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## Legitimizing Family Management: The Role of Adolescents' Understandings of Risk

*Few studies use the kinds of rich qualitative data that permit the analyst to probe for the numerous ways that contextual demands could explain adolescents' interpretations of the socialization processes within their families. Using inductive techniques, the author analyzed Black adolescents' (N = 64) interpretations of their parents' expectations and rules. Several findings emerged. First, agreeing with parents' assessments of risk was critical to participants' acceptance of family management. Second, participants legitimized their parents' practices as helping them avoid the risks of getting in trouble with the law, acquiring a disreputable identity, and failing to ascend the class ladder. Third, boys and girls legitimized different expectations and rules because they experienced and assessed risks in gender-specific ways. The author argues that adolescents bring an understanding of risk to bear on their interpretations of family life and uses these findings to develop a grounded concept of legitimizing parents' controlling practices.*

Adolescents and their parents differ in their views about where the limits of parental authority should be drawn. Indeed, across ethnicities,

adolescents describe more issues as outside the bounds of legitimate parental authority than do parents (Smetana & Daddis, 2002). Researchers suggest that adolescents' concerns for autonomy drive their views about the spheres that parents have a right to oversee (Smetana, 2002). For instance, scholars argue that, because it threatens their growing independence, middle-class African American adolescents regard parental authority over the personal domain—their friendships, activities, and bodies—as excessive (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Daddis, 2004). Such findings raise the question of how adolescents from nondominant groups, whose parents often exercise strenuous control over their personal choices (Burton & Jarrett, 2000; Elliott & Aseltine, 2013; Ferguson, 2000; Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999; Jarrett, 1997), perceive their parents' expectations and rules. Yet few studies use the kinds of rich qualitative data that permit an investigation into how everyday experiences of risk pertain to adolescents' interpretations of the socialization processes within their families. This paucity hampers efforts to understand how contextual demands, in addition to concerns for personal autonomy, relate to adolescents' perceptions of their parents' family management practices. It also corresponds to a more general gap: Despite growing attention to how children influence their parents, there remains a dearth of family science research that places the child's interpretations at the center (Corsaro, 2005; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Parkin & Kuczynski, 2012; Stattin & Kerr, 2000; Tokić & Pečnik, 2011).

In this study, I analyzed how Black adolescents ( $N = 64$ ), living in disadvantaged urban

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neighborhoods, explained their parents' expectations and rules. Black adolescent interpretations of family life warrant attention. Black children are disproportionately likely to live in high-poverty environments (Sharkey, 2008), and children's respect for parental authority is necessary for ensuring that parents' practices are truly protective (Furstenberg et al., 1999). In elaborating my findings, I developed a grounded concept (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; LaRossa, 2005) of *legitimizing parents' expectations and rules* and contribute to existing research in two ways. First, I advance the literature on parent-child relations among urban Black families with adolescent children; and second, I deepen understanding of how contextual demands relate to adolescents' perceptions of parental authority. Below, I highlight perspectives on racial stratification. Then, I summarize research in three relevant areas: adolescent conceptions of parental authority, families from nondominant groups, and parental regulation of adolescent self-presentation.

#### THEORETICAL INFLUENCES

##### *Racial Stratification and Family Processes*

Family scientists have called for more attention to the influence of racial hierarchies on families (Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, & Hordge Freeman, 2010). Yet, most studies that examine adolescents' perceptions of their parents' expectations and rules rely on questionnaires with limited ability to assess how the social realities of life in a racially ordered society could influence parent-child relations (e.g., Smetana & Daddis, 2002; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). By contrast, family science research that integrates a definition of the United States as uniquely racially constituted (Patterson, 1982) examines how racial stratification affects family dynamics (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). For instance, Ferguson (2000) and Hamer (2005) examine how life in a racially unequal society shapes Black parents' child-rearing goals. They highlight how Black parents' priorities are rooted in their concerns about how racial discrimination and disadvantage affect their children.

##### *Adolescents' Conceptions of Parental Authority*

Social domain studies show that adolescents agree that parents have the legitimate authority to manage some domains of their lives. Researchers argue that adolescents' concerns

for autonomy influence their views of what these domains are. For example, a sample of middle-class African American adolescents regarded parental attempts to control the personal domain as unreasonable (Smetana, 2002; Smetana et al., 2004). Yet, adolescents often accept and legitimize parental regulation over the moral and conventional domains. The moral domain includes acts that are prescriptively wrong because they affect the rights or well-being of others; the conventional domain refers to socially constructed behavioral norms that ease and organize interpersonal interaction (Smetana, 2000; Smetana & Daddis, 2002).

Adolescents' perspectives on parents' motives for managing them also influence the extent to which they legitimize parents' expectations and rules (Best, 2006). For instance, Schalet (2011) reported that many White American middle-class adolescents did not believe that parents' rules about sex and alcohol were designed to protect them from risk. Her study participants believed their parents' rules emerged from a desire to uphold an image of themselves as good parents, rather than from genuine concerns that sex and alcohol would undermine their physical or emotional safety (A. Schalet, personal communication, August 27, 2013; Schalet, 2011).

Relatedly, when adolescents believe that parents make rules based on an exaggerated sense of danger, they regard parents' use of authority as excessive (Best, 2006; Schalet, 2011). These perceptions may motivate adolescents to ignore or defy parents' wishes. For instance, Marc, a teenage boy quoted in Schalet (2011), said he dismissed his mother's warnings, because she overstates risk: "She just does the drugs, alcohol, sex thing. ... It is just like the triple threat and I am just like, 'God, go away'" (p. 115).

