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# **THE DEADLY CHALLENGES OF RAISING AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS:**

## ***Navigating the Controlling Image of the “Thug”***

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*Through 60 in-depth interviews with African American middle- and upper-middle-class mothers, this article examines how the controlling image of the “thug” influences the concerns these mothers have for their sons and how they parent their sons in light of those concerns. Participants were principally concerned with preventing their sons from being perceived as criminals, protecting their sons’ physical safety, and ensuring they did not enact the “thug,” a form of subordinate masculinity. Although this image is associated with strength and toughness, participants believed it made their sons vulnerable in various social contexts. They used four strategies to navigate the challenges they and their sons confronted related to the thug image. Two of these strategies—experience and environment management—were directed at managing characteristics of their sons’ regular social interactions—and two—image and emotion management—were directed at managing their sons’ appearance. By examining parenting practices, this research illuminates the strategies mothers use to prepare their sons to address gendered racism through managing the expression of their masculinity, racial identity, and class status.*

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I interviewed Karin, a married mother, in her apartment while she nursed her only child. Karin let out a deep sigh before describing how she felt when she learned the baby's gender:

I was thrilled [the baby] wasn't a boy. I think it is hard to be a black girl and a black woman in America, but I think it is dangerous and sometimes deadly to be a black boy and black man. Oscar Grant<sup>1</sup> and beyond, there are lots of dangerous interactions with police in urban areas for black men . . . so I was very nervous because we thought she was a boy. . . . I was relieved when she wasn't. It is terrible, but it is true.

Karin's relief upon learning her child was not a boy underscores how intersections of racial identity, class, and gender influence African American middle- and upper-middle-class mothers' parenting concerns. They are aware their children will likely confront racism, often start addressing racism during their children's infant and toddler years (Feagin and Sikes 1994; Staples and Johnson 1993; Tatum 1992, 2003), and attempt to protect their children from racially charged experiences (Uttal 1999). Responding to these potential experiences of racism, parents believe giving their children the skills to address racism is an essential parenting duty (Feagin and Sikes 1994; Hill 2001; Staples and Johnson 1993; Tatum 1992, 2003). Although the participants in this research were middle- and upper-middle-class, and thus had more resources than their lower-income counterparts, they felt limited in their abilities to protect their sons from the harsh realities of being African American boys and men in America.

Research demonstrates that race and gender influence how African Americans are treated by societal institutions, including schools (Eitle and Eitle 2004; Ferguson 2000; Holland 2012; Morris 2005; Pascoe 2007; Pringle, Lyons, and Booker 2010; Strayhorn 2010), law enforcement (Brunson and Miller 2006; Hagan, Shedd, and Payne 2005; Rios 2009), and employment (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004; Grodsky and Pager 2001; Pager 2003; Wingfield 2009, 2011). African American children also experience gendered racism (Essed 1991). African American boys face harsher discipline in school and are labeled aggressive and violent more often than whites or African American

girls (Eitle and Eitle 2004; Ferguson 2000; Morris 2005, 2007; Pascoe 2007). Although African American families engage in bias preparation with their children (McHale et al. 2006), the content of that preparation and how gender and class influence it is often not researched. Anecdotal evidence depicts African American parents as compelled to provide gender- and race-specific guidance to their sons about remaining safe in various social interactions, even within their own, often middle-class, neighborhoods (Graham 2014; Martinez, Elam, and Henry 2015; Washington 2012).

This article examines how African American middle- and upper-middle-class mothers raising young children conceptualize the challenges their sons will face and how they parent them in light of these challenges. I focus on mothers because they are often primarily responsible for socializing young children (Hays 1996), and specifically on middle- and upper-middle-class African American mothers because they typically have more resources to address discrimination than do lower-income mothers. Indeed, one might assume that these mothers' resources would enable them to protect their sons from certain challenges. African American mothers are more likely to engage in the racial socialization of younger children and to prepare children to address experiences of racism than are African American fathers (McHale et al. 2006; Thornton et al. 1990). They are also more likely to be single and, thus, principally responsible for decisions related to their children's educational, social, and cultural resources and experiences. Although there has been substantial public discourse about African American mothers' ability to teach their sons to be men, there has been little systematic analysis of their involvement in these processes (Bush 1999, 2004). Also, cultural stereotypes of uninvolved African American fathers overshadow research demonstrating their more active involvement (Coles and Green 2010; Edin, Tach, and Mincy 2009; Salem, Zimmerman, and Notaro 1998).

Although masculinity is associated with strength, participants' accounts of their parenting practices revealed their belief that the thug image made their sons vulnerable in many social interactions. Participants feared for their sons' physical safety and believed their sons would face harsher treatment and be criminalized by teachers, police officers, and the public because of their racial identity and gender. Their accounts revealed four strategies used to navigate these challenges, which I term *experience*, *environment*, *emotion*, and *image management*.

