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Linking Contexts, Intersectionality, and Generations: Toward a Multidimensional Theory of Millennials and Social Change

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Abstract

While millennials are culturally homogenized as a unitary group, scholarly work has examined the complex historical, economic, and social challenges that shape millennials' heterogeneity. This paper draws on three studies to build on this work, showing how millennials experience and enact social change across different spaces: beauty politics and the natural hair movement, black men shaping new masculinities at work and home, and undocumented students navigating institutions of higher education. We show how different groups of millennials bridge and forge new communities, generate hybridized identities that challenge fixed conceptions of identity, and develop new mechanisms for changing the world around them. From findings that highlight the complexity of intra-group and intra-generational experience, we argue for a multidimensional theory of millennials and social change that links contexts, intersectionality, and generational transmission. Such a framework offers a more systematic way to conceptualize variation as it shapes contentious politics and social change.

Keywords

collective behavior and social movements, culture, race, gender, and class

Despite their cultural construction as the "Me Me Me Generation," made up of "lazy, entitled narcissists who still live with their parents" as a 2013 *Time* magazine cover famously described (Stein 2013), scholarly work has shown how complex historical, economic, and social challenges shape millennials' heterogeneity of generational experience (Milkman 2017; Terriquez 2015a). Understanding how these intersecting challenges shape the ways millennials make sense of their lives and approach social change animates the work of scholars and activists alike. In the presidential panel, titled, "Millennials in Social Movements" panelists LaToya Council, Chelsea Johnson, and Karina Santellano, with Hajar Yazdiha presiding, explored different ways that millennials lead the charge in social change. Through complex studies of beauty politics

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and the natural hair movement, black men shaping new masculinities at work and home, and undocumented students navigating institutions of higher education, this panel explored how different groups of millennials are bridging and forging new communities, generating hybridized identities that challenge fixed conceptions of identity, and developing new mechanisms for changing the world around them. These studies complicate oversimplified studies that homogenize group experiences, whether those of "black women," "black men," "DACA students," or "Millennials" more broadly. In findings that highlight the complexity of intra-group and intra-generational experience, these studies call for more systematic ways to conceptualize variation as they shape contentious politics and social change. In this overview, we first describe the central outlines and contributions from each panelist's paper then draw out the broader themes that emerged from these analyses. We offer new research questions and future directions for scholars, and scholar-activists, to take up in a movement toward a multidimensional theory of millennials and social change.

#TeamNatural: Black Beauty and Millennial Forms of Resistance

Chelsea Johnson's study begins by situating millennial beauty politics in its historical trajectory. Dating back to the transatlantic slave trade, the state and media have deployed controlling images of black women to justify their marginalization under capitalist, patriarchal white supremacy (Collins 2000; Gilkes 1983; Springer 2007). Racist tropes that black women are inferior and subhuman have been mapped onto discourses about coily hair, such that it is routinely described as wild, exotic, or needing to be tamed (Banks 2000; Rooks 1996). These stigmas have persisted through to present day. As a result, women of African descent face pressures to manage their presentations-of-self due to a distance from valued forms of femininity and in response to racist and sexist ideologies that deem their bodies closer to the earth, uncontrollable, and uncivilized (Banks 2000; Caldwell 2008; Collins 2000; Mercer 1994). Hair texture and style are often used to measure black women's worthiness of economic, social, and cultural capital, such that when a black woman chooses not to straighten her hair, her natural hair is often viewed by employers, educators, and romantic partners as an indicator of her inherent inclination to poverty, servitude, laziness, wildness, criminality, or backwardness (Byrd and Tharps 2014; Mercer 1994; Rooks 1996). Black women are often pressured or socialized into disciplining their bodies using chemical relaxers and weaves to keep their jobs and perform heterosexual womanhood appropriately (Tate 2007; Thompson 2009). The treatment of black women's natural hair as problematic demonstrates that "the allocation of power and resources not only in the domestic, economic, and political domains but also in the broad arena of interpersonal relations" is dependent upon "doing gender" per white standards (West and Zimmerman 1987:145).