##### *Family Management Practices in Disadvantaged Neighborhoods*

Many parents in disadvantaged environments exercise vigilant control over their teens' physical appearance, comportment, whereabouts, and friends (Burton & Jarrett, 2000; Furstenberg et al., 1999; Hamer, 2005; Jarrett & Jefferson, 2003). Parents in disadvantaged contexts manage their children's appearance and demeanor for several related reasons. First, parents may wish to help their children navigate symbolic boundaries, or the creation and enforcement of

divisions that incorporate and positively distinguish some people, but leave out others, marking them as inferior (Pachucki, Pendergrass, & Lamont, 2007). In some neighborhoods, symbolic boundaries classify and divide community members into categories of “morally worthy” (or decent and good) versus “disreputable” (or ghetto; e.g., Anderson, 1999; Jones, 2010).

Second, parents may hope to help their children avoid stigmatization and stereotyping. For instance, Kaplan (1997) described how low-income Black mothers of teen girls exhorted their daughters to “dress up” to counterbalance the stigma of being on welfare. Similarly, to avoid gendered racism by teachers and peers who hope for them to be more “quiet” and “ladylike” (Ispa-Landa, 2013; Morris, 2007), parents of Black girls may encourage their daughters to adopt ways of dressing, speaking, and interacting associated with upper-class White womanhood (Fordham, 1996).

Third, parents seek to help their children avoid physical victimization. For instance, believing that public representations of young Black men as threatening increase their vulnerability to aggressive policing (Brunson & Miller, 2006), parents may encourage their sons to adopt clothing styles and behaviors that suggest acceptance of authority (Ferguson, 2000; Fordham, 1996). To help girls and boys navigate the risks of violence and sexual harassment in disadvantaged communities (Cobbina, Miller, & Brunson, 2008; Hamer, 2005), parents also strictly limit their children’s personal choices. They may chaperone teenage children on their daily rounds in the neighborhood (Jarrett, 1997; Jarrett & Jefferson, 2003), warn them about the dangers that may befall them if they socialize with undesirable peers (Harding, 2009), and try to control their time use (Furstenberg et al., 1999).

In brief, a large body of literature suggests that parents in disadvantaged neighborhoods seek to regulate the personal domain of their children’s lives (e.g., Ferguson, 2000; Fordham, 1996; Furstenberg et al., 1999; Jarrett, 1997; Jarrett & Jefferson, 2003; Kaplan, 1997). However, social domain research on how youth in disadvantaged settings regard parental authority over the personal domain remains scarce.

### *Styles of Self-Presentation*

Research has shown that African American parents may help their children learn styles

of self-presentation that positively influence authority figures’ perceptions of them (Murry, Berkel, Brody, Miller, & Chen, 2009). However, there is little research on how Black adolescents understand their parents’ efforts to encourage particular styles of self-presentation. Do adolescents view these parental efforts as intrusions, as suggested by social domain research? Or do they justify and legitimize these parental efforts, understanding them to be motivated by sincere concerns for their safety and well-being?

In sum, middle-class adolescents often regard parental control over the personal domain as an unreasonable encroachment upon their personal autonomy (Smetana, 2002; Smetana et al., 2004). Yet, although parents in disadvantaged neighborhoods often maintain strict control over their children’s personal choices (Furstenberg et al., 1999), we know little about how adolescents from nondominant groups make sense of their parents’ practices. Further, previous research suggests that when adolescents believe their parents’ rules are rooted in genuine care for their physical and emotional well-being and are appropriately attuned to threats, they are likely to legitimize them (Schalet, 2011). Nonetheless, we still lack a comprehensive model to explain how adolescent interpretations of parents’ control over the personal domain could be contextually embedded. One reason might be methodological: a more thorough examination of adolescent interpretations of parents’ rules requires attention to how adolescents themselves perceive threats in the environment.

### THE CURRENT STUDY

Two related research questions guide the present analysis:

- 1 How do Black adolescents in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods understand and explain their parents’ expectations and rules—especially those related to the personal domain?
- 2 Do Black adolescents’ understanding of the contextual demands facing them, such as the need to cope with threats posed by disadvantaged neighborhoods and racism in the dominant society, relate to their understanding of their parents’ expectations and rules? If so, how?

## METHODS

*Participants*

Observational and interview data came from a larger qualitative study of the schooling, home, and neighborhood experiences of 64 Black adolescents (31 girls and 33 boys) living in poor and working-class neighborhoods in a large northeastern city in the United States. The adolescents were in 8th to 10th grade, and ranged in age from 13 to 17 years, with a mean age of 14.6 years.

Many of the participants lived in triple-decker houses typical of working-class homes in residential parts of the city. Some lived in more crowded or dangerous apartment complexes. All were from neighborhoods where Whites are a minority, and Blacks are the majority. The areas they lived in had median household incomes ranging from \$27,000 to \$47,000, with an average median household income of \$37,452. The average percentage of children living in poverty in participants' neighborhoods was 29% (U.S. Census, 2004). Many of the participants' mothers worked long hours in relatively low-wage work: nursing or low-level hospital jobs, customer service, social work, or retail.

Twenty-six (41% of the sample) participants reported living with two married parents who were their birth parents, 19 (30%) reported living with their mothers and no other adult, and 5 (8%) lived in blended families. Fourteen (22%) lived in families that fit none of these definitions; for example, they lived with a mother and another adult, such as an aunt, uncle, social aunt, or grandparent, who was not joined to their mother through marriage, romantic cohabitation, or civil partnership. To put these figures in perspective, according to the 2009 U.S. Census report (Kreider & Ellis, 2011), 37% of Black children in the United States lived with two parents.