## RACED, CLASSED, AND GENDERED PARENTING CHALLENGES

### Gendered Racism and Controlling Images

Scholars have examined how race, class, and gender influence African Americans' experiences in various settings (Ferguson 2000; Morris 2005, 2007; Wingfield 2007, 2009). African American boys and girls experience different levels of social integration within suburban schools (Holland 2012; Ispa-Landa 2013). Boys are viewed as "cool" and "athletic" by classmates and are provided more opportunities to participate in high-value institutional activities, while girls are viewed as aggressive and unfeminine, and are provided with fewer similar opportunities (Holland 2012; Ispa-Landa 2013). Despite having somewhat positive experiences with peers, boys' encounters with teachers and administrators are fraught, as educators often perceive them as aggressive, violent, and potential criminals (Ferguson 2000; Morris 2005; Pascoe 2007). Compared to whites and African American girls, African American boys are disciplined more severely in school (Welch and Payne 2010), and their in-school discipline is more likely to lead to criminal charges (Brunson and Miller 2006).

African American boys are also more likely to have encounters with law enforcement than are whites or African American girls, and these interactions are more likely to have negative outcomes (Brunson and Miller 2006; Quillian, Pager, and University of Wisconsin-Madison 2000) and become violent (Brunson and Miller 2006). The news provides numerous examples of fatal shootings of unarmed African American teenage boys, often by white police officers and private citizens (Alvarez and Buckley 2013; McKinley 2009; Severson 2013; Yee and Goodman 2013). Initiatives like the White House-sponsored "My Brother's Keeper" are responding to an expansive body of research that demonstrates African American boys face disproportionate challenges to their success from schools, their communities, law enforcement, the workplace, and beyond (Jarrett and Johnson 2014).

Collins (2009) theorizes how controlling images function as racialized and gendered stereotypes that justify the oppression of certain groups and naturalize existing power relations, while forcing oppressed populations to police their own behavior. Scholars studying controlling images examine how these inaccurate depictions of black sexuality, lawfulness, temperament, and financial well-being are used to justify policies that disempower women of color (Collins 2004, 2009; Gilliam 1999; Hancock 2003; Harris-Perry 2011) and impact African Americans' experiences in their

workplaces, school settings, and other social contexts (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Dow 2015; Ong 2005; Wingfield 2007, 2009). These images depict African American men as hypermasculine: revering them as superhuman or reviling them as threats to be contained (Ferber 2007; Noguera 2008). Scholars suggest that African American men enact the thug, a version of subordinate masculinity associated with violence, criminality, and toughness, because they are not permitted to attain hegemonic masculinity (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Indeed, African American men who enact alternative versions of manhood that are associated with being educated or middle class confront challenges to their masculinity and racial authenticity (Ford 2011; Harper 2004; Harris III 2008; Noguera 2008; Young 2011).

Expanding on this scholarship, I examine how the thug image influences African American middle- and upper-middle-class mothers' parenting concerns and practices when raising sons. Building on Ford's view that "black manhood refers to imagined constructions of self that allow for more fluid interactions in Black and nonblack, public and private social spaces" (Ford 2011, 42), I argue that this fluidity is not just permitted but required to protect black male bodies and manage their vulnerability in different contexts. Black manhood and double consciousness (Du Bois [1903] 1994) are complementary concepts because each requires individuals to see themselves through the broader society's eyes. These concepts also illuminate how individuals who are associated with privileged identities, such as "man" or "American," confront obstacles that prevent them from benefiting from those identities' privileges.

### **Emotional Labor and Identity Work**

Scholarship on emotional labor and identity work examines how African Americans navigate stereotypes. Hochschild (2003) argues that individuals who perform emotional labor induce or suppress the display of certain feelings to produce specific emotional states in others, thereby contributing to their subordinate position. Studying a predominately white law firm, Pierce (1995) uncovers how men, but not women, garner rewards for expressing a range of negative emotions. Summers-Effler (2002) examines how "feeling rules" become associated with particular positions in society and the members of groups generally occupying those positions. Building on Hochschild's (2003) theories, scholars demonstrate that, fearing they will affirm controlling images, African Americans believe there is a limited range of emotions they can display in the workplace without confronting negative stereotypes, and thus feel less entitled to express discontent or anger (Jackson and Wingfield 2013; Wingfield 2007, 2011, 2013).



Historically, interactions between whites and African Americans have been guided by unspoken rules of conduct that signaled different status positions and maintained and reproduced a social structure that subordinated African Americans through acts of deference (Doyle 1937). These acts included African Americans using formal greetings to signal respect to whites, while whites used less formal greetings to signal their superiority (Doyle 1937). Violations of these rules resulted in frustration, anger, and violence from whites and anxiety, fear, and submission among African Americans (Doyle 1937). Rollins's (1985) research reveals how African American women employed as domestics suppressed their emotions and physical presence in interactions with white female employers. Indeed, adhering to specific feeling rules maintains and reproduces racial, class, and gender hierarchies, even as individuals circumvent them.

