

crooked room

STORIES FROM NEW ORLEANS

INSTITUTE OF WOMEN AND ETHNIC STUDIES

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lost my name
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in public places
and bloom despite
hate in the Earth
for once i want
to cry soft tears
without retaliation
and stand in
in my Blackness
without explanation

Kelly Harris-DeBerry

IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE HUMAN TRAGEDY HURRICANE KATRINA (2005),
WROUGHT UPON PREVIOUSLY DISENFRANCHISED AND OPPRESSED
COMMUNITIES OF COLOR IN NEW ORLEANS, THE INSTITUTE OF WOMEN AND
ETHNIC STUDIES (IWES) ADOPTED THE ANCIENT PRACTICE OF WISDOM
CIRCLES (REFER TO APPENDIX A). THESE CIRCLES WERE UTILIZED TO CREATE
SAFE SPACES IN WHICH COMMUNITY MEMBERS COULD COME TOGETHER
TO SUPPORT EACH OTHER, PROBLEM-SOLVE, RECOVER AND HEAL WOUNDS.
WISDOM CIRCLES HAVE BEEN UTILIZED OVER THE AGES BY TRIBAL AND
INDIGENOUS PEOPLES TO HARVEST COMMUNAL WISDOM AS TO HOW TO
SURVIVE, HOPE AND DREAM.

In 2012, as part of IWES' ongoing community-based human recovery efforts, Wisdom Circles were conducted with fifty-five African American women of varying socioeconomic status and age. The circles explored how stereotypes, shame, and racism shape their current sense of self-efficacy and agency, both of which have been cited by Benight and Bandura¹ as key factors in being able to manage one's personal functioning and the myriad of demands occasioned by traumatic events. Three key questions were asked of the women:²

- Can you recall a time in your life when you felt misrecognized and invisible in society as an African American woman?
- Can you recall experiencing encounters with stereotypes related to African American women? If so, how have encounters with racial and gender stereotypes impacted your experiences as African American women?
- Have you seen evidence in your family, your community, and/or romantic relationships of chronic shaming/rejection based on skin color and/or hair texture?

These probes were derived from *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (Harris-Perry, 2011), in which Dr. Melissa Harris-Perry hypothesizes that Black women, in their confrontation with race and gender stereotypes, are standing in a "crooked room" and have to navigate which way is up.

She anchors this hypothesis in cognitive psychology research on field dependence, which explores the influence of environmental and visual cues on one's perception of self in relationship to spatial reality (H.A. Witkin et al., 1977).

The constant and frequent racial and gender stereotypes encountered by Black women make up their *crooked room*. The *crooked room* impacts some Black women's self-perception, oftentimes represented by their choice to adopt the behaviors associated with those stereotypes in order to "fit" within the *crooked room*. On the other hand, some Black women work to remain "upright" in the *crooked room* by resisting these racial and gender stereotypes. Dr. Harris-Perry contends that misrecognition, shame, stress, and internalized oppression are individualized experiences with a common denominator: the *crooked room*.

¹Benight C, Bandura A. Social Cognitive theory of posttraumatic recovery: the role of perceived self-efficacy. *Behavior Research and Therapy*.42 (2004) 1129-1148

²Please refer to Appendix B for a description of the Wisdom Circle Cohorts

Dr. Harris-Perry (2011) argues that African American women’s citizenship is shaped by their attempts to navigate a room made crooked by stereotypes that have significant psychic consequences. The prevailing stereotypes of Black women include:

Mammy, an asexual, loyal and nurturing woman;

Sapphire, a matriarchal and emasculating woman, also known as the Strong Black Woman; and

Jezebel, an oversexed and over sexualized woman.

It seems that nonconformity and conformity to these stereotypes both result in social rejection for Black women, generating feelings of shame that have both physiologic and psychological effects (Harris-Perry, 2011). For example, skin color and hair texture can evoke a sense of shame that affects African American women’s feelings of attractiveness, familial relationships, and romantic partnerships, thwarting their self worth and self-esteem.

So, how do Black women confront the *crooked room* while attempting to stand straight and strong? What is upright in a post-disaster city such as New Orleans? How do women cope with racism and sexism in the “Big, Not-So-Easy?” Does the *crooked room* in New Orleans reflect the systematic crookedness of the United States? In the Wisdom Circles, many of the women were natives of New Orleans. However, there were also women who had moved from Minnesota, Washington D.C., Texas and California that call New Orleans home. Despite various origins, all of the participants shared similar *crooked room* experiences that were influenced by living as women of color in New Orleans.

These Wisdom Circles were an attempt to temporarily straighten a room for women in New Orleans to feel whole and acceptable. Dr. Harris-Perry (2011) reminds us that because of Black women’s history as chattel slaves, labor market participation as domestic workers, and roles as dependents in a punitive modern welfare state, African American women live under heightened scrutiny by the state. As members of a stigmatized group, African American women lack opportunity for accurate, affirming recognition of self and hence, true participation in the democratic process. Can Black women ever feel safe and whole?

The *crooked room* has impacted Black women’s families, communities and romantic relationships in New Orleans. How can Black women in New Orleans heal so as to confront not only the issues that have plagued us for decades, but more recently in a post-disaster context? This book provides a glance into the lived experiences of these women.

Crooked Room Stories From New Orleans is organized into six recurring themes that highlight the issues most prominent in the Wisdom Circles. Those themes include the *color complex*, *Black hair politics*, *internalized oppression*, *work place discrimination*, *battling stereotypes and invisibility*. After assigning the data to categories based on responses, titles were created to provide a guide for the reader. It should be noted that the section titles do not reflect the order of topics discussed in the Wisdom Circles.