Ten (16%) participants lived in multigenerational households, with a parent (or parents) and a great-uncle, great-aunt, grandmother, or grandfather; this figure includes participants in all of the family types previously mentioned. The majority of participants ( $n = 53$ , or 83%) lived in households with siblings, step-siblings, cousins, nieces, nephews, or foster siblings. Eleven of the 64 (17%) participants lived in households where other children under the age of 18 were not present.

*Data Collection*

*Recruitment.* To recruit participants, I contacted Black families who had placed their child's name on a list to be considered for enrollment in Diversify, an urban-to-suburban bussing program. (Identifying information, including the program name and other details, has been changed to maintain participant confidentiality.) The Diversify database offered an opportunity to sample adolescents who lived in neighborhoods that had been consistently identified as having concentrations of households at or below poverty level. To place a child on the waiting list for Diversify, parents or guardians had to submit an application form to the main Diversify office in person. Thirty-eight participants were bussed to suburban schools through Diversify; 26 had been waitlisted. Of the 26 waitlisted students, seven were attending a boarding school or school that used selective exams for admittance and 19 were attending urban charter and public schools.

I only interviewed adolescents who returned a signed parental consent form to me and who agreed (in writing and speech) to proceed with the interview after meeting with me and hearing what the study was about and how I would protect their confidentiality. I gave participants a \$10 gift card at the end of the interview.

*In-depth interviews.* Each interview lasted between 1 and 3 hours; interviews were conducted between October 2007 and November 2008. I asked the students open- and closed-ended questions about their daily experiences at school and at home. I adapted all interview questions to reflect participants' living arrangements and family situations. For instance, I asked some adolescents about their parents' (mothers' and fathers') expectations and rules and others about their mothers' practices.

I asked adolescents what rules, if any, their parents had about whom they could spend time with, where they could spend time unaccompanied by an adult, and when (if at all) they had to be home for the evening. Throughout the interview, I also asked participants open-ended questions about what their parents thought or felt about their appearance and personal style, risky behavior, and friendship choices. My interviews were in-depth and sought to elicit participants' interpretations of their experiences and world views. I have edited the quotations presented in

the findings section to make them more readable and compact, deleting filler phrases and words such as “like” and “you know.”

As I discovered, and consistent with previous research (e.g., Best, 2006), many of parents’ controlling practices did not take the form of clear-cut rules. Thus, in examining teens’ experiences with parental regulation, I analyzed teens’ reports not only of the rules their parents established for or with them, but also accounts of how parents wanted them to behave. I refer to the latter category of controlling practices as “expectations.”

*Observations.* Roughly one third of the interviews were conducted in participants’ homes. For those interviews, I wrote down detailed observations about the physical home environment and neighborhood conditions. These observations benefited the interviews, enabling me to ask questions that were sensitive to participants’ social context.

*Key points about my social location.* My social location as a White woman surely influenced what participants told me and what I noticed. Nonetheless, I do not believe that my background characteristics invalidate the data I gathered. Perhaps my background caused me to misconstrue (or simply miss) the intended meaning of some of my participants’ words or actions. However, my position as an outsider was often helpful. I frequently asked participants to explain the meanings of events to me. Responses to these questions were often the most vivid and in-depth. Participants enjoyed teaching me about their lives. Thus, the ways that my own perceived or real status influenced the data I gathered does not seem to fall into any easy pattern (see Young, 2004, for similar points about outsider interviewing).

#### *Data Analysis*

I used a modified version of grounded theory, one that emphasizes the utility of moving between inductive and deductive modes of analysis (Fine, 2004). I entered this research project with an interest in how urban Black adolescents would experience parental regulation of peers and whereabouts. These categories functioned as “sensitizing concepts” that “suggested directions along which to look” (Blumer, 1954, p. 7), and helped to narrow my focus as I developed

a coding scheme, wrote profiles of participants, and focused my analytic memos.

In the first stages of coding, I labeled elements of data that spoke to participants’ experiences of parental regulation. With a research assistant, I then wrote memos on each participant, writing in narrative form everything the participants reported about their parents’ expectations and rules and how these fit into their community, neighborhood, and family contexts.

In the second stage of data analysis and writing, I first worked with the analytic memos that had emerged from my earlier rounds of coding and with the memos I had written on each participant. After noticing the frequency with which participants described their parents’ rules as helping them achieve goals and stay safe, I developed secondary, or focused, codes that referred to legitimizing or rejecting parents’ expectations and rules. Then, I conducted theme or pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Overall, the use of inductive techniques of data analysis helped me develop a theory about the underlying logic that guided adolescents’ perceptions of their parents’ rules and practices, alerting me to processes that previous literature had not systematically described.

## RESULTS

### *Legitimizing Parents’ Expectations and Rules*

The adolescents in my sample conveyed a desire to make sense of parents’ expectations and rules. In so doing, 58 of the 64 (91%) participants consistently interpreted their parents’ expectations and rules as rooted in parents’ genuine concern for their safety, well-being, and future success. In other words, they—in marked contrast to many suburban and middle-class adolescents (Best, 2006; Schalet, 2011; Wilkins, 2008)—believed their parents’ expectations and rules were not just the result of their parents’ efforts to uphold an image of themselves as good parents or of their parents’ potential tendency to overestimate risk.