As African Americans traverse different economic and social strata that are governed by different rules, scholars identify how they manage the expression of their racial identity and class through code-switching (Anderson 1990), shifting (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003), identity work (Carbado and Gulati 2013), and cultural flexibility (Carter 2003, 2006). Carter's (2003, 2006) and Pugh's (2009) research demonstrates that African American children and families, respectively, often necessarily retain some fluency in "low-status" cultural capital, even as they ascend economically. Lacy's (2007) research also suggests that some middle-class African Americans emphasize their racial identity, class identity, or racially infused class identities, depending on social context, to gain acceptance. Although these scholars examine how African American middle-class children and families negotiate race and class, gender is not central to their analysis. This article complicates their scholarship by analyzing how race, class, and gender affect how mothers encourage their sons to express their racial identity and masculinity. Schrock and Schwalbe argue, "learning how to signify a masculine self entails learning how to adjust to audiences and situations and learning how one's other identities bear on the acceptability of a performance" (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009, 282). Mothers play an important part in this gendered, classed, and racialized socialization process (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009).

## METHODS

This article is based on data from a larger project that examined how African American middle- and upper-middle-class mothers approach work,

family, parenting, and child care. Participants were recruited using modified snowball sampling techniques. Study announcements were sent via email to African American and predominately white professional and women's organizations. Announcements were made at church services and in bulletins, and were posted at local businesses and on physical or Internet bulletin boards of community colleges, local unions, and sororities. Announcements were also posted to list servers catering to parents, mothers, or African American mothers. Participants who were interviewed were asked to refer others. Through these methods, 60 participants<sup>2</sup> were recruited to the study, of which 40 were raising sons only or sons and daughters. Aside from the opening quote describing a mother's relief upon learning she was not having a son, this analysis focuses on participants raising sons.

Interviews were conducted in person in a location of each participant's choosing, including her home or office, cafés or restaurants, and local parks. Interviews lasted from one hour to two and a half hours, and were conducted between 2009 and 2011. I asked participants about the families in which they were raised, becoming mothers, and their parenting concerns and practices. Before each interview, participants completed a Demographic Information Sheet that included questions about their marital status, education, total family income, and family composition. Table 1 lists participants' pseudonyms and demographic information.

All participants lived in the San Francisco Bay Area and were middle- or upper-middle-class as determined by their education and total family income. Participants attended college for at least two years, and their total annual family incomes ranged from \$50,000 to \$300,000. Participants' total family incomes were as follows: (1) 27 percent were between \$50,000 and 99,000; (2) 23 percent were between \$100,000 and \$149,000; (3) 23 percent were between \$150,000 and \$199,000; and (4) 27 percent were between \$200,000 and \$300,000. The upper end of this income range is high by national standards; however, in the San Francisco Bay Area between 2006 and 2010, the median owner-occupied home value was \$637,000 (Bay Area Census 2010). Homeownership is an important marker of middle-class status (Sullivan, Warren, and Westbrook 2000). Participants at the upper end of this income range were among the few who could easily attain that marker. Half of the participants were homeowners and half were renters. Participants' ages spanned from 25 to 49 years. The majority of participants (63 percent) earned advanced degrees such as MD, JD, PhD, or MA, with 27 percent earning college degrees and 10 percent attending some college. Three-fourths of the participants were married or in a domestic partnership, and one-fourth were divorced,



**TABLE 1: Names and Interviewee Characteristics (N = 60).**

	Name	Age	Occupation	Degree	Marital Status	Spouse or Domestic Partner's Degree	Number of Kids
1	Netia	27	SAHM	SC	S	N/A	1
2	Jameela	26	Administrative assistant	SC	S	N/A	1
3	Calliope	28	Graduate Student / SAHM <sup>3</sup>	BA	S	N/A	1
4	Heather	35	Administrator and teacher / SAHM	BA	D	N/A	3
5	Elizabeth	40	Program manager	MA	M	BA	1
6	Riana	36	Analyst	MA	S	N/A	1
7	Rochelle	35	Clerical / SAHM	AS	M	AS	3
8	Tracy	35	Paralegal	BA	M	BA	5
9	Hana	37	Part-time consultant / SAHM	MA	M	BA	2
10	Nia	30	Teacher	MA	M	BA	2
11	Monique	28	Social worker	MA	M	BA	1
12	Jennifer	34	Dentist	DDS	D	N/A	1
13	Karin	27	Writer / SAHM	MA	M	MA	1
14	Sharon	44	Program manager	BA	M	BA	2
15	Trina	25	Part-time teacher	MA	M	MA	1
16	Nora	40	Educator	PhD	M	MA	2
17	Brandy	45	Project manager	BA	M	HS	2
18	Cara	48	Nurse weekends / SAHM during week	MA	D	N/A	2
19	Vera	45	Dentist	DDS	M	MA	2
20	Mary	44	Educator / SAHM	MA	M	SC	2
21	Kera	34	SAHM	MA	M	SC	2

(Continued)