As you read *Crooked Room Stories From New Orleans*, ask yourself how you may contribute to the crooked environment Black women live in. Do you stereotype or shame women with negative or critical commentary? How can you empower young Black girls? Do you believe there is a relationship between cultural drivers of self-esteem, self worth and black women’s ability to be resilient in the face of the myriad structural and environmental traumas that assault Black women?

It takes a village to raise a child, and it also takes a village to heal the hurt within its community. After reading the stories of New Orleans women, IWES hopes you encourage similar conversations with the mothers, wives, sisters, daughters and friends in your life.

Kelly A. Harris-DeBerry, Co-editor

Denese Shervington M.D., M.P.H., Co-editor / Wisdom Circle Facilitator

Rashida Govan Ph.D., Co-editor



*Back in the Day:
Elders Speak Out*

**“WHEN I WAS IN
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AT
VALENA C. JONES IN THE
7TH WARD, WE LINED UP
BY COLOR. I WAS ALWAYS
IN THE BACK OF THE LINE,
EVEN THOUGH MY LAST
NAME BEGAN WITH A B.”**

Fifteen African American women (ages 53-70) shared stories about growing up as Black girls in New Orleans. A core focus of their dialogue was the impact of skin color on their experiences as African American girls and women. This section provides some context through which to understand the color complex, presents testimonies from Wisdom Circle participants regarding their experiences with the color complex and offers a brief analysis of its impact on the lives of African American girls and women.

In 1960, Ruby Nell Bridges became the first Black child to attend a previously all-white elementary school. This 6-year-old girl from New Orleans helped shape American integration by her mere presence. Bridges attended William Frantz Elementary School at 3811 North Galvez Street in New Orleans. Immediately, white parents began removing their children. Teachers also refused to teach anyone while a Black child was there. Luckily, Bridges was provided with psychological support during her walk inside a crooked school.

While the nation zoomed in on little Ruby, there were countless other Black girls in New Orleans entering schools without physical and emotional protection. They were little girls with no tools to cope with the racial opposition they faced daily. The constant feeling of being overlooked and undervalued is never forgotten. In many cases, the wounds never heal.

In a city known for celebrating individuality, free-spiritedness, and hospitality, these New Orleanians recalled times in their youth when they caught more hell than Mardi Gras beads. During Carnival season, float riders traditionally toss beads to girls and women they deem the prettiest. Imagine reminiscing as an

adult about all the beads you caught as a child only to have your father reveal that he had bought beads in advance to protect you from feeling racially isolated. The woman who shared that story wondered what other slights she missed. Sisters whose physical features did not reflect the accepted standards of beauty experienced rejection and sometimes oppression as reflected in the following testimonies.

One Wisdom Circle participant recalled witnessing open discrimination against a dark-skinned schoolmate. “In elementary school at Valena C. Jones, we had a festival called May Fest. One year the student with the highest honors was a dark brown girl, but they gave it (award) to a light-skinned girl with straight hair instead. *“I remember seeing one of my teachers cry because she was so angry,”* she said. Nearly all the participants shared a childhood story of either being mistreated or seeing a peer mistreated because of her skin color. As one woman said, *“I went to school where your color determined your altitude,”* a chilling example of the reality faced by many African American women in this Wisdom Circle.

In the independent film *Chameleon Street* by Wendell B. Harris (1989), the external view of Black women is highlighted in a popular dialogue between two characters in the film. This dialogue was popularized by the hip-hop group Black Star in their 1998 hit track, *Brown Skin Lady*.

The dialogue goes as follows:

Character 1: “You got that good hair, too.”

Character 2: “You like what?”

Character 1: “I like girls with that light complexion look.”

Character 2: “You’re a moron.”

Character 1: “Man, I can’t help it.

Character 2: “What, being a moron?”

Character 1: “Yeah, that too.

Character 2: “You’re the first one out there with a dashiki talking that crap.”

Character 1: “I’m a victim!”

Character 2: “Good hair. ” (Laughs) Nigga, you so brainwashed.”

Character 1: “I’m a victim, brotha!”

Character 2: “You’re a victim?”

Character 1: “Yeah! I’m a victim of 400 years of conditioning.

Character 2: “Shut up!”

Character 1: “The man has programmed my conditioning.”

Character 2: “Um hmm.”

Character 1: “Even my conditioning has been conditioned.”

Black Star’s use of this dialogue on their album and the content of their song capture the impact of the color complex on women and men, an issue that still persists in the African American community. The color complex, the “programmed conditioning” that places value on Eurocentric physical features over features customarily found in people of African descent, is referenced extensively by women who participated in the elder Wisdom Circle. Their reflections provide a social and historical context for understanding how Black women were (and sometimes still are) treated and viewed.

According to the book, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color among African Americans* (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992), the *color complex* is defined as “a psychological fixation about color and features that leads Blacks to discriminate against each other” (p.92). Elder African American women have countless stories about experiences with the color complex within their communities. It’s a discussion that is often heated and filled with heartache. In *Blackberries and Redbones: Critical Articulations of Black Hair/Body Politics in Africana Communities*, Scholar Yaba Blay said, “In New Orleans, light skin, straight hair, and the ability to claim a Creole heritage has afforded some individuals access to the educational, occupational, social and political opportunities that their dark-skinned, kinkier-haired, non-Creole counterparts have been denied” (p. 30).

Women in the elder Wisdom Circle as well as younger participants in other Wisdom Circles highlighted the Seventh Ward as being marked by a high concentration of light complexioned people and the seeming absence of dark-skinned people. Dating back to a Louisiana Supreme Court decision (*Adele v. Beauregard*) in 1810, Creoles and other people of color (mulattos, Indians and those with one white parent) were considered free under the law. Dark-skinned people of pure African descent were not. These hand-me down social and political norms have created a caste system, a *crooked room* for Black women in New Orleans.