Based on adolescents’ descriptions of family life, there appeared to be a connection between legitimizing parents’ expectations and rules and believing that compliance was necessary for achieving upward mobility. Most (48 of 64, or 75%) participants reported a fierce desire to “make it” in mainstream society. Further, the majority of participants depicted their parents’

expectations and rules as aimed at helping them achieve this ideal.

Fifteen-year-old Sabrina gave an account of family life that exemplified these themes. Emphasizing that her parents had deliberately sheltered her from her neighborhood, Sabrina explained that she barely knew her neighbors and had never witnessed any of the violence that her area was known for. Sabrina explicitly connected her parents' expectations and rules to their reverence for education and hopes for her future upward socioeconomic mobility:

Usually when 'South Gate' is said, it's associated with dangerous gangs and things, but to be quite honest, I've never heard a gunshot or seen a gun in my life. I think it was very deliberate on my parents' part ... I just wasn't allowed ... I guess maybe that's part of the reason why I've never seen first-hand things that are associated with South Gate, because I wasn't allowed to go roaming. My parents are more like, "read a book" type people. [Laughing]. I remember there was this one conversation, when I was a lot younger. My parents were having it, and they said something to the effect like, "I did better than my parents, and I want my kids to do better than me." I think that they would hope that, like [pause] living will get easier for us. ... And they want me to be happy. So, they feel like a good job, good education will help that.

Sabrina implicitly contrasted her parents, whom she called "read a book" types, to other parents, who allow their children to "go roaming." She also affirmed that her parents' expectations and rules were appropriately calibrated to their goals (raising children who would go on to become economically secure and professionally fulfilled adults).

Fourteen-year-old Dalton also legitimized his parents' expectations and rules as important to his future success. I met Dalton at his third-story walk-up apartment, which overlooked a busy highway. When I rang the doorbell, Dalton met me at the door, took my bags, and walked me through a dingy stairway (peeling wallpaper, beige carpet turning brown in places) to his apartment. The apartment was stuffed with furniture and clutter; the radiators were sputtering steam on a winter day. Dalton reported that he "had a library" in his bedroom (which I did not see), and that he liked to read "law books, like books by Thurgood Marshall," his hero (and the first Black Supreme Court Justice). If Dalton were to achieve his goals for becoming

a constitutional lawyer, he would clearly surpass his family's current economic situation, at least judging by where his family's apartment was located and its worn condition. (Dalton told me that his father was a sales manager for Staples and that his stepmother was an accountant for the billing department of a local hospital.)

Dalton, like other participants, expressed hopefulness about the future and emphasized that he felt like he was "on the right path" to meeting his goals. Importantly, Dalton emphasized that part of the reason why he was poised to do well was that his father's expectations and rules kept him from doing "whatever," or engaging in counterproductive activities. He explained,

Not to be mean to my cousins, but I'm probably the most well behaved out of the ... I guess you could say that I have a future for myself, because most of my cousins, blah, whatever [says that in a way that indicates that their futures are "blah"], especially like on my mom's side. ... They follow after their mothers ... like my cousin Dajon [pseudonym], who is a fantastic basketball player, he stole his mother's car and drove around. He was 15 at the time. He didn't have a license or anything. I know that I'm different, because my dad has strong rules. He's kind of strict on things. So, I kind of had that stability in my life, where he always set me to do what I wanted to do. Not just let me do whatever. He made me set goals for myself.

When I asked Dalton where he thought he would be in 5 years, he stressed that he wanted to be in college, repeating that he expected to "do better" in life than the people around him, including his own relatives: "Be in college ... because I want to make myself known, I guess you could say. I want a better future for myself than as I see other people."

In sum, Dalton emphasized that his father's expectations and rules were a sign of his investment in Dalton's future. Dalton also believed that his cousin's parents had not established sufficient control over their children, and that as a result, his cousins were not likely to develop into the kinds of people who might have a "good future." Thus, in explaining how he was different from his cousins, Dalton offered additional evidence that he legitimized his father's expectations and rules on the grounds that it would help him achieve upward mobility.

Other participants also legitimized their parents' expectations and rules as helping them achieve upward mobility and supporting them in their efforts to be different from (and superior to) their peers in the neighborhood. For Dalton, Sabrina, and other participants, a moral line separates parents who control their children, encouraging their upward mobility, from parents who allow their children to flounder. In this way, symbolic boundary-marking became an integral part of the process of legitimizing parents' expectations and rules.

Participants routinely made negative remarks about parents whom they viewed as less vigilant than their own. For instance, Bernice, 14, attributed her identity as a "respectable" person who stays out of "trouble" to her mother's strict rules, high expectations, and constant monitoring of her whereabouts. Bernice stated that parents who do not monitor their children are negligent, prophesying that their children will develop "ghetto" identities and engage in deviant behavior. As Bernice explained,

Like, of course they can control their actions, like I have friends ... who have friends who ... live down the street that have been to jail, have been to rob people, and been involved with gangs and violence and drugs. They can choose what they want to do, but being ghetto, I guess that has an impact on what you do. Like they make different choices than us (my friends and me) ...

*[Interviewer: And why do you think that is?]*

Well I think the majority, like a lot of Black and Hispanic families have single parents, or parents that have to work all the time and don't focus on their children. They try to, or they try their best, or some just don't care. Like my parents are on me 24/7. If I don't call, if I'm 15 minutes late, they will call me 20 times.

Engaging in boundary-marking against other racial-ethnic minority families, Bernice construed other people's parents as either "trying their best" but still falling short as authority figures or else as indifferent to their children's well-being. In Bernice's view, peers with less strict and caring parents would not have the same kinds of morally worthy identities and make the same kinds of good choices, as she and her friends do.