**TABLE 1 (continued)**

	Name	Age	Occupation	Degree	Marital Status	Spouse or Domestic Partner's Degree	Number of Kids
22	Farah	32	Academic	PhD	M	SC	2
23	Maya	37	Professor	PhD	M	BA	4
24	Reagan	45	Senior manager	BA	D	N/A	1
25	Sarah	36	Graduate student / SAHM	BA	M	MA	1
26	Sydney	32	Public health administrator	MA	M	MA	1
27	Mera	32	SAHM	MA	M	MA	2
28	Tamika	41	Freelance administrator / SAHM	BA	M	BA	1
29	Robinne	40	Administrator	MA	M	BA	1
30	Ann	49	Teacher coach	MA	M	SC	2
31	Audra	37	Meeting planner	BA	M	BA	2
32	Teresa	30	Project coordinator	BA	M	BA	2
33	Ashley	44	Project manager	MA	M	SC	1
34	Asa	40	Development director	BA	M	PhD	1
35	Lakeisha	35	Marketing manager	MA	M	MA	1
36	Claudette	34	Freelance paraprofessional / merchandiser / gym teacher/ substitute teacher / SAHM	BA	M	SC	2
37	Jessica	42	Administrator	BA	D	N/A	1
38	Alana	40	Probation officer	BA	M	BA	2
39	Chandra	41	Program coordinator	MA	D	N/A	2
40	Cheryl	39	Pediatrician	MD	M	JD	1
41	Charlene	33	Attorney	JD	M	SC	1

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (continued)

	Name	Age	Occupation	Degree	Marital Status	Spouse or Domestic Partner's Degree	Number of Kids
42	Essence	37	Health educator / program manager	MA	M	SC	1
43	Christine	43	Acupuncturist	MA	S	MA	1
44	Kristen	42	Attorney	JD	M	BA	1
45	Jordana	40	Marketing program manager	MA	M	BA	2
46	Kellie	44	SAHM	AS	M	MA	4
47	Karlyn	35	Research compliance manager	MA	S	N/A	2
48	Rachel	36	Operations manager	MA	M	BA	2
49	Tammy	37	Team leader	AS	M	BA	3
50	Rebecca	40	Educator	MA	W	N/A	1 <sup>4</sup>
51	Charlotte	40	Self-Employed / SAHM	MA	M	MA	4
52	Remi	36	Nurse	MA	M	BA	6
53	Harper	37	Child psychologist	MD	M	MA	1
54	Samantha	35	Human resources director	MA	M	MA	2
55	Claire	36	SAHM	PhD	M	MA	1
56	Ava	42	Project manager	MA	M	SC	2
57	Emma	34	Public relations project manager	BA	M	BA	1
58	Grace	30	Admissions director	SC	S	N/A	1
59	Hannah	45	Training manager	BA	DP	BA	2
60	Sophia	38	Grant writer	MA	S	N/A	1

NOTE: All names are pseudonyms. Occupation: SAHM = stay-at-home mother. Degree: AS = associate's degree; BA = bachelor's degree; DDS = doctor of dental medicine; HS = high school; JD = juris doctorate; MA = master's degree; MD = doctor of medicine; PhD = doctorate; SC = some college. Marital status: S = single; M = married; D = divorced; DP = domestic partner; Sep. = separated; W = widowed.

never married, or widowed. All participants were raising at least one child who was 10 years old or younger, as this research focused on mothers who are raising young children. Participants' employment status included working full-time or part-time, or not working outside of the home (i.e., stay-at-home mothers).

Using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and the procedures and techniques described by Strauss and Corbin (1998), I transcribed interviews and coded them to identify and differentiate recurring concepts and categories. A key concept that emerged was the controlling image of the "thug," a version of subordinate masculinity identified in masculinity and black feminist scholarship. Some participants used the term "thug" or "thuggish." Others used language that referred to components of the thug, such as criminality, violence, and toughness. Outliers within the data were examined to determine how they challenged or could be reconciled with emerging themes. My focus here on the accounts of mothers precluded a direct analysis of fathers' views, but fathers were involved in these strategies. This focus also precluded an analysis of how African boys and teenagers navigated these challenges themselves.

As a middle-class African American mother, I shared traits with my participants. These characteristics, in some ways, positioned me as an insider with participants and facilitated building rapport and their willingness to share information about their lives. This status also required that I refrain from assuming I understood a participant's meanings. I balanced building rapport with guarding against making assumptions by probing for additional clarification when a participant suggested I understood something based on our shared background.

## **PROTECTING SONS FROM BABY RACISM AND CRIMINALIZATION**

Although participants described parenting concerns that transcended gender and related to fostering other aspects of their children's identity, this article examines their specific concerns about raising sons. Participants' concerns included ensuring the physical safety of their sons in interactions with police officers, educators, and the public, and preventing their sons from being criminalized by these same groups.

### **Gender, Racial Identity, and Parenting**

Generally, middle-class children are thought to live in realms of safety, characterized by good schools, an abundance of educational resources, and

protection from harsh treatment from police, teachers, and the public. However, numerous scholars have demonstrated that despite the expansion of the African American middle class, its members face economic, social, residential, and educational opportunities that are substantively different from those of middle-class whites (Feagin and Sikes 1994; Lacy 2007; Pattillo 1999). Middle-class African Americans continue to face discrimination in lending, housing (Massey and Denton 1993; Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Sharkey 2014), and employment (Pager 2003). African American middle-class children often attend schools that are poorly funded, lack adequate infrastructure, and are characterized by lower academic achievement than their white counterparts (Pattillo 1999, 2007). These children are also more likely to grow up in neighborhoods with higher levels of crime and inferior community services as compared to their white counterparts (Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Pattillo 1999). Although participants recognized that their middle-class status afforded them additional resources, they believed that their sons' access to middle-class realms of safety were destabilized and diminished because of their racial identity and gender.

