
5. What would you think if you found out a friend was taking PrEP?
6. What would a partner of someone taking PrEP think about it?
7. Would knowing that your partner is taking PrEP change anything about your safe sex/STI prevention practices?

Concluding Question:

1. Is there anything that you would like to add or share about what we've discussed today?
 2. And, lastly, do you have any questions for me? If you think of any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at any time.
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until all team members agreed on the coding and no discrepancies remained. The team agreed on the process of coding before analysis occurred. All codes were compiled and organized with Dedoose mixed-methods analysis software (Dedoose, 2020).

Findings

Themes relating to gendered-racist stereotypes emerged across all focus groups in the study as participants became candid in discussing how they are

often oversexualized and discriminated against by their male counterparts. Three themes emerged in the study: (1) experiencing the effects of gendered racism on their bodies, (2) feeling powerless and invisible due to stereotypes, and (3) navigating the pressure to have sex due to stereotypes.

Effects of Gendered Racists Stereotypes on Their Bodies

Overwhelmingly, participants brought up instances of how they are targeted by males due to their race and gender in sexual ways that make them uncomfortable. Teens in the study were well aware that their victimization was due to stereotypes placed on their group that allowed for their mistreatment to be normalized and accepted in society. One participant added, *“So why is it okay for this Black boy to be sexualizing me and making me feel uncomfortable?”* expanding on the notion that their discomfort in such situations was normal and often ignored by society. One participant mentioned that reaching puberty early changed the way people viewed her, assuming that she was sexual, seemingly seeing her as older than her age:

When I was going through puberty. . . I was an overly developed kid from an early age. I started growing breasts when I was 8. I was in the second grade with a bra and then by the time I was finished with elementary school. . . I had a bigger body than a lot of other girls. . . In high school having a different body than a lot of my peers it distorts your body image because then people think you are being overly sexual. When you start developing from an early age, people assume that you know certain things or you're ready for a talk.

A majority of the participants ($n=15$) acknowledged that Black females have historically been accused of being overly sexual and described how the historical context of their treatment is therefore different from other women in the U.S. One of the participants explained:

Black women are often sexualized. In our history Black women were ostracized for having big chests, and big hips, and but now it is seen as a trend when it's on White and Latino women. All type of stuff like how Black women are always being told like, “you're too aggressive, you're too hypermasculine, you're this, you're that, you're not attractive.” But those same attributes that were deemed not attractive on us, are attractive on every other race. And I just feel like, you know, when do we win?

Another participant described how she is aware of the way her body is treated and viewed differently than her White female classmates:

I have some classmates who always they wear crop tops and short, low-cut shorts all the time and they think nothing about it. I don't shame them for that. But I think of myself, I will get slapped for wearing something like that outside. Even to this day I'm scared to wear a crop top outside and that's saying a lot. I'm a 16-year-old girl and most of us we have revealing clothing. . .I'm scared as hell to wear a crop top and some jeans outside because I don't want to be perceived one way. I don't want to get slapped or I don't want to get talked bad about.

Participants agreed that they sometimes didn't feel safe in school settings and acknowledged that it disappointed them when their male peers would make them feel uncomfortable and their discomfort was not acknowledged.

Then it's like you go to school and boys think they own you. It's like we both Black. You would think we'd both have the same parent structures. . .it is really scary because you really don't know and feeling uncomfortable with your own body and sexuality as a teenager girl especially as a Black girl, I feel like it's not talked about enough.

One participant described the emotional labor that Black teen girls have to go through which then internalizes and normalizes the behaviors:

"I'm 17 and people don't understand that. . .it's like you're in middle school and you got all these boys saying, "she thick" and then they start touching your booty. At some point you start to think that's what normal is. So then you get to high school and it's more aggressive added onto such a booty. They want to have sex with you and all that. It's just uncomfortable to think about"

Overall, participants felt a sense of hypervigilance related their bodies based on how others perceived and oversexualized their bodies. Many noted that they often felt uncomfortable by the perceptions of others and experienced a different standard compared to their white peers. This type of victimization led many to feel unsafe—physically and emotionally—in their surroundings.