Byron, 14, also drew symbolic boundaries against families who place few restrictions on their children's personal choices. He, like many participants, reported that, before being allowed

to spend time with a friend, he was required to introduce the friend, and the friends' parents, to his parents. Byron justified his parents' rules about friendships as essential to helping him avoid getting in trouble with legal authorities:

Like if one of my friends calls, and asks if I can come over, if they don't know the parents that well, then they won't let me go. Because there's nowadays, they [other kids' parents] aren't as strict as my parents. And they aren't really going to let me go, because some kids do stupid stuff, and they don't want me getting in trouble. ... Like my cousin, he got sent to juvie. [juvenile detention center]

*[Interviewer: So like, your parents have to know their parents?]*

Yeah. They have to know the way their attitude is. ... Like, if she [the other kids' mom] has attitudes like "I don't care" and stuff, then they [my parents] would know that you aren't really strict.

Byron depicted his peers as falling to harm (going to "juvie") because their parents were not as strict as his own. In so doing, Byron signaled a vision of himself (and his family) as the kinds of "decent" people who stand in symbolic opposition to the types of "street" people who maintain, as he described them, "I don't care" attitudes.

In sum, participants tended to legitimize their parents' expectations and rules, even over the personal domain of their friendships and activities. In part, this was because adolescents connected their parents' practices of family management to their own future success as economically secure adults. Drawing symbolic boundaries between "good" and "bad" families, participants also claimed that families in which parents fail to establish high expectations and strict rules are inferior to families, like their own, in which children are highly regulated.

To offer additional explanation for why participants legitimized their parents' expectations and rules, I analyzed whether participants shared their parents' perceptions of risk, and how, if at all, this might influence adolescents' interpretations of parents' family management. Previous research has suggested that, when adolescents believe their parents overestimate threats, they will interpret parents' expectations and rules as unwarranted and excessive (Schalet, 2011).

Participants generally described their parents' expectations and rules as genuinely responsive to the risks posed by the neighborhood or by peers who had gotten involved in neighborhood

ills—like carrying drugs or getting tangled up in gangs. As Selena, 16, said in a quiet voice, when I asked her why she thought her parents always wanted to know where she was, “Of course, they love me; they want me to be safe.”

Nicholas, 14, similarly legitimized his parents’ expectations and rules as helping him to avoid dangers posed by the neighborhood, such as being violently attacked for being on the wrong turf. Nicholas described his mother as “cool” and “alright” (a compliment), emphasizing that she was “just right” in her strictness. Nicholas felt that his mother’s ways of monitoring him were appropriate, given the neighborhood risks. As he explained: “There’s other people that ... if you’re not from here, if you’re not from the same place as they are from, it’s a problem. Like, [if you’re not from] the same street. ... So, she has to know where I am. ... So she like calls or texts.”

Derek, 15, also reported that his parents wanted him to be safe. He explained that shootings were common in his neighborhood and portrayed his mother as reasonably wanting him to avoid particular areas. He reported,

She don’t want me behind that school [pointing in the direction of the elementary school on the corner.] The school that’s over there. Like, when it starts getting dark out, ’cause there’s been a lot of shootings over there. And like, I don’t go over there anymore really, so. ... And nowadays, people do kill people over stupid things, like, “Oh you took my girl” and stuff like that, you know. It really does happen.

Adolescents in other contexts might contest parental monitoring as overprotective. But nowhere in the quote by Derek is there any hint of disagreement with his mother’s basic requirement that he should avoid certain places. Indeed, Derek began by noting that his mother does not want him behind the local elementary school, an area known for being the site of several murders. Then he reported that he, himself, “don’t go over there anymore, really.” Derek’s later phrasing makes it sound as though he independently decided that spending time behind the school is dangerous. However, when analyzed in its entirety, Derek’s interview suggests that consensus with parents about risks promotes adolescents’ legitimization of parents’ expectations and rules.

Sometimes, adolescents’ accounts suggested their attitudes had changed over time, with

adolescents gradually coming to share their parents’ views about what is dangerous and what is not. For example, 16-year-old Marshella reported that when she was younger, her parents often spoke to her about her friendship choices because she had been “immature,” but that as she grew older, she had come to agree with them about the risks posed by deviant peers.

I know the difference between certain people that will get me in trouble; I haven’t always known that. I was immature at one point in time, but as of now, I basically know, so they don’t have to worry about anything now. ... I avoid all different types, like people that seem too fast for my pace. Like, people that are kind of ruthless or too rebellious. You know, some people, they’re always down to do something crazy, but not in a wholesome kind of “let’s just break all the rules” way, but more in a ruthless way, like “let’s get in some trouble” way—like “Let’s go to a party and get trashed” or start a fight!

At the time of the interview, Marshella felt that her parents no longer needed to tell her whom to avoid because she agreed with their assessments about how deviant peers could get her into trouble.

There were no clearly patterned differences between the Diversify and the waitlisted students’ interpretations of the risks facing them or of their parents’ expectations and rules. This makes sense: Both groups of students lived in the same neighborhoods, and parental regulation is largely a local phenomenon, informed by parents’ perceptions of the dangers associated with the local neighborhood (Harding, 2009).

#### *Expectations and Rules That Adolescents Opposed*

Six participants claimed that they selectively disobeyed their parents’ rules, complying with some requests and ignoring others. Consistent with the goals of grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2006), I used their accounts to analyze the underlying logic that guided their interpretations of family management. Overall, these participants believed their parents had the right to make rules to keep them safe but felt that some of their parents’ rules were excessively cautious.