In the PBS series, *African American Lives*, Dr. Henry Louis Gates explores genetic diversity in the African American community. Gates reported the following data on the United States population:

- **58 percent** of African Americans have at least 12.5% European ancestry (equivalent of one great-grandparent);
- **19.6 percent** of African Americans have at least 25% European ancestry (equivalent of one grandparent);
- **1 percent** of African Americans have at least 50% European ancestry (equivalent of one parent) (Gates is one of these, he discovered); and
- **5 percent** of African Americans have at least 12.5% Native American ancestry (equivalent to one great-grandparent).

Based on this information, the color complex and its institutionalization through Creole culture seem somewhat arbitrary. Regardless, the discrimination and abuse experienced by women in this Wisdom Circle was very real and was a significant source of pain for Wisdom Circle participants. The next discussion examines their experiences.

“I am a woman of dark hue, with soft hair and big bosoms. Shame began for me in elementary school. My entire life has been shaped by color. I hear many of you talking about these experiences and laughing, but these were very painful experiences for me.”

Another Wisdom Circle participant shared, *“When I was in college at Xavier University, I was dating a man that later became my husband and the father of my children. He is a brown-skinned man. One day a nun pulled me into her office and told me that she was certain that my mother would not approve of me dating him.”*

In the essay, *Pretty Color ‘n Good Hair: Creole Women of New Orleans* and the Politics of Identity, Dr. Yaba Blay writes: “The worst Jim Crow around New Orleans was what Creoles and Blacks did to themselves.” The social expectations placed upon New Orleans women to marry lighter-skinned men to maintain fair-skinned family trees and/or Creole status was the norm for many of the participants. These social and political protocols handed down from generation to generation form social caste systems that are *crooked rooms* for Black women in New Orleans.

The color complex in New Orleans is not an issue of the past. In a 2013 NOLA.com poll, 26.81% of readers voted that the color complex was as bad as ever in New Orleans, after the Oprah Winfrey Network broadcasted the documentary, *Dark Girls*. Times-Picayune columnist Jarvis DeBerry wrote a column titled, *Light or Dark, Black Women in New Orleans Have Felt Mistreated*.

The article drew over 100 comments, many of them from women of color. DeBerry also received countless emails and calls from light and dark-skinned women in New Orleans sharing their skin-color heartaches.

“SOMETIMES, I FEEL
DISCRIMINATED AGAINST, BUT IT
DOES NOT MAKE ME ANGRY.
IT MERELY ASTONISHES ME.
HOW CAN ANY DENY
THEMSELVES THE PLEASURE OF
MY COMPANY? IT’S BEYOND ME.”

- Zora Neale Hurston

Women in the elder Wisdom Circle cited family, friends and professional success as buffers against communal and societal stereotypes. Being strong at the cost of personal and emotional sacrifice was worth it for many of these Black women because, in their minds, the cost of being vulnerable was too great. The personal histories of wisdom-circle participants were varied but the pain was shared. Many women reflecting on their childhood realized they had been trying to function in a crooked room since an early age.

Although these conversations focused on the experiences of Black women in New Orleans, the color complex is an issue experienced by women globally. Are there dark-skinned women still living with the psychological damages of their dark girlhood? Are there light-skinned women who experienced dark skin backlash? How do these feelings manifest into adult behavior and attitudes in the community and workplaces?

Recommended Reading:

Golden, M. (2004). *Don't play in the sun: One woman's journey through the color complex*. New York: Doubleday Publishing.

Russell, K., Wilson, M. & Hall & R. (1993). *The Color complex: The Politics of skin color among African Americans*. New York: Anchor Press.

Spellers, R.E. & Moffit, K.R. (Eds.). (2010). *Blackberries and redbones: Critical articulations of Black hair/body politics in African communities*. New York: Hampton Press.



*Mirror Mirror on the wall:
Black Women and Beauty*

“MY BRAIN WASN’T WORTH MUCH BECAUSE OF THE HAIR THAT GREW OUT OF IT.”

In September 2013, Tiana Parker, a 7-year-old African-American girl from Tulsa, Oklahoma, was sent home from Deborah Brown Community School because her dreadlocks violated school rules. According to school policy, Tiana’s hair was considered ‘distracting and faddish’. Tiana became the center of a social media debate about African American hair.

Imagine being removed from a classroom because of your hairstyle or its texture. Many adult women of color admit to being insecure about their hair. Now imagine that same weight on the shoulders of a 7-year-old. Several comments from Wisdom Circle participants in the 21-50 year old age group mirrored the tears of young Tiana. This chapter focuses on the experiences of those women.

Two physical features are often used to describe Black women: skin tone and hair. These markers often lead to stereotypes and social hierarchy in the African-American community. The billion-dollar hair and beauty industry provides women of color with beauty products to edit their appearances. Black women pump billions of dollars into the industry each year, an indicator that beauty ideals for Black women are deeply tied to hair.

Wisdom Circle participants of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds admitted to spending heaps of money to achieve ‘acceptable’ hair. Acceptable hair is often hair that is straight, wavy or has a loose curl pattern, and is long. In this chapter we look more closely at the role of Black women’s hair and other physical features in this social hierarchy.

One woman shared, *“Hair has always been a big issue for me. As a child, my grandmother combed my hair very meticulously. She used a ruler to part my hair. When I went natural, she told me I was not beautiful anymore. I am the exact opposite with my daughter. I want her to embrace her natural hair texture and not feel confined by society’s standards of beauty.”*

Acceptable beauty definitions and standards are often passed down from generation to generation. Hair and skin approval often depends on a generation's social and historical realities. In New Orleans and throughout the U.S., Black women often say they first became aware of different skin color or body features because they looked different than some of their family. The diversity of complexions within African American families is often the norm and can be attributed to a number of factors including institutionalized rape during slavery.