Charlotte, a married mother of four sons, who lived in an elite and predominately white neighborhood, held back tears as she described her fears about how others would respond to them:

I look at the president. I see how he is treated and it scares me. I want people to look at my sons and see them for the beautiful, intelligent, gifted, wonderful creatures that they are and nothing else. I do not want them to look at my sons and say, "There goes that Black guy," or hold onto their purse.

Similarly, Nia, a married mother of two sons, who lived in an economically diverse, predominantly African American neighborhood, described interactions with other families at local children's activities that she called "baby racism":

From the time our first son was a baby and we would go [to different children's activities]. Our son would go and hug a kid and a parent would grab their child and be like, "Oh, he's going to attack him!" And it was just, like, "Really? Are you serious?" He was actually going to hug him. You see, like little "baby racism." . . . I have even written to local parents' listservs to ask, "Am I imagining this . . . ?" And the response was interesting. Almost all the black mothers wrote in, "You're not imagining this, this is real. You're going to have to spend the rest of your life fighting for your child." And all the white mothers said, "You're imagining it. It's not like that. You're misinterpreting it." And it was like, okay, so I'm not imagining this.

Charlotte and Nia, like other participants, believed that when African American boys participated in activities that were engaged in by predominantly white and middle-class families, their behavior faced greater scrutiny. Race and gender trumped class; poverty and crime were associated with being an African American boy. Participants believed the process of criminalizing their sons' behaviors began at an early age, and was not confined to educational settings but was pervasive. Although participants had no way of knowing how others were thinking about their sons, numerous studies support their belief that African American boys' actions are interpreted differently in a range of settings (Ferguson 2000; Morris 2005; Pascoe 2007).

Participants also saw teachers and educators as potential threats to their sons' development. Karlyn, a single mother of a son and daughter, described her son's experience of being harshly disciplined at school:

A teacher was yelling at my son because some girls reported that he cheated in Four Square. . . . I had to let her know "don't ever pull my son out of class for a Four Square game again. . . . And don't ever yell at my child unless he has done something horrible." . . . I told the principal, "You know, she may not think she is racist but what would make her yell at a little black boy over a stupid Four Square game?" . . . He said, "Oh my God, I am just so glad that you have the amount of restraint that you did because I would have been really upset." I said, "As the mother of a black son, I am always concerned about how he is treated by people."

Like Karlyn, others relayed stories of educators having disproportionately negative responses to their sons' behavior, describing them as aggressive or scary, when similar behavior in white boys was described as more benign. Karlyn, and others, continuously monitored their sons' schools to ensure they received fair treatment. Ferguson's (2000) and Noguera's (2008) research supports their assessment, identifying a tendency among educators to criminalize the behavior of African American boys. Participants' middle-class status did not protect their sons from these experiences.

Mary, a married mother of a son and daughter, also believed her son faced distinct challenges related to his racial identity, class, and gender and sought out an African American middle- and upper-middle-class mothers' group to get support from mothers who were negotiating similar challenges. Mary described a conversation that regularly occurred in her mothers' group, revealing her worries about adequately preparing her son to navigate interactions with teachers and police officers:



With our sons, we talk about how can we prepare them or teach them about how to deal with a society, especially in a community like Oakland, where black men are held to a different standard than others, and not necessarily a better one. . . . When you are a black man and you get stopped by the policeman, you can't do the same things a white person would do because they might already have some preconceived notions, and that might get you into a heap more trouble. . . . We talk about our sons who are a little younger and starting kindergarten. What do we have to do to make sure teachers don't have preconceived ideas that stop our sons from learning because they believe little brown boys are rambunctious, or little brown boys are hitting more than Caucasian boys?

It is worth emphasizing that although these participants were middle- and upper-middle-class African American mothers with more resources than lower-income mothers, these resources did not protect their sons from gendered racism. Also, middle-class mothers are depicted as viewing educators as resources (Lareau 2011), but these participants viewed educators as potential threats. They believed their sons' racial identity marked them as poor, uneducated, violent, and criminal, and they would have to actively and continuously challenge that marking and assert their middle-class status in mainstream white society—a version of the politics of respectability (Collins 2004). Some participants attended workshops aimed at helping them teach their sons to safely engage with teachers, police officers, and the public. Like the parents described by Lareau and McNamara (1999), some used race-conscious strategies and others used color-blind strategies to address concerns about gendered racism.

Although most participants believed their sons faced challenges related to the thug, a few did not. These participants attributed their lack of concern to their sons' racially ambiguous appearance. Kera, a married mother of two sons, said, "The way they look, they're like me. They could be damn near anything depending on how they put their hair. . . . I don't think they'll have the full repercussions of being a black man like my brothers or my husband." Kera's comments echo research suggesting that skin color differences impact African Americans' experiences in employment, school, and relationships (Hunter 2007).