Courtney, 15, described her mother as “overprotective.” As Courtney explained, her father, a policeman, is more reasonable in his



assessments of risk, so she follows his precepts rather than her mother's. Thus, Courtney believed that parents have the right to make rules that will keep their children safe. The difference in how Courtney reacted to her father's and mother's rules was simply a matter of Courtney's perception that her father's rules will truly keep her safe, whereas her mother's rules are irrelevant to safety. Courtney elaborated:

My mom is really protective and she talks a lot. But my dad, he lets me go a lot of places. He doesn't like me walking to the park, because that's a gang-violent place, and he doesn't even want me to be anywhere around it. But, like, going to 7-Eleven—the way he sees it, there's witnesses. He thinks like a cop, so like if you get hurt, technically someone's going to see it. So like [against my mother's rules], I have walked home from Luton by myself, and I walk with my friend Lorenzo sometimes.

Courtney followed her father's rule that she not go to the park because she agreed with him that the park was dangerous. However, she did not follow her mother's rule that she not be allowed to walk alone in the neighborhood because she disagreed with her mother that this was risky.

After interviewing Courtney in her home, Courtney's mother, like many of the parents in my sample, objected to my walking to the bus station alone. She insisted that I allow her to drive me to a train station. As Courtney's mother drove, we talked. During our conversation, the divergence between how she and her daughter viewed their neighborhood appeared in stark form. Whereas Courtney described her area as "safe enough" for walking, her mother portrayed it as terrifyingly dangerous. Courtney's mother complained that her daughter "sees no problem" with the neighborhood and does not appreciate how dangerous it is:

She has to be supervised at all times. . . . She sees no problem, but we (her father and I) have a serious problem. There's gang violence, and people have been shot by mistaken identity. One day, I came home from work early and I found that she had walked to the drugstore on the corner by herself, and I went ballistic. I was terrified. She was like, "Mom, you know it's right there! I live here—why can't I walk?" But my reality is, you can't. I mean, there's been shootings, so for Courtney to even be escorted to the end of the street and walk the rest of the way alone, that's major trauma for me.

Thus, Courtney complained that her mother overestimated risks, whereas her mother felt that Courtney did not have sound judgment and was prone to put herself in harm's way. Given that Courtney and her mother did not share each other's assessments of risk, it is unsurprising that Courtney defied her mother's rules about walking unaccompanied in the neighborhood.

Yet Courtney legitimized other parental rules and precepts. Not only did she follow her father's rules about not going to the park, but she also agreed that her mother was right to try to meet the parents of all her friends and keep her indoors after dark. Courtney even noted that when she has children, she will enforce many of the same rules as her mother. Describing herself as a future mother, Courtney explained how she would monitor her children's whereabouts and friendships: "I mean, like you don't want your kids going on the street like at night-time, like you do want them to tell you where they're going and everything. And who they're with. And I would like to meet the parent (of my kids' friends). But doing simple things like walking down the street—I think if you have two legs, it's great exercise. It's good." Courtney clearly believed that parents have the right and the obligation to restrict their children's freedom to keep them safe. She merely believes, in contrast to her mother, that walking around near her home is safe and therefore should be allowed.

Like Courtney, Sojourner, 14, agreed that her parents have the right to make rules to keep her safe but disagreed with her parents about which rules accomplish this goal. For instance, Sojourner accepted her 5:00 p.m. curfew because she saw this restriction as attuned to neighborhood risks. However, Sojourner opposed her parents' expectation that she avoid what she called "bad influence friends." In her view, such people did not pose risks to her well-being. Sojourner believed that she could adroitly manage her friendships; she felt that she was able to associate with deviant peers without jeopardizing her future. Sojourner explained,

There's a lot of people they don't want me to hang out with, but I end up hanging out with them anyway, because it's unavoidable.

*[Interviewer: Why would they want you to avoid them?]*

Because, they don't want them to influence me, and they don't want me to get in trouble for something that I wasn't doing. But, like—pretty much everyone in Luton—they're either doing one

of the things that my parents don't want me to be doing, or they're hanging out with those people. I mean, there's a few kids (who don't do that stuff), and I am friends with them, but if I did what they (my parents) want, I would have, like, three friends.

As Sojourner explained, she was not in danger of succumbing to negative peer influences. Stating that she would never fall to the level of her deviant friends and associates, whom she believes will not achieve upward mobility, Sojourner stated,

People can do what they can to try to get me—pull me down to their level—and it's not gonna happen.

[Interviewer: And why would someone do that?]

Like if they see that someone is above them, and acting better than them, then they will try to drag them down to their level. But I don't care ... Like, they have no future—they have nothing, and they're foolish. I just laugh at them.

Thus, Sojourner's logic was similar to Courtney's: She chose to follow only those rules that she believed were truly protective. Sojourner also challenged her parents' messages about avoiding "bad influence people" because there were few adolescents she knew who met her parents' high standards. She felt her parents were trying to prevent her from experiencing trivial and inescapable risks.

In short, I found variation in the nature of the rules that adolescents opposed. Adolescents accepted expectations and rules that they believed promoted their upward mobility and protected them from avoidable harm. They opposed expectations and rules that they saw as irrelevant to their safety or represented parental attempts to prevent them from experiencing risks that were unavoidable. I also found variation in the expectations and rules that adolescent boys and girls experienced, the topic I turn to next.