“Both of my parents are light-skinned and so is my brother. I felt insecure, as a child because I was not. I was teased for not being light-skinned like the rest of my family. I wondered why I couldn’t look like them. Outsiders would assume that I am my older sister’s daughter because she is brown-skinned like me. They would assume that my niece (my sister’s daughter) is my mom’s daughter because they both were light-skinned,” said a participant in the age 21-50 Wisdom Circle.

In one Wisdom Circle made up of women ages 20-35, some participants said they grew up feeling inferior because they were darker than the rest of their family. The brown paper bag test and other complexion acceptability tests evoked anger during this Wisdom Circle conversation. To have one's skin measured against a brown paper bag and be deemed too dark still struck a nerve for many women. Although tests like these are now frowned upon, the mentality behind such activities still exists. This environment of discrimination was widely accepted by many African Americans, especially those of greater economic means.

Passing was another theme that emerged in the conversations. Some Wisdom Circle participants admitted they had family members who ‘passed’ for white citizens in New Orleans or moved away to live as white people. Awareness of white skin advantage made the option to pass favorable for those African Americans who could do so. As was stated by a participant, *“I grew up in L.A. and there were some New Orleans families that moved there. They considered themselves to be Creole and separated themselves from African Americans. They tried to create a new race.”*

Systematic oppression is so damaging that the oppressed often oppress each other in the absence of the oppressor. Most often the damage starts at an early age. It was striking to witness the incredible detail which participants recalled while talking about their hair or skin. Several participants shared these memories:

“My biggest insecurity is my nose. I always wanted my mother’s smaller nose.”

My mom always wanted [me to have] lighter skin and a softer textured hair.”

“My mother considers me to have good hair. Growing up, she never wanted me to cut my hair.”

Does straightened hair make one straight in the crooked room? For some, “Yes.” For others, “No.”

Many participants admitted feeling pressure to accommodate their significant other's hair preferences: *“I find that African American men are not accepting of the trending transition into natural hair by African American women.”*

There was agreement among the participants when the subject of the lack of Black men's support of natural hairstyles was raised. Many Black men are just not willing to support their Black women partners' and loved ones' transition from chemically treated to natural hair. Two participants shared the pain of their fathers rejecting their natural hair. One told the group that, her father said, *“A woman’s hair is her glory”* (suggesting natural hair was not glorious). Another father told his daughter she needed to stop cutting her hair short. And yet another woman stated that during a visit home from college with her new hairdo, her father asked, *“Why haven’t you done anything with your hair, girl?”*

“We’re the hardest on each other when it comes to our hair,” said one participant. *“We are constantly judging each other.”*

Every participant agreed and applauded the statement. The constant fear of physical judgment often leads Black women to assume they are rejected for a job or relationship because of their features. Constant altering of one's appearance for the sake of others leads to stress and resentment for many women of color. On the other side, and equally as painful, *“As a child, I was made fun of for being light skin with blonde hair. I was called albino. I wanted to be brown skin. I was told that I was too light to have kinky hair. This issue is spiraling out of control.”*

“I just wanted to do me, but people started to think I was ‘wild’ when I went natural,” said a young woman student on the reaction of her friends and male peers about her transitioning from straight to natural hair.

Ignoring racial scars is difficult for many women of color. It's difficult to look in the mirror and not measure oneself by the standards of beauty put forth in society. The need for acceptance and appreciation of their physique, skin and hair is truly a longing many women of color never have met. However, many of the New Orleans participants felt that they have learned to cope despite feeling dehumanized in their communities and in the world.

Recommended Reading:

Williams, T.M. (2009). *Black pain: It just looks like we're not hurting*. New York: Scribner Publishing.



*Self-Defined
-or-
Other-Determined*

“BECAUSE THE WOMEN FEEL INVISIBLE, THEY WEAR PROVOCATIVE CLOTHES.”

The media and the dominant culture are not alone in calling Black women negative or derogatory names. Many participants agreed that Black women are just as likely to see each other as Jezebels.³ Successful Black women often look down on their uneducated counterparts, and other times there is judgment about clothing, weight, relationship status, number of children and more. Participants identified Black women as each other’s harshest critics.

Some participants in the Wisdom Circles expressed frustration with Black women who reinforce stereotypes in their communities and on television, while others voiced concerns about reality shows and hip-hop music’s negative and over-sexualized portrayal of Black women.

A lack of support and affirmation in the media has lasting consequences and shapes women’s beliefs about themselves. One woman noted that even the most qualified Black professional woman is defined by negative language:

“If I am in a position of authority, often it is assumed I am an angry Black woman. And when I’m not a bitch, the expectation is that I am going to be a mammy.”

To be viewed as an individual Black woman is nearly impossible to achieve in a *crooked room* because the stereotypes of Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire are waiting to be attached to them. It is a typecasting that can’t be escaped:

“If you’re a woman that exhibits leadership qualities, it’s perceived as negative. You are labeled a bitch, masculine, and aggressive. In the South, it’s worse because you are expected to be kind and docile.”

Participants between the ages of 21 and 50 years old said that it was painful to be labeled an angry Black woman by other women. Women in the Wisdom Circle expressed frustration with other Black women who reinforce stereotypes about Black women in their communities and on television.

Participants of all ages agreed that when Black men label Black women “angry,” it was most hurtful and disappointing. “*Everyone gets upset when Black women speak up,*” stated one woman. Conversations around this issue seemed to really bubble in all the participants’ responses. “*Black men see us as always mad and fussing,*” one participant stewed. The yearning for Black men to see beyond Black women’s anger and offer empathy and support to women who also experience racism was strongly voiced.