Feeling Powerless and Invisible due to Stereotypes

Girls in the study described different ways in which they felt they are not heard, seen or validated, leaving them to minimize their own mistreatment. Some girls attributed this to the avoidance of discussion of sex and sexual assault within their communities.

One participant mentioned:

. . .you can't talk to your family about it. You can't go to mom and say. . . A boy slapped my ass today. [She would say], "What were you wearing? Well, I told you not to wear those clothes outside." One time when I was 11, this man he had. . . he tried to solicit me in his car. He was talking how he wants to have sex with me. And I just ran away. I told my mom. She's like, "make sure you don't wear that outside anymore." And I was literally wearing pajamas. I had just gotten up and then my mom was like "go take out the trash." What was I supposed to do?

Another participant added how it is difficult to talk to her mom or friends about it the sexualization of Black girls and how they are treated:

. . .you can't talk to your mom about it. You can't talk to your friends about it because they're in the same boat as you are. When it comes to sex, being a Black girl, people assume that you have sex. I'm a dark-skinned Black girl and we are fetishized and seen as sexual beings, high sexual beings. People will perpetuate that stereotype even though that's far from the truth.

Approximately eight participants verbally acknowledged across the focus groups shared the sentiment that they could not talk to their families about sexual assault or mistreatment and were unsure of how to process such incidents. Even within the school context, a majority of girls shared their experiences of not being treated seriously when they were physically touched by a male classmate. In this next quote, this participant shared her shock in which she was disciplined by the schoolteacher when she retaliated, which made her feel powerless and not protected.

. . .And then going through school, elementary school, middle school and now high school, guys will look at you a certain way. People try to touch you. One day in my Spanish class, in middle school and I had on my favorite pair of skinny jeans and this nice white Polo shirt. . . I got my hair done. I was feeling nice. And then I walked past the table where one of my friends and then this boy slapped my ass and I yelled at him. I got in trouble for yelling at him. The teacher was like "you should have handled that better." And she didn't see what he did and no one else saw. I wound up getting in trouble for it. But if situations like that happen, you think. . . wait, I have no power.

This same participant went on to describe the multiple challenges she faces in challenging stereotypes, and other participants agreed.

. . .And people talk about things. "Oh, she's a ho, she wear tight clothes all the time. She always showing off." But then if you dress down, if you wear sweatpants and a sweatshirt every day, "oh she's sloppy. She raggedy. She

don't care about herself." And if you try to go somewhere in the middle where you wear a tight shirt and some sweatpants, people still talk about that behind your back, "she's trying to be a dyke. She's gay" So it's a never-ending cycle. You can't do right.

Another participant described her opinion of the silence on sexual assault within her community and the normalization of sexualizing Black girls' bodies:

So, I feel like. . . in the Black community, it happens within families, it happens within churches, it happens within gatherings, and no one talks about it. No one in the Black community wants to talk about this sort of stuff and I feel like it's really wrong. Because, assault does happen. . .

Girls in the study agreed that collectively that they do not receive enough information about healthy relationships and interactions, their bodies, or sexual education from their school and families. Girls felt that because sex is seen as a taboo subject in their family which may place them at a disadvantage to understand how to engage in healthy relationships.

I feel like being a Black girl. . .sex is talked about different. It's more taboo. "Don't be fast. Don't wear this." We already expected to not be sexual people because in the real world we already are sexualized. So that's why it's hard to understand parents. That's how I feel. And I've got sisters. Mom, I think she just assumed that I know. . .

Collectively, participants acknowledged the pervasive nature of their victimization among their family and community members. As such, they often avoided or minimized their trauma given how often they experienced it themselves or through witnessing the experiences of others. This, in turn, often forced them to internalize their victimization alone. Many participants disclosed that did not have opportunities to engage in discussions around healthy relationships and interactions, their bodies, or sexual education—silencing their needs to learn and to explore these topics at a critical developmental stage.