As racial formation theory emphasizes, racialized groups are in continuous political struggle over racial meanings and resources (Omi and Winant 1994). These struggles can be "read" through black people's shifting hair styling practices over time, through discourses about black bodies, and through black peoples' consumer options in the cosmetics industry. The performative, expressive, and aesthetic aspects of gender and black hair's cultural significance make hair ripe material for exemplifying intersectional politics, identities, and experiences. For example, in the early twentieth century, black women of the Silent Generation challenged the legal and extra-legal segregation of the American North and South during the Jim Crow era by straightening their hair to de-emphasize embodied differences between themselves and more powerful whites (Blackwelder 2003; Byrd and Tharps 2014; Gill 2010). In the middle of the twentieth century, black women of the Baby Boomer Generation adopted the Afro and "soul style" to decolonize their bodies and portray a cultural connection to an imagined African homeland (Banks 2000; Craig 2006; Ford 2016; Mercer 1994). In the final decades of the twentieth century, black Generation Xers returned to straight and braided hairstyles, adorning their heads with long

extension braids, platinum blonde weaves, elaborate cornrows, and ornate up-dos in resistance against respectability politics, in alignment with flourishing multicultural discourses, and in the embrace of black working-class culture.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, black millennial women across the African diaspora are again returning to natural (unstraightened) hairstyles and referring to this trend as a social movement. This research uses the newly emergent natural hair movement as a starting place for observing Africana millennial women's shifting political frameworks and forms of resistance in an increasingly global field of race and gender relations. Johnson asks, how are black women making and remaking race in the twenty-first century? What can millennial women's political strategies, goals, and cultures tell us about how racial formation operates more broadly? This study answers these questions using interviews with 80 women of African descent and three years of multisited participant observation in black beauty spaces in the United States, South Africa, France, Spain, Brazil, and the Netherlands. The following analysis centers her work in the United States and South Africa, since the natural hair movement is centrally shaped by the generational resources (Estrada 2013) that young black women possess in these two places.

A comparison of natural hair discourses among women in South Africa and the United States highlights two under-acknowledged aspects of how racial formation operates. First, racial formation is gendered. Women deploy natural hair as a discursive symbol to make their intersectional experiences of race, class, and gender oppression known in social movement contexts where black men's experiences take center stage. Second, this research shows that racial formation is multilevel, drawing from local, state-level, and transnational diasporic networks. Black millennial women are politicized through global networks of black feminist activists through their conversations online, using their technological generational resources to form transnational connections that were difficult, if not impossible, for their mothers to forge. State-level racial regimes, however, determine the target of women's embodied critique. In the United States, women use natural hair to make their gendered experiences of racism legible in a moment where black men's risk of suffering violence dominates Black Lives Matter political narratives about rights to bodily integrity and respect. In South Africa, natural hair is a black feminist manifestation of a broad move toward a de-colonial political orientation among South Africa's youth. For millennial and Generation Z women in South Africa, natural hair politics has become intertwined with the Fees Must Fall Movement to decolonize schools. When these young women's parents came of age under apartheid rule, they faced pressures to adhere to white-centered aesthetic standards in order to receive an education, be upwardly mobile, and achieve economic security. Young South African women today have fewer de jure constraints and deploy natural hair politics to break down de facto racist relics of South Africa's apartheid past.

Black women's deployment of natural hair in any particular location transfers frames developed in other highly publicized racial justice movements that are occurring at the same place and time. Social movement scholars call this transmission "social movement spillover" (Meyer and Whittier 1994). These scholars suggest that the transference of social movement frames is greatest when group membership overlaps. While there's much international overlap in the discourse on natural hair care, fashion, and black affirming aesthetics, there's less overlap in membership of antiracist social movements employing on the ground protest strategies. So, women deploy natural hair to different ends in local contexts, where participants in natural hair culture are simultaneously members of or sympathizers with the social movement organizations in the communities in which they live. The natural hair movement is global in scope, but it has nested meanings and applications that are shaped by local histories, racial regimes, and geographies. Patterns of and platforms for black millennial conversations about hair symbolize and signify how racial meanings are both more global and contextually specific than ever before.