Another challenging issue for women in the circle was to acknowledge their mother’s role in shaping their insecurities. Several women admitted their mothers tried to change their appearance as children and that made them feel unacceptable to their mothers:

“When I was younger, I wanted to be lighter like my mom and her side of the family. People used to ask me why I wasn’t light skinned like my mom.”

Many women found it difficult to critique their mothers whom they know loved them but unwittingly raised them with oppressive standards and expectations. Many admitted they learned to live with sadness rather than confront their mothers whom they believe meant no harm. One woman shared a story in a circle about her mother always obsessing over her presenting well (physically and verbally) in public. Even the mother’s friends chimed in once on the participant’s looks saying, “*You’re so pretty for a dark girl.*” Another woman shared a story of her grandmother who told her she was not beautiful anymore because she had decided to wear her hair naturally. Many of the mothers in the circle pledged not to raise their daughters like they were raised. One mother said she compliments her daughter’s hair, complexion and body shape to create a more loving and supportive environment to boost her confidence. One woman felt the ire of their mother’s envy, “*My mom always wanted my lighter skin and softer textured hair.*”

How does it feel like if you are unable to live up to your mother’s expectations? To be called angry, ugly, promiscuous and unqualified for your job? All this, and you are still expected to be a soft, gentle, accommodating and happy woman without complaint. This is the *crooked room* in which women of color live each day. The stereotypes are exhausting to confront. Several of the women between the ages of 53 and 70 stated that throughout their lives, they were placed into stereotypical categories. When challenged by negative images of Black women or treated unfairly, they have learned to voice their displeasure and never stand for being disrespected.

When participants were asked how they cope with issues of beauty in a *crooked room*, one participant responded: “*I stand tall with love. I see my mother and grandmother and their strength when I look in the mirror.*”

Recommended Reading:

Brown, E.M., Haygood, M. & Mclean, R J. (2010). *The Little Black book of success: Laws of leadership for Black women.* New York: Ballantine Books.



*Post Racial:
Myth or Reality*

**“WHEN I WAS
IN GRADUATE
SCHOOL, MY
PROFESSORS
AND CLASSMATES
ASSUMED THAT
I HAD MULTIPLE
CHILDREN
BECAUSE I WAS
YOUNG AND
BLACK.”**

The Wisdom Circles were representative of African American women across various age groups. Many were successful professionals who worked in education, business, human services, mental health, non-profits and mortgage lending.

All had stories of their qualifications and abilities being questioned by their white counterparts. The women in this circle were asked, “*Can you recall a time in your life when you felt misrecognized and invisible in society for being an African American woman?*” The women shared countless stories of being misrecognized or not recognized at all:

“Oftentimes in the hospital, I am questioned by white patients about where I attended medical school. It’s hardly ever assumed by patients that I am the doctor. They typically think I am the nurse or the social worker. My patients usually refer me to by my first name. They refuse to refer to me as Dr.”

These women’s painful stories of discrimination related to their race. Many of these women said that they felt that their accomplishments in academia would help them to stand tall and not feel so invisible to larger society. However, as young adults they began to realize that high academic and professional accomplishments would not free them from their painful experiences of living in a racialized society:

“I felt ignored for the first time in my life a few years ago. My co-workers refused to share office space with me and gave me odd looks when I parked in the medical consultant parking space. They could not believe that I was a clinical psychologist with a Ph.D.”

**“IF I DIDN’T DEFINE MYSELF FOR MYSELF,
I WOULD BE CRUNCHED INTO OTHER
PEOPLE’S FANTASIES FOR ME AND EATEN ALIVE.”**

- Audre Lorde

All said their professional qualifications are constantly questioned and their authority challenged by men and women. Some felt they were not respected in their professional settings despite their professional credentials. Black women professionals in New Orleans are often confronting assumptions about their competency:

“When I worked as an executive, my authority was questioned by one of my subordinates in a very overt way. He submitted a report with typos and incorrect information. I refused to present it at a meeting and informed him that we would revise it before presenting it. He presented the report at the meeting and completely ignored my instructions.”

What would a post-racial world look like to a Black woman? Would it be the absence of judgment of her hair? Skin tone? Relationship status? Qualifications? Sexual history? Is it possible to imagine a workplace where women of color could feel free to express themselves verbally and culturally without being perceived as threatening, unqualified or deserving?

“Often times, when visitors come to the school where I serve as principal they assume that my non-Black counterpart is the principal. I am always the last person expected to be the principal. They always assume that one of the two assistant principals is the principal.”

“I felt ignored as the only African American executive at an all white corporation. The experience made me hard. I was labeled a bitch.”

Participants in the Wisdom Circles shared their experiences of feeling invisible in society as African American women. One woman said, *“When my career in medicine began, I purposely changed my walk so that I would not accentuate my curves.”* Another said, *“It’s difficult working in a position that is considered to be a ‘white position.’ My white co-workers change their tone of voice when they are talking to me. They try to ‘sound Black.’”*

Some women stated that their white peers often “sister-girl” (i.e., to speak and gesture in ways characteristic of the Sapphire archetype previously mentioned) them at work. Many participants found it annoying to work with someone who makes assumptions about and mimics one’s (assumed) way of talking and being. Participants were uncomfortable addressing it because they don’t want to appear to be the angry Black woman. The Sapphire stereotype of being angry and brash is often attached to professional Black women. One participant said the stereotype is not only used by white peers but also by Black men to control a Black woman’s emotions and to scare her out of being outspoken. Many women agreed and admitted feeling pressure from Black men to calm their frustrations.