### *Gendered Self-Presentation*

*Feminine self-presentation.* In addition to legitimizing parents' expectations and rules as helping them reach shared goals for upward mobility, 72% of the girls also legitimized parents' rules as helping them maintain a style of self-presentation that signaled a kind of gendered respectability (Jones, 2010). This respectability had to do with avoiding looking

sexually provocative, showing a "ladylike" deference to adults, avoiding overt domination of other women or men, and showing emotional restraint in public.

Rebecca, 14, reported that her mother encouraged behaviors that signal sexual restraint, describing her mother as concerned with how she would "carry herself." Rebecca legitimized her mother's expectations, noting that they were appropriately attuned to the reputational risks facing teenage girls. She explained,

My mom is very big on respect, and she says all the time that if I don't respect myself, how do you expect other people to respect you? So if I respect myself and I treat, if I like carry myself the way I want to be portrayed as a person (takes a deep breath). ... Like if you run around, all over boys and this and that, and like if they call you a bad name for it, okay well—you dug your own grave. But if you carry yourself in a respectable fashion and people like see "Oh you know, Rebecca is a nice girl, but we don't really know her all that well, but she's nice," that's fine, I'm cool with that.

Brianna, 14, described her father's attempts to regulate not only her sexual self-presentation but also her emotional displays:

Like my dad, okay, he says like, present myself like approachable, and as a young lady, and like not wear certain clothes. ... Like my skirts too short, or my shorts too tight, or like my shirt cut too low.

[Interviewer: And when he says um, be approachable, what do you mean?]

I am sometimes, like a moody person, so sometimes I just don't want to talk to people, and I make that obvious.

Critically, Brianna acknowledged that her father was "right" in his attitudes about what constitutes proper feminine behavior, saying it is not good to be viewed as "rude."

Brianna also legitimized her father's messages about the need to conform to idealized notions of White femininity (being "approachable" and "nice" are classic tropes of White, middle-class womanhood; Childs, 2005). Showing support for her father's gendered expectations, Brianna reported that she hopes to get married, have sex (only after marriage), and then have children. As she explained, "I see people all the time, suffering with, like, 10 kids by their selves, without a wedding ring on. And they usually made a stupid decision and got knocked up. That's a really bad look!" Thus, the

girls in my sample agreed with their parents that it was desirable to embody a kind of gendered respectability that confers honor and status.

Further, female participants believed that their parents' expectations for their feminine self-presentations reflected their parents' accurate assessments of risk. They could be right: Adolescent girls whose expressions of sexuality are overt or who fail to practice conventional modes of emotional restraint are often sanctioned and penalized by teachers, peers, and others whose evaluations are important to them (Morris, 2007).

Girls' statements also evoke the perils of sexual exploitation and of being viewed through a predatory and sexualized lens. Rebecca, Brianna, and other female participants blamed girls who had been sexually victimized, had gotten pregnant, or had earned a reputation for "running around." They said that such girls "dug their own graves" and that getting pregnant or having a "slutty" reputation gave off a "bad look." These findings are consistent with past research. Girls in disadvantaged urban communities face heightened risks of sexual violence and assault and often suffer reputational damage when they are victims (Cobbina et al., 2008; Jones, 2010; Miller, 2008). Thus, the participants' statements provided additional evidence that adolescents bring an understanding of risk to bear on their understandings of their parents' expectations and rules.

*Masculine self-presentation.* For Black males, gendered risks include being seen as dangerous and punished for this (Cobbina et al., 2008). Not surprisingly, boys often spoke about feeling misrecognized as violent gang members, drug dealers, or school troublemakers by formal authorities, such as police officers and school safety guards. Nonetheless, male participants did not report that their parents used their authority to help them avoid these kinds of gendered and raced misrepresentations. Nor did boys report that their clothing styles had been influenced by their parents. Why would girls report that parents sought to help them avoid gendered risks but not boys?

Perhaps cultural belief systems about who is responsible for various unfortunate events may explain the difference in boys' and girls' reports. Culturally, girls and women are charged with responsibility for men's sexuality. Often, girls are deemed accountable for being the

recipients of sexual harassment and violence (Miller, 2008). Hoping to help their daughters avoid sexual victimization and avoid being blamed for such victimization, parents of daughters may seek to regulate their feminine self-presentations. Further, daughters who live in communities that pose heightened risks of sexual exploitation may notice and justify this kind of regulation as appropriately responsive to the risk context.

The more likely risk for Black boys is police harassment. However, residents in disadvantaged neighborhoods do not blame boys for being the victims of police harassment. Indeed, many feel that there is little that Black men can do to avoid negative contact with the police (Gau & Brunson, 2009). Although scholars find that parents of Black boys seek to control their appearance and comportment to help them avoid negative attention from police and deviant peers (e.g., Ferguson, 2000), boys themselves may not be as inclined to notice or report these efforts as girls. Society-wide beliefs about who is responsible for different unwelcome events could explain the gender difference in reporting.

## DISCUSSION

Social domain research shows that middle-class adolescents regard parental authority over the personal domain as excessive (Smetana & Daddis, 2002). Meanwhile, many parents in disadvantaged neighborhoods strive to maintain strict control over the personal domain of their children's lives, hoping this will protect their children from risk (Burton & Jarrett, 2000; Ferguson, 2000; Furstenberg et al., 1999; Jarrett, 1997). Yet, to date, we have more knowledge about how parents in disadvantaged communities explain their own parenting practices (e.g., Elliott & Aseltine, 2013; Hamer, 2005; Kaplan, 1997) than about how their children perceive these practices.