Participants also believed their sons faced pressure to perform specific versions of African American masculinity that conformed to existing raced, classed, and gendered hierarchies. Nora, a married mother of a son and daughter, said, "There is a lot of pressure for black boys to assume a more 'thuggish' identity. There aren't enough different identity spaces for black boys in schools . . . and so I want my kids to have choices. And if

that's the choice, I might cringe . . . but I would want it to be among a menu of choices." Elements of the thug, such as criminality, aggression, and low academic performance, recurred in participants' accounts as something they and their sons navigated. Scholars (Ong 2005; Wingfield 2007) have identified how African American adults negotiate controlling images, but Nora's comments underscore that these negotiations begin at a young age.

Given these pressures to perform specific versions of African American masculinity associated with poverty and criminality, participants tried to protect their sons from early experiences of subtle and explicit racism because of the potential impact on their identity formation. Sharon, a married mother of a son and daughter, captured a sentiment shared by many participants when she stated,

Each time a black boy has a racially charged interaction with a police officer, a teacher, or a shop owner, those experiences will gradually start to eat at his self-worth and damage his spirit. He might become so damaged that he starts to believe and enact the person he is expected to be, rather than who he truly is as a person.

Participants believed their sons were bombarded by negative messages about African American manhood from the broader white society and, at times, the African American community. Participants worried about the toll these messages might take on their sons' self-perception as they transitioned to manhood. They steered their sons away from enacting the thug, but also observed an absence of other viable expressions of racially authentic middle-class masculinity.

### **Strategies to Navigate the Thug**

Legal scholar Krieger (1995) argues that the law has a flawed understanding of racial prejudice and that, rather than being an active and explicit set of beliefs, racism operates by shaping our perceptions of behaviors. A loud white boy is viewed as animated and outgoing; a loud black boy is viewed as aggressive and disruptive (Ferguson 2000). Similar to the interracial interactions in the South that Doyle (1937) describes, participants believed that whites expected African American boys to adjust their behavior depending on the racial identity of the person with whom they were interacting. Participants walked a tightrope between preparing their sons to overcome the gendered racism they might confront and ensuring they did not internalize these views or use them as excuses

to fail. Christine, who was engaged to be married and the mother of a son, explained that in teaching her son what it means to be an African American man, she wanted to ensure that he did not grow up “with that black man chip on the shoulder. Feeling we are weak. Whites have done something to us and we can’t do something because of white people.” Christine wanted her son to understand how some viewed him, but she tried to foster a version of double consciousness that emphasized his agency and discouraged him from feeling bitter toward whites, disempowered, or constrained by others’ views.

Next, I outline the strategies participants used to navigate the thug image and teach their sons how to modulate their expression of masculinity, race, and class. Participants often preferred one strategy but they may have used other strategies, or a combination of strategies, during different periods of their sons’ lives.

### **Experience and Environment Management**

Participants used two explicitly race-, class-, and gender-conscious strategies to manage their sons’ regular social interactions: *experience* and *environment management*. *Experience management* focused on seeking out opportunities for sons to engage in activities to gain fluency in different experiences—both empowering and challenging—of being African American boys and men. *Environment management* focused on monitoring their sons’ regular social environment, such as their school or neighborhood, with the aim of excluding sources of discrimination. These environments were often primarily middle-class but diverse in terms of racial identity, religion, and sexual orientation. Participants often used environment management when children were preschool age to avoid early experiences of discrimination. Despite having additional resources, participants navigated a landscape of institutionalized child care, which they believed included racially insensitive providers.

Participants using experience management tried to help their sons acquire what they viewed as an essential life skill: the ability to seamlessly shift from communities that differed by race, class, and gender. Experience management involved shuttling sons to activities, such as Little League baseball, basketball, or music lessons, in a variety of neighborhoods comprising African Americans from different economic backgrounds. Participants also exposed sons to African American culture and history and African American men, including fathers, uncles, cousins, coaches, or friends, whom they believed expressed healthy versions of

masculinity. Karlyn said, “I worry about my son because he is not growing up with the kind of ‘hood’ mentality that me and his father had, but he will have to interact with those people.” Karlyn’s son was not completely ensconced within the safety of a middle-class community. She believed as her son traveled through his day—to school, riding on buses, walking down the street, going in and out of stores, and interacting with police officers and the public—he would be perceived in a range of different and primarily negative ways. Karlyn believed her son would have to adjust the expression of his masculinity, racial identity, and class to successfully interact with people from that “hood mentality”—a version of subordinate masculinity and people from other racial and class backgrounds. She believed that lacking regular experiences in settings like the one she grew up in put her son at a disadvantage in these situations. Karlyn sought out experiences to help her son learn to navigate a world that she believed viewed him primarily as an African American boy and potential troublemaker, rather than a good middle-class kid. She ensured that her son had regular contact with his father and other African American men. She also regularly discussed examples of clashes between African American men and the police with her son.