Navigating the Pressure to Have Sex due to Stereotypes

The lack of discussion about sex and the protection of their bodies led Black girls in the study to acknowledge the pressure they and their friends feel to have sex and the inability to know how to negotiate healthy sexual behavior with their partners:

Most situations, a lot of the girls sometimes feel pressured. Because I've heard some people say like from a friend from a different school that I didn't know, they're like, the girl asked the guy if he wanted to do it [have sex], because she felt like if she didn't, he would leave her or something.

Some participants even mentioned how resisting having sex could lead to being stereotyped negatively. No matter what decisions Black teen girls make in regard to sex, their decisions are often seen as negative and labeled as such:

Especially when you're a Black woman or girl. It's like well you're just being a bitch if you say no [to having sex].

Another participant added:

A lot of labels come into play. When it comes to a woman saying no and standing in her own and just being comfortable with setting boundaries, people have issue with that for whatever reason. We get labeled with angry Black girl. We get labeled as a bitch and it's like I just wanted to let you know that's not what I was trying to do.

Another participant mentioned the stigma that is associated with not wanting to have sex:

For me, I'm a high school senior and there's a lot of pressure with people having sex with each other. You don't want to be labeled as a prude. You don't want to do anything. That's just something. . . It's a stigma. Even though a lot of girls don't feel pressured to do anything, they don't want that label.

Shaming as described by girls in the study were associated with either having sex or not wanting to have sex, which presented as a challenge for girls in regard to their sexual decision making as mentioned by another participant:

I feel like a lot of girls get shamed for that, but then they're also shamed if you do it and the same with guys. It's like you can't win either way. If you do it, you're slut. If you don't, you're a prude or a dyke.

Girls in the study felt that regardless of the decisions they made in terms of choosing to have sex or remain abstinent, they would be judged unfairly and, therefore, labeled through a gendered-racist stereotypical lens as being angry, prudish, or promiscuous—consistent with negative sexual scripts that are shared by Black women. They highlighted the inconsistent messaging along with judgment from society on how they engage in sexual behaviors. Specifically, they noted stigma and shame from having sex and from not having sex. Given society's hyperawareness of their sexual behaviors, they noted

how this impacted their sexual decision-making process and made it difficult to set boundaries.

Discussion

This qualitative study contributes to a critical examination of gendered racist stereotypes that Black teen girls face and must challenge daily. Such stereotypes can impact their decision making in romantic relationships, as well as impact their treatment and overall sexual health. This study uses Black feminist thought (Collins, 1991) as a foundational theory, through the lens of a Black girlhood framework as a guide to understand and highlight the lived experiences of Black teen girls and the stereotypes that impact their view of self in relation to the world. By highlighting the voices of Black teen girls, this study emphasizes the importance of providing Black teen girls a safe space to discuss structural issues that uniquely impact them. This approach allows for the uplifting of Black teen girls within a focus group setting, to analyze, resist, and challenge the norms using a Black girlhood lens. Participants in the study overwhelmingly were aware of stereotypes that were placed on Black teen girls due to the socio-historical context of Black women and girls. By understanding specific challenges, including language that is used to dismiss or harm Black teen girls, prevention researchers can begin to adapt or develop interventions appropriately.

Key themes arose which were centered around the intersection of their race and gender and how stereotypes specific to Black girls and women impacted the way they were viewed in romantic relationships. As discussed within the study, the normalization of the oversexualization of Black girls is often ignored within larger contexts such as within schools and families, which can lead to detrimental consequences for Black girls. Girls in the study admitted that they had been fondled or sexually assaulted in the past by boys in their schools but felt powerless to defend themselves. Girls in the study attributed their mistreatment by teen boys to sexualized stereotypes that normalized the behavior of their male counterparts. Racialized and gendered stereotypes contribute to the problematic behavior and treatment of Black girls in the U.S (Feagin, 2014). While girls in the study appeared to have a strong sense of closeness and awareness to their Black identity, collectivistic orientation may create culture-specific barriers to disclosure among Black girls in the aftermath of intra-racial sexual assault from teen boys that are also Black (Gómez & Gobin, 2020; Tillman et al., 2010).

Another finding that arose from the focus groups was the lack of support Black teen girls in the study felt they received from family members and teachers, in regard to discussions of sexual topics including sexual assaults.