This study fills gaps in knowledge about how adolescents make sense of the parenting practices within their families. The results suggest that Black adolescents living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods legitimize parental expectations and rules that they believe could help them prevent avoidable risk and achieve upward mobility, even those that intrude on the personal domain. Drawing on these findings, I developed a grounded concept (Glaser & Strauss, 1967;

LaRossa, 2005; Roy, 2012) of *legitimizing parents' expectations and rules* as occurring when adolescents believe that (1) parents' expectations and rules are designed to protect them from avoidable risk and (2) following parents' wishes matters for achieving goals. My findings have several implications. I conclude by expanding on each implication, describing data limitations, and offering suggestions for future research.

#### *Agreeing With Parents About Risk*

The adolescents in this study believed that parents have the legitimate authority, and even the obligation, to protect their children from risk by imposing limits on their freedom. When adolescents and parents agreed with one another about the environment and the risks it poses, adolescents found their parents' expectations, rules, and monitoring reasonable. When parents instituted controls that adolescents felt reflected an overestimation of threat and were therefore irrelevant to their safety, adolescents challenged and defied them. Thus, agreeing with parents about the risks present in the environment appeared to drive participants' legitimization of parents' expectations and rules.

For the adolescents in my sample, risks were related to their social location as Black youth in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. These risks include the potential for downward mobility or persistent poverty (Pattillo, 2013; Sharkey, 2008), being labeled “ghetto” or “street” (Jones, 2010), and threats to physical safety. Participants approved of their parents' efforts to control them in ways that they believed would promote success in the dominant society. Thus, these findings offer yet another window into how parent–child relations, like other social relations in this society, unfold within a racialized social structure that “conditions meaning” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 59).

My conceptual model also suggests a reason why, in contrast to middle-class samples, Black adolescents from disadvantaged neighborhoods legitimized rules that intruded on the personal domain. Middle-class adolescents may use the personal domain of their lives—their friendships, activities, clothing styles, and overall physical appearance—for creative self-exploration and self-expression and regard their choices as a matter of personal autonomy (Weininger & Lareau, 2009). For them, parental attempts to control the personal domain could

be interpreted as an invasion of privacy and independence. Living in a disadvantaged neighborhood amplifies racial stigma (Wacquant, 2007). Less advantaged Black adolescents may, like their middle-class counterparts, regard the personal domain as important to self-exploration and expression. Yet, they may also be aware that self-exploration and expression can be risky in light of pervasive, society-wide negative beliefs about Blacks (Cobbina et al., 2008; Ferguson, 2000). Differences in the riskiness of self-expression for middle-class and other Black adolescents could explain why one group tends to oppose parental control over the personal domain whereas the other accepts it.

#### *Limitations*

The data for this study are limited in several ways. First, the sample is comprised of Black adolescents whose parents sought to enroll them in an urban-to-suburban racial integration program. Future research could explore the extent to which the model I have developed reflects a generic process and applies to other settings and populations. For example, future research could examine and compare how a group of Black adolescents from the same neighborhoods, but whose parents did not sign them up for Diversify—or who have various problems and are the “others” that my study participants disparaged—perceive their parents' expectations and rules. Second, the Black adolescents in my sample all lived in relatively disadvantaged neighborhoods. This sample limitation makes it impossible to disentangle how living in a disadvantaged neighborhood, on the one hand, and being Black in a racialized society, on the other, could influence adolescents' legitimation of parental controls over the personal domain. Third, my interviews focused on adolescents, not parents. Thus, I do not know the extent to which adolescents' perceptions of their parents' family management practices match those of their parents.

#### *Future Research*

In this study, Black adolescents living in poor and working-class neighborhoods tended to legitimize parental oversight of the personal domain because they saw it as appropriately protective. If the neighborhood contexts and resources of these families were suddenly

changed into those of more privileged Black families, would these adolescents no longer legitimize parental regulation of the personal domain? Or are there race-specific reasons why Black adolescents might legitimize parental control over the personal domain that are somewhat independent of neighborhood risk contexts? Future research could trace how risky neighborhood contexts and race-specific threats to adolescent well-being could influence children's perceptions of parents' expectations and rules. For instance, researchers could examine how White adolescents living in disadvantaged neighborhoods or Black adolescents living in upper-middle class suburban enclaves understand their parents' rules and expectations.

Building on gender theory, future research could explore how ways of assigning responsibility for various misfortunate events could affect adolescents' perceptions of parental control. For instance, researchers could examine whether girls in contexts where women are less likely to be blamed for being the victims of sexual exploitation are equally likely to legitimize parents' regulation of their physical appearance.

Finally, in Annette Lareau's (2003) *Unequal Childhoods*, younger poor and working-class children (ages nine and 10) were taught to show respect and deference to adults in positions of authority, including their parents. In my study, adolescents from disadvantaged neighborhoods described themselves as having a mostly respectful attitude toward their parents. Future research could examine whether there is a longitudinal continuity in children's respectfulness toward parents from middle childhood to adolescence and how social class and race inflect these continuities. Future research could also trace the long-term implications of legitimization of parental controls for children from different race/class groups.

This study opens an inquiry into how the social realities of life in a racialized society relate to children's interpretations of parental controls. In so doing, it responds to calls for more research that foreground the child's experiences and interpretations on family life (Corsaro, 2005; James et al., 1998; Parkin & Kuczynski, 2012; Stattin & Kerr, 2000; Tokić & Pećnik, 2011). Further research linking broad structures of racial and gender inequality to children's interpretations of parents' rules would be productive. In the meantime, this research uses rich qualitative data to identify the underlying logic

that guided adolescent participants' understandings of family management.

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