Maya, a married mother of four, also used experience management. She described how she and her husband exposed their son to alternative and, in her view, more positive ideals of masculinity:

With our son, we definitely have a heightened level of concern, especially around public schools, about what it means to be a black male in this society. . . . [My] husband does stuff with him that is very much male socializing stuff. . . . But, it is worrisome to think about sending him into the world where he is such a potential target. . . . I know how to make a kid that does well in school and can navigate academic environments. My husband knows how to help young people—black young people—understand their position, how the world sees them and how they might see themselves in a different and much more positive way.

Through these experiences, out of necessity, participants aimed to help their sons develop a double consciousness—“a sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (Du Bois [1903] 1994, 5). Maya and her husband did this by teaching their son how others might perceive him while rejecting prevailing images of African American masculinity and crafting alternatives.

Environment management involved managing sons’ daily social interactions by excluding specific kinds of exposures. Rachel, a married

mother of a son and daughter, said, “My son thinks he is street-smart but he is used to being in an environment in which he is known. No one thinks of my son as a black boy, they think of him as my son, but when he goes out into the real world people will make assumptions about him.” Rachel lived in a predominately white neighborhood with few other African American families. She believed her neighbors did not view her family as “the African American family,” but simply as a family, and this protected her son from challenges associated with being an African American male in the broader society where he might be assumed to be part of the urban underclass. Charlotte, mentioned earlier, described her efforts to find a neighborhood with the right kind of community:

When we lived in [a different predominately white suburb], none of the mothers spoke to me. Maybe they would wave but I was really taken aback by how shunned I felt. We were the only black family in the school and no one spoke [to us]. . . . Here [another predominately white area], over the summer, people knew my name and I didn’t know their name. . . . There was a feeling of welcome and friendliness from the group. . . . You know, I just worry so much for them. I want them to be accepted, and not judged, and not looked at like a black kid. I want people to look at them as “that is a good young man or a good boy.” . . . Maybe if they know my sons and me and my husband, it won’t be “Oh, there are the black kids”; it will be “There is us.”

Charlotte wanted her sons to have access to better resources and schools, and that translated to living in primarily white neighborhoods. Nonetheless, revealing the diversity in white settings, she looked for white neighborhoods where she believed her sons would not face discrimination. Charlotte hoped to transform her sons from “anonymous” African American boys, assumed to be up to no good, to “the kid next door.” Being African American was accompanied by assumptions about lower-class status and criminality that participants sought to overcome. Charlotte’s experience underscores how intersections of race, gender, and class are used to value individuals and the challenges her sons confronted to be seen as both African American and “good middle-class kids.”

Participants living in economically diverse predominantly African American communities with higher crime rates faced particular challenges when using environment management. Jameela, a single mother of a son, explained, “I live in Richmond because it is more affordable, but I don’t see a lot of parents like me. I keep a tight leash on my son because of where we live. I don’t want him to get involved with the wrong element.”

Jameela, and participants living in similar environments, often did not let their sons play with neighborhood children. Her experiences highlight class divisions within African American communities and the intensive peer group monitoring parents engaged in when their residential choices were limited. These children's regular environment did not include their immediate neighborhood but was confined to controlled spaces, including their school, church, or other settings that were diverse, free of racial discrimination, and often primarily middle class.

Experience and environment management both focus on social interactions but with different aims. Experience management aims to inform sons through regular controlled activities about the challenges they may face as African American boys and men and teach them how to modify the expression of their masculinity, class, and racial identity. Environment management aims to reduce or eliminate the challenges of being an African American male so they are not the defining features of their sons' lives. These mothers tried to find or create bias-free environments that would not limit their sons' expression of their masculinity but worried about their sons' treatment outside of these "safe havens."

### **Image and Emotion Management**

Participants also used *image* and *emotion management* to reduce the vulnerability they believed their sons experienced related to the thug image and to prevent them from being associated with poor urban African Americans. These strategies were also explicitly race, gender, and class conscious and focused on their sons' emotional expressions and physical appearance. Sons were encouraged to restrain their expressions of anger, frustration, or excitement lest others view them as aggressive or violent. Participants also counseled their sons to strictly monitor their dress and appearance so they would be viewed not as criminals but as middle-class kids.

Karlyn engaged in something she called "prepping for life" with her son. She said, "I talk to [my son] constantly. We do scenarios and we talk about stuff. I'll pose a situation, like say, if you are ever kidnapped, what do you do? If the police ever pull you over, how do you need to react? So we do scenarios for all of that, it's just prepping for life." It would not be unreasonable for a parent to instruct their child to view police officers as sources of help. What is striking about Karlyn's examples is that she viewed child predators and police officers as equally dangerous to her son. She used emotion management with the hope that preparing her son for these scenarios would give him some agency in his response in the moment.



Some participants looked for places where their sons could safely express “normal boy” behaviors while gaining control over those behaviors. Heather, a divorced mother of a son and two daughters described her plan to help her son control his emotions at school: “I’m hoping to get [my son] into enough relaxation-type yoga classes so he is a little bit calmer when he does go to school. I want to make sure he lets it all out in the play yard and activities after school.” Through activities like yoga, karate, and meditation, these participants hoped their sons would learn to restrain their emotions, and that this ability would translate to their interactions with teachers, police officers, peers, and the public. Participants emphasized that there were appropriate times to express feelings and advised their sons to refrain from responding to discrimination in the moment, instead taking their time to determine the best approach. This often meant reframing race-related grievances in nonracial terms so they would be better received by white teachers and administrators. Although masculinity is associated with strength, participants believed their sons were vulnerable and did not have the freedom to exhibit certain feelings or behaviors.