Michelle Obama has been labeled an angry Black woman in the media, by comedians and in editorial cartoons. Melissa Harris-Perry examines First Lady Obama in the context of the stereotypes she outlined in her book, *Sister Citizen*. Although Mrs. Obama attended an Ivy League school, she admits to feeling invisible at times while attending Princeton. White America assumed that Michelle Robinson was angry at her college and at white people. *“I have found that at Princeton, no matter how liberal and open-minded some of my White professors and classmates try to be toward me, I sometimes feel like a visitor on campus; as if I really don’t belong,” she wrote in the introduction to her thesis. “Regardless of the circumstances under which I interact with Whites at Princeton, it often seems as if, to them, I will always be Black first and a student second.”*

Black women, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, and yes, even dead, are constantly being stereotyped. Some Black men are even responsible for the perpetuation of these stereotypes. In August 2013, hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons released a video on his All Def Channel (owned by Google) that was described as a Harriet Tubman sex tape. When social media activists voiced their displeasure, Simmons was perplexed about the outrage. *“I didn’t understand the clip as being nothing but her taking advantage of the slave master,”* Russell Simmons said. In a Huffington Post interview, he stated he didn’t think the Internet video suggested rape because she (Harriet Tubman) was seducing him (the slave master). But the idea that Harriet Tubman or any other slave woman would want to exchange her body for freedom makes her a Jezebel. Enslaved women were regularly raped. In what world would an enslaved woman have an advantage over a man?

Another subtle variant of the Jezebel is the welfare queen. The welfare queen is depicted as lazy, having multiple children and draining the economic system by utilizing resources generated by working people. This archetype showed up a few weeks after the Harriet Tubman incident during an interview with Lee Daniels conducted by Larry King. *“I think that’s the reason we have AIDS.. I did a movie called ‘Precious,’ and when I was doing the research for ‘Precious,’ I walked in to the Gay Men’s Health Crisis Center in New York City and I expected to see a room full of gay men, but there are nothing but women that are there – Black women with kids. I thought I had walked into the welfare office,”* said Lee Daniels. Neither Russell Simmons nor Lee Daniels took responsibility for their comments. By perpetuating these stereotypes, Simmons and Daniels dishonored Black womanhood. Political philosopher Charles Taylor stated, *“A person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or the society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.”* Harris-Perry argues this distortion has lasting consequences on Black women.

The women in the Wisdom Circles could not envision a reality absent of negative images and assumptions about them. The long history of perpetual stereotypes profits Hollywood, comedians, entertainers and beauty companies at the expense of Black women. Many found it hard to visualize a society where Black women are treated equal to their white male/ female and Black male counterparts.

Recommended Reading:

Nelson, S. E. (2011). *Black woman redefined: Dispelling myths and discovering fulfillment in the age of Michelle Obama*. New York: Harper Collins



The Next Generation

“IS IT POSSIBLE TO MIRROR SELF-WORTH IN OUR CHILDREN IF WE ARE ASHAMED OF WHO WE ARE?”

-Denese Shervington M.D. M.P.H.,
IWES President and CEO

Eleven students from prep, private, public and charter schools gathered to discuss African American stereotypes. Participants in this circle were between the ages of 15 and 18 years. This was the only coed circle, comprised of seven female and four male participants.

The circle began with the question: *“Have you, as young African Americans in New Orleans, ever felt invisible?”* Many members of the circle responded, *“Yes.”* Some felt invisible in their homes, especially in cases where there was more than one sibling. Others noted that a lack of friends made them feel invisible. One participant noted, *“We’re even more invisible in the community than at home. I remember a time when you’d know all your neighbors. Since Katrina, I don’t even know who lives next door. People come here to go out and party and they don’t even care about us.”*

Next, the group was asked to discuss ways in which stereotypes such as Mammy, Uncle Tom, Jezebel and other Black stereotypes affect African Americans in New Orleans. As some of the students were not familiar with the stereotypes, a handout was provided for them to review.

Many students felt that negative stereotypes of African-Americans were true; however, they felt that they were exceptions to the rule. As result of this belief, many young women admitted that they do not associate with other African-American girls because they were embarrassed by their stereotypical behavior. Dr. Shervington warned the group, *“Stereotyping is alive and well and we’re often doing it to ourselves.”*

One student shared that she and her peers have to balance being quiet, ‘acting white’ and being loud, acting ‘ghetto’ (i.e., Black) stating, *“We are called hoodrats when we act Black. We are called church girls when we act white.”* Another participant reported that teachers and students had been calling her Aunt Jemima because she is respectful in class and completes her assignments on time. Some of the students also reported that there is a silent expectation from white teachers for Black students to behave badly and to not take their grades and goals seriously.

One participant said she often sees her high school peers falling into the Sapphire stereotype. The majority reported feeling shamed by fellow Black women. This shaming can be very intense for teenage girls who are navigating esteem and body issues.

The students were not familiar with historical stereotypes, perhaps because they have been transformed into new ones. Students stated that if a young woman is loud, she is seen as “ghetto,” whereas a quiet woman was considered “stuck up.”

While some students believe teenage promiscuity is related to absent fathers, one young woman passionately disagreed. “It’s bullshit!” she exclaimed, stating that some of her peers use absent fathering as an excuse for their behavior. Another stated, “I have few African American friends because they try to get attention through wearing provocative clothes, then get angry when men respond.”

The young women in the circle believed the male students at their school did not like “ghetto” girls because they were loud and pushy. They also defined “hood rats” as girls or young women with no self-esteem. What was most interesting about this particular circle and age group was that the conversation focused mostly on internal racism and African-American judgment.

Young female participants said they are constantly fighting stereotypes of “chicken head,” “hood rat” and “church dressed.” These judgments continue past high school and are carried into adult womanhood. After reflection, many students realized that some of the name-calling among their peers is directly connected to racism and sexism.

Later during the conversation, two students had a heated exchange about being /acting Black. One student attended a predominantly white public school, while the other attended a predominately black public school. According to an observer, the difference in their ability to present their opinion effectively and concisely represented the difference in quality of their education.