As girls reported incidents to teachers and family members, their accusations tended to either be ignored or dismissed, leaving girls powerless and unsure whether the attack on their bodies would remain unpunished. Consistent with the literature, Harris and Kruger (2020) conducted a critical phenomenological study with middle school Black girls who described their experiences with verbal and physical sexual harassment from their classmates were dismissed or minimized by teachers and school administrators. Due to gendered racist stereotypes, teachers may view Black teen girls as sexually available, and interpret harassing behavior as an accepted cultural norm within the Black community (Carter Andrews et al., 2019), even though Black girls are more likely to be touched, fondled, or grabbed than Hispanic/Latina or White girls (Young et al., 2009). Despite over a decade of data documenting their risk of exposure to sexual harassment, the gender-based harassment and assault of Black teen girls are often ignored due to teacher perceptions of students based on race, gender, and class (Rahimi & Liston, 2009; Tonnesen, 2013). Regarding families, it is possible that some matriarchs within the Black family may avoid discussions related to sex and sexual assault as a way to shield their daughters from knowing about sex. In a study on HIV communication between Black mothers and their daughters, daughters reported wanting to have more serious conversations about sex and sexuality but felt their mothers were avoiding the discussions, however, mothers in the study felt that they had adequate conversation with their daughters about sex (Amutah-Onukagha et al., 2018). While Black girls tend to want to hear from their mothers (Opara, 2018) about sex and safe sex practices, there appears to be a miscommunication between the type of information mothers provide their daughters, and how their daughters perceive the information.

Within the context of romantic relationships, girls in the study also struggled to navigate protecting themselves while not being perceived as an “angry Black woman,” promiscuous, or other gendered racist stereotypes. Participants in the study also acknowledged the power dynamics that often pressure girls to have sex when they are not ready. More interestingly is that girls in the study mentioned that no matter which decision they make regarding sex, they felt they will be labeled negatively such as promiscuous or prude or have their sexual orientation questioned. Consistent with French (2013) discussion of stereotypes that Black girls often navigate, such as the stereotype of “Jezebel” or being labeled a “Freak” for sexually active girls or “dykes” or “prude” which refers to a female who is attracted to another female or resists sexual activities with men. While the girls in the study did not appear to have a negative bias or connotation toward same-sex relationships, they felt that being seen as “prude” or a “dyke” had negative connotations, depending on the context. This can lead to serious implications for their sexual health as they may

be unable to negotiate safe sexual options with their partners, leaving them most at risk of contracting HIV, STIs and/or unwanted pregnancies. A major construct within Black Feminist Thought is the importance of Black females learning how to survive and thrive within oppressive societies (Collins, 1991). Consequently, it is necessary for Black girls to obtain skills that can allow them to view themselves contrary to how society perceives them while also honoring their identities and their girlhood.

Limitations

Although our study has several strengths, including the contribution to the limited literature on understanding how gendered-racist stereotypes impact sexual decision making and treatment of Black teen girls, we acknowledge that our study has some limitations. Our participants are not a representative sample of Black teen girls in the U.S. More research among a broader sample of Black teen girls is needed to fully understand the scope and impact of the gendered stereotypes reported by the teens in this study. Moreover, our focus group guide (See Table 1) was not initially developed to explore the nuance of intersectional identities. Rather, across all five focus groups, the themes addressed in this paper emerged naturally over the course of discussions about dating, romantic relationships, and sex. While this limitation is important to note, it also serves as strength. The themes extracted indicate that participant accounts of gendered racism are inextricably linked to the lived dating experiences and treatment of Black teen girls, and strongly indicate a need for a deeper exploration and understanding of these themes.

Implications

Clinicians, educators, and researchers working with Black teen girls are urged to create strategies to address how gendered racism impacts the identity development of Black teen girls. Using Black feminist thought as a foundational framework while highlighting Black girlhood as a lens to work with allows for prevention researchers to examine how Black teen girls' intersecting identities impact not only how they are viewed and treated, but also how they engage in romantic relationships, how adultification of Black girls emerges from society and how to honor girlhood and identify development naturally with Black girls. These factors can further exacerbate sexual health disparities that affect Black girls and so must be addressed.