Participants also encouraged their sons to engage in image management to avoid being viewed as thugs. Rebecca, a widow with one son who also raised her nephew in his teenage years, recounted discussions during which she counseled her nephew about how people interpreted his clothing:

Things like him wearing his hoodie and the assumption that he is up to no good. I tried to explain that to him because he didn’t understand. He said, “I am just wearing my hoodie.” “But baby, I understand what you are doing, and there is nothing wrong with that, but if you walk through the [poor, primarily African American and high-crime] neighborhood near my school, we see something different.” You know, just having to protect him and trying to shelter him from unnecessary stress and trauma. . . . You know, the sagging pants and all the things that teenage boys do that don’t necessarily mean they are doing anything wrong. . . . Is it fair? No. Is it reality? Yes.

Rebecca’s comments illustrate a parenting paradox. Even as Rebecca challenged the double standards that she believed were used to evaluate her nephew’s and son’s behavior and appearance, as a practical matter, she felt compelled to educate them about these different standards. At times, she counseled them to adhere to those standards for their own safety. Given the recurring news stories of unarmed African American boys shot by police officers and private citizens, Rebecca’s approach seems reasonable. Participants believed their sons might be labeled thugs because of their attire, thus leaving them vulnerable to attacks from others. Participants

could not prevent these interactions from happening, but wanted their sons to survive them.

## CONCLUSION

This research was bookended by two shooting deaths of unarmed African American males. The first, Oscar Grant, was shot in the back by Officer Johannes Mehserle while lying face-down on a Bay Area Rapid Transit platform (McLaughlin 2014). The second, Trayvon Martin, was pursued, shot, and killed by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch coordinator, while walking home in his father's "safe," middle-class, gated community (Alvarez and Buckley 2013). Despite being a child from that community, it was not safe for Mr. Martin. He was not viewed as a good middle-class kid, but was instead interpreted as a threat. Since these incidents, African American parents are increasingly sharing the concerns they have for their sons' safety. Associated Press writer Jesse Washington (2012) wrote a heart-wrenching but matter-of-fact editorial describing how he advises his son to behave in affluent neighborhoods and in interactions with police and others. These instructions may have damaged his son's spirit but increased his chance of remaining alive. Incidents like these reminded participants that their sons have different experiences with the public than do white boys and men.

Initiatives like My Brother's Keeper focus on heightening African American male youths' agency in their lives, often paying less attention to the societal constraints they face. Some might suggest that recent videos of unarmed African American boys and men being shot by officers are shedding light on those constraints and are compelling the US government to take a closer look at law enforcement's interactions with African American boys and men. These incidents draw attention to contradictions between American ideals and practices, underscoring the fact that solving these challenges is not just a matter of changing behavior or increasing resources. These concerns about safety and vulnerability transcend class and are produced by societal forces.

Although the practices of fathers were not directly examined, it is clear from participants' statements that they helped to execute these strategies. Nonetheless, given that African American fathers' parenting practices at times differ from those of mothers (McHale et al. 2006), future research might directly examine their concerns and strategies. Researchers might also examine how different intersections of race, class, and gender produce different forms of vulnerability and protection.

Existing research suggests that having a male body and access to masculinity confers privileges and protections that serve as a symbolic asset in social interactions. However, my research demonstrates that depending on its racialization, the male body can be a “symbolic liability.” The thug image derives its power and strength from intimidation and is used to justify attacks on African American boys’ and men’s bodies and minds. Participants’ additional labor to protect their sons and its raced, classed, and gendered nature is largely invisible to the people it is meant to make more comfortable. Despite having additional resources, participants and their sons were not immune to a social system that required them to police their behaviors, emotions, and appearance to signal to others that they were respectable and safe middle-class African American males. Ironically, by feeling compelled to engage in strategies that encouraged their sons to conform to stricter standards and engage in acts of deference, participants contributed to reproducing a social structure that subordinates African Americans. Their accounts show a continuing need for African Americans to have a double consciousness through which they understand how society views them. Their actions also suggest a tension between individual strategies of survival and strategies that challenge and transform existing gendered, classed, and raced hierarchies.

## NOTES

1. On New Year’s Day 2010, Johannes Mehserle, a white Bay Area Rapid Transit police officer, fatally shot Oscar Grant, an African American teenager, in Oakland. During the incident, Grant was unarmed, lying face-down on the train platform, and had been subdued by several other officers. On July 8, 2010, Mehserle was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter, not the higher charges of second-degree murder or voluntary manslaughter (McLaughlin 2014).

2. Sixty-five mothers were interviewed. Five were excluded because they did not meet the income and educational criteria of the study.

3. Notably, almost half of the participants who identified as stay-at-home mothers were employed in part-time to full-time jobs.

4. She raised her nephew during his teen years with her, now deceased, husband.

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