Like their elders, girls in the youth Wisdom Circle expressed disappointment and feeling hurt when their male peers rejected and judged them. A young woman stated that some Black males refuse to date Black girls if they are associated with a certain group or school. Another recalled being told, “*I ain’t datin’ you. You Black.*”

Four African American male stereotypes were introduced to the group to compare and contrast how Black females and males are conditioned in the United States. The four African American Black male stereotypes are: Black Buck/Mandingo, large, savage, hypersexualized Black men notable for criminal activity and targeting innocent White women; *Coon/Sambo*, stupid, lazy, silly and childish Black men mocked for comic relief; *Uncle Tom*, the “Good Negro” that is faithful to White people at the expense of Black people and dependent on their kindness; and the *Magic Negro*, a Black man that fixes White people’s problems with special powers and/or mystical insight.

A male participant stated, “*Tiger Woods fits the Black Buck stereotype because he’s an athlete that married a white woman and was*

accepted by white people. When Tiger cheated on his wife, and the scandal was promulgated throughout the media, he was treated differently because he was black.”

Another stated, “*One of the black professional football players is a very gifted athlete but this does not always translate in interviews. He has poor posture and poor body language.*”

A youth who tried to bust the Uncle Tom stereotype noted, “*I do not understand why Uncle Tom has such a negative connotation. Harriet Beecher’s Stowe’s account of Uncle Tom is that while it appeared to onlookers that he was obedient to the white people, he was secretly assisting in freeing the slaves.*”

It was important to highlight to the younger participants, many of whom were unaware of their history, the impact that stereotypes have upon their communities and family dynamics. When people are exposed at an early age to their history, it is easier as they approach adulthood to think more critically about their citizenship in the world.

What does the future look like for Black youth in New Orleans? Older Wisdom Circle participants acknowledged their concerns about the younger generation’s ability to be unified, citing many of the city’s murders as evidence of today’s youth’s inability to make something of the struggles won by the Civil Rights generation.

However, students placed blame for the violence and crime on both their peers, and on local organizations’ ineffectiveness at creating change in their communities. All agreed that there is not enough attention on young people who are doing the right things, which leads to an increased sense of invisibility. A male student added that he feels frustrated when he makes honest efforts that go unnoticed. Another female student noted feelings of invisibility because there is so much emphasis placed on saving Black boys and men.

Although, many of the youth participants did not have the life experiences of other circles, their responses reflected the same sense of feeling misrecognized and stereotyped expressed by adult Wisdom Circle participants. However, they also discovered that they were perpetuating stereotypes among their peers and that they had to take responsibility for contributing to the shaming and judgment of young Black women and men. Students were reminded of the dangers of separating themselves from other African Americans by perceiving themselves as not being like the others.

Recommended Reading:

Brown, R.N. (2008). *Black girlhood Celebration: Toward a hip-hop feminist pedagogy*. New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers.



*Crooked Room
Consequences*

“JEZEBEL, MAMMY, AND SAPPHIRE ARE THE ANGLES IN THE CROOKED ROOM WHERE BLACK WOMEN LIVE. THEY DO NOT REFLECT BLACK WOMEN’S LIVED EXPERIENCE; INSTEAD, THEY LIMIT AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN TO PRESCRIBED ROLES THAT SERVE THE INTERESTS OF OTHERS. MISRECOGNITION SUBVERTS THE POSSIBILITY OF EQUAL DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION. IT IS PSYCHICALLY PAINFUL TO HOLD AN IMAGE OF YOURSELF WHILE KNOWING THAT OTHERS HOLD A DIFFERENT, MORE NEGATIVE IMAGE OF YOU.”

-Dr. Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, p. 96

To occupy a *crooked room* that tilts against your race and gender is taxing on a woman’s psychological and physical well-being. Chronic shame can undermine African American women’s self-esteem, relationships and ability to pursue their dreams due to internalized hatred. In other words, some Black women believe the stereotypes about themselves and then behave accordingly. By distinguishing oneself from the ‘bad,’ ‘unkempt,’ or ‘unprofessional woman’ – divisions among Black women are born.

The most persistent theme among the Wisdom Circles was internalized body shame – *“Life’s a struggle for women who have a bit more body on their body.”* The source of this shame ranged from weight and shape, to skin color and hair texture. Participants did agree however, that Black women are making some advancement in self-acceptance as evidenced by the growing natural hair trends and the economic impact on the beauty industry.

Female-on-female shaming was another issue that all participants agreed was prevalent in their communities. Some believed it’s worse in the African American community. Intergenerational shaming creates tension between younger and older African-American women. Intra-racism was easy to point out in the group but difficult to own up to as individuals. The racial ramifications of being a Black woman are not easy to pinpoint in an individual’s life.

Participants vowed to be more mindful of their words when speaking about or interacting with their female peers. One participant admitted to not talking much because she felt

“CARING FOR MYSELF IS NOT
SELF-INDULGENCE,
IT IS SELF-PRESERVATION,
AND THAT IS AN ACT OF
POLITICAL WARFARE.”

- Audre Lorde

guilty for perpetuating stereotypes against other Black women in her community. Oftentimes at the expense of other women, Black women will distinguish themselves as the antithesis of the stereotypical Black woman in an effort to make one visible to others and to avoid negative stereotypes.

A university administrator who participated in a Wisdom Circle confessed, *“I’m always a little crooked. Standing straight in a room that someone else has built for you is impossible.”* She also acknowledged she must tap into her internal power to manage her self-worth as she navigates her personal and professional goals.

When participants were asked for solutions to the crooked room, many suggested creating supportive communities for the next generation of women of color. All agreed that their communities must address the lack of affirmation of young girls and women at home and in their larger community. Participants noted that there are few positive female role models for young Black girls, especially in the entertainment industry where so many young women are nothing more than sexual props for rappers.