The findings of this study indicate the need for the development of resisting and challenging gendered-racist stereotypes in order to promote Black teen girls' positive identity development and improve their sexual

health. Schools can play a significant role in supporting Black teen girls in their questioning of the negative messages to which they are exposed. Because youth spend a majority of their time within the classroom, educators play an integral role in challenging offensive behaviors, such as being fondled or sexually assaulted, and teachers must publicly defend Black girls facing such abuse. Normalizing outrage over the mistreatment and disrespect of female bodies due to sexism should be highlighted within the school system to give Black teen girls a safe space to understand that their bodies belong to them. Jacobs (2016) encouraged the use of Black feminist thought and other critical feminist theories through a Black girlhood framework lens to be adopted within school system. The use of a Black girlhood lens within schools not only challenges the power dynamics within a school setting, but also provides an example to other youth who are of either the same or different races and genders, to support and respect Black teen girls and honor their childhood such as other non-Black teens. Examples of this of approach include advocating for school policies with consistent consequences for sexist behavior against students, town halls specifically for Black teen girls to ensure their experiences and voices are heard, race- and gender-centered conversations led by school counselors, advisory topics that focus on addressing behavior, celebrations of excellence, and student-led girl groups focused on challenging anti-racist and sexist behaviors and norms.

Sexual health programs that incorporate HIV and STI prevention should acknowledge power imbalance and stereotypes placed on Black girls whilst celebrating Black teen girls' strengths through the acknowledgment of positive health behaviors. Within prevention programming for Black teen girls, it is essential that programs and interventions incorporate themes of identity development, including gender and sexual identity, by allowing for the positive development of Black girls to naturally emerge. Black girls should be encouraged to challenge stereotypes as a means of increases their self-esteem and worth. By incorporating strategies to promote positive development, future interventions have the potential to empower healthy decision making around sexual health and overall decrease the HIV and STI disparities that affects Black teen girls. This can be seen as an important step toward making society a more equitable place for Black teen girls and promote more positive health outcomes for this group as they transition into adulthood.

Within the family context, incorporating more family-based conversations around listening and believing Black girls' stories regarding sexual assault. For Black girls, kinship can extend beyond the ties of the nuclear family structure to include a wide range of intimate bonds between social support networks (Field & Simmons, 2019). It is essential that Black girls have the ability to navigate such gendered-racists systems with the support of their

families and others within their immediate environments (e.g., teachers, counselors). The stigma and shame regarding sex and discussions around healthy relationships and bodies should be explored to eliminate barriers that place Black girls in an uncomfortable position to talk about critical topics. The burden of protecting Black girls should not be placed on the shoulders of Black girls alone, but on the shoulders of adult allies who can honor their innocence as children and adolescents and provide them with safe spaces to develop their identities in a healthy and positive way.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the youth participants for agreeing to be a part of our study and allowing us to tell their stories.

Author Contributions

I.O.: Conceptualization, overall writing of manuscript, awardee (NIH and NIMH); V.F.: Study design, methodology, data analysis, and writing; B.S.: Study design, methodology and data analysis; C.F.F.: Study design, and writing; K.H: Study design, methodology, supervision, data analysis, and principal investigator of study (NICHD).

Availability of data and material

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the principal investigator of the study [K.H.], upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This study was supported by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (1R21HD098031-01; PI: Dr. Kimberly Hieftje). The first author (I.O.) is supported with funding from the National Institutes of Health, Office of the Director (1DP5OD029636) and partially supported by an education grant from the National Institute on Mental Health (R25-MH087217). The fourth author (C.F.F.) is supported by CTSA Grant Number KL2 TR001862 from the National Center for Advancing Translational Science (NCATS), components of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and NIH roadmap for Medical Research. This project was also supported in part by grant number K12HL138037 from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. Points of view, opinions, and conclusions in this paper do not necessarily represent the official position of the U.S. Government. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.

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Code availability

No quantitative data sets were generated from this qualitative study. Therefore, there was no custom codes available.

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