There was agreement that each woman in the circle is responsible for reducing the cycle of shame and stereotyping of Black women. One participant shared that she often reminds herself, *“I wasn’t brought into this world to do everything.”* Declaring freedom from perfection is a struggle for many women of color, who oftentimes feel guilty for gifting themselves with self-care space and ritual.

In each circle women of color were given permission, some for the first time, to express their societal frustrations and struggles without feeling a need to be nice or to accommodate or protect anyone’s feelings. Of note, participants empathized with the challenges that Black men endure in society, but were slow to identify their female struggles as institutionalized. Many had been silent for too long, but agreed that their energy should not be focused on pain, but rather on healing.

Participants agreed that self-definition and self-acceptance start within. It’s a necessary tool in confronting the hurtful interactions many women of color experience. Citizenship was eventually granted to people of color, but oppression still exists. For Black women there is double misrecognition as citizens. Racism and sexism tilt every social, personal and political room of their lives. Members of the Wisdom Circles agreed that they must uplift each other with their language and actions and work with everyone to strengthen their community. Competition and internal-fighting were identified as roadblocks to unity in the Black community. Although Black women collectively face racism and sexism, the individual experience of Black women must be honored.

Recommended Reading:

Harris-Perry, M.V. (2011). *Sister citizen: Shame, stereotypes, and Black women in America.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

appendices

DISCUSSION PROBES

1. Can you recall a time in your life when you felt unseen or invisible because of the color of your skin?
2. Are African American women more invisible in society than other women?
3. Who do you feel is most invisible in society, African American males or females? And why?
4. Can you recall experiencing stereotypes in your life or in the life of someone you know that are highlighted in “Sister Citizen?”
5. How do people in your community honor or dishonor African-American women?
6. How might chronic racial shaming contribute to some of the rage /violence in the African-American community?
7. How are Black women in leadership positions treated?
8. How do you contribute to maintaining the crooked room?
9. How do local politics affect Black women in your city?
10. Does the intergenerational transmission of trauma, combined with toxic stress and other forms of structural racism affect black women’s ability to be fully resilient?

APPENDIX A: WISDOM CIRCLE DESCRIPTION

Wisdom Circles are an ancient way in which tribal and indigenous peoples came together in sacred circles to learn from each other how to survive, hope and dream. They are safe spaces in which community comes together to solve its problems and support each other, heal wounds and find the courage to act upon the inner voice.

Wisdom Circles are places to share a vision, and define a mission. There is no cross talk or advice giving. The focus is on deep truth telling by practicing heart-to-heart communication skills, and likewise, listening.

THE 5 MUSTS:

1. The creation of a sacred space – utilize ritual to bring members into the present and to experience a sense of awe and reverence about being connected to something larger than self
2. The intention to listen and speak from the heart
3. The use of a talking object – right to speak without interruption
4. The choice to remain silent – members can pace themselves within their comfort zones
5. The commitment to confidentiality

SUPPLIES:

1. Discussion Guide
2. Ritual objects e.g. candle, incense, music
3. Talking object – stone, crystal

Reference:

Garfield C, Spring C, Cahill S. *Wisdom Circles: A Guide to Self-Discovery and Community Building in Small Groups*. 1998. Hyperion, N.Y.

APPENDIX B: IWES WISDOM CIRCLE COHORTS

- On **October 23, 2012**, 11 African-American students gathered to participate in the Community Based Wisdom Circle. The 11 participants ranged between the ages of 15-18 years of age.⁵ The group was comprised of 7 females and 4 males. All of the participants were students in the Greater New Orleans area. Of the 11 participants, 10 were high-school students and one was a college freshman. The charter school systems, private/parochial schools, and recovery school district were represented in the cohort.
- On **November 26, 2012**, 15 African-American women gathered in downtown New Orleans at the office of The Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies (IWES) to participate in the Community Based Wisdom Circle. The 11 participants ranged between the ages of 21-50 years of age. Of the 11 participants, 9 were IWES staff members. Participants' professional levels ranged from entry level to senior management positions.
- On **October 8, 2012 at 5:30 p.m.**, 15 African-American women gathered at the home of Dr. Beverly Wright to participate in the Community Based Wisdom Circle. The 15 participants ranged between the ages of 53-70 years of age. All of the participants were professionals in the following areas: education, healthcare, the private business sector, human services, mental health, the non-profit sector, and mortgage lending.
- On **November 7, 2012**, 10 African-American women who were all faculty members at local universities in the city of New Orleans gathered to participate in the Community Based Wisdom Circle. They ranged in age from 21- 50 years. Of the 10 participants, the following universities were represented: Dillard University, Xavier University, Tulane University, Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO).

- Wisdom Circle of HIR women – On **March 2013**, ten African American women who were previous participants in IWES' and the Chaka Khan Foundation's Healing is the Revolution Program / Superlife Program (HIR) gathered at IWES to participate in the Community Based Wisdom Circle. They ranged in age from 21- 35 years. The HIR program engaged women who had faced hardships – financial, housing, education, mental distress, and employment. Under the direction of Dr. Shervington and Chaka Khan and her foundation, women were provided with tools to assist them in a yearlong journey to achieve their stated goals.
- On **February 26, 2013**, 11 African-American men gathered in uptown New Orleans at the home of academician Dr. Andre Perry, of Loyola University, to participate in a Community Based Wisdom Circle facilitated. The 11 participants ranged between the ages of 19-55 years of age. Participants' professional levels ranged from mid-management level to senior management positions and included one high-school student. The findings from this Circle are not included.

⁵All Wisdom Circles were facilitated by Denese Shervington M.D., M.P.H.