New Black (Family) Man: Middle-class Black Men and Masculinities at Home

Elucidating these complexities in the realm of work and family, LaToya Council's paper begins with the premise that even though middle-class black men are more likely to participate in financial provision than working-class black men (Collins 2004), they are still impacted by economic racism that places them in work conditions that are discriminatory, unstable, and lacking in opportunities for advancement and promotion (Feagin and Sikes 1995; Wingfield 2009, 2013). Scholarship on middle-class men describes a white hegemonic masculine norm wherein the enactment of manhood will center earning status, as the breadwinner and dominant head of the household (Connell 1990, 1995). However, these findings show that the context of racism shapes different masculinities and forms of family participation for black men. Drawing on an analysis of 20 in-depth interviews conducted in 2016 with 14 Gen X middle-class black men and six Millennial middle-class black men between 31 and 45 years in age, this study examines how race, gender, and class inform middle-class black men's participation in families and the masculinities they construct within their homes. By showing how middle-class black men make sense of and negotiate these multiple masculinities, this study shows how intersections of gender, race, and class pattern inequality not only within but also across generations.

This study reveals two central masculine pathways incorporated by middle-class black men in family participation. Unlike the white hegemonic norm rooted in economic status, these two pathways emphasize noneconomic masculinities in black men's family participation. The first group consists of nine men who rely on traditional masculine performances otherwise enacted by men who are the economic breadwinners in their families. At first glance, these performances appear to be comparable to broader research, as men in this group lean on masculine selves that emphasize head-of-household status and decision-making (Gorman-Murray 2008; Nelson 2003). However, contrary to broader research which argues that these identities are rooted in earning status, this group of middle-class black men are *not* the main income earners in their relationships. This finding shows how gender power within heterosexual relationships can be maintained without its connection to main income earner status (Moore 2008; Tichenor 2005). This decoupling also points to the complexity of race, class, and gender in men's lives and the pervasiveness of male privilege within relationships. That is, many middle-class black men may experience economic racism such as underemployment and unemployment, but these experiences do little to change male gender power within heterosexual relationships. Unlike working-class black men, this group of professional black men has access to some wealth that allows them to gain access to some rights and privileges within their homes and relationships (hooks 2004). This group relies on available cultural masculine repertoires (Hirsch and Kachtan 2018) or manhood acts (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009) that have withstood larger economic shifts.

A second noneconomic masculine pathway was evident among the second group of men, 11 respondents, who construct masculinities emphasizing moral support of family and community involvement. The adaptation of moral support masculinities illuminates how professional black men compensate for inequality in an oppressive context. By making room for moral support masculine identities, this group of professional black men emphasize caring masculine identities that can work to combat broader structural racism and oppression (Wingfield 2009). Moral support masculinities transcend white patriarchal masculinities by staying committed to masculinities that meet black familial and community expectations—dating back to Western African culture and family patterns (Collins 2004; hooks 2004).

This study offers new questions for masculinities research on professional black men by examining their negotiations of gender, work, family, and financial provision. This study also negates the homogenizing findings of the 1965 Moynihan Report, like many other recent studies of black families, by illuminating their rich complexity. By focusing on middle-class black men

and their modes of family participation, this study challenges racist narratives of black masculinities and controlling stereotypes of the absent black father. If it is the goal of research on families to move past these debunked yet dominant narratives of family types, then research should interrogate more families on the margin by bringing them to the center of analysis.

Furthermore, part of this research project asked men to provide advice for the next generation. These men identified generational phenomena like hip-hop music as part of the problem of inequality, highlighting a potential extension of this research to examine how an older generation of middle-class black men may create symbolic boundaries around middle-class black male respectability that generate intra-group divisions. More work could examine these inter- and intra-generational conflicts, specifically how middle-class black men's investment in masculinities shaped by respectability politics places undue burden on the next generation of black men to combat social inequality.

Investigating Local Contexts: Undocumented Students and Institutional Support

Karina Santellano brings the study of millennials and Generation Z to the institutions of higher education, examining the experiences of undocumented students. Approximately 98,000 undocumented students graduate from high schools in the United States every year (Zong and Batalova 2019). About 27,000 of these students graduate from California high schools and some matriculate to California public colleges and universities (Zong and Batalova 2019). In recent years, college campuses across the California public college and university system have established Dream Resource Centers (DRCs) to provide legal, financial, and academic assistance to undocumented college students. While research on undocumented college students has largely focused on this population's challenges in accessing and persisting in higher education given their multiple disadvantaged social locations (Abrego 2006; Enriquez 2017; Gonzales 2015; Terriquez 2015b), little research has examined the role of institutional support specifically designed for undocumented college students. Santellano asks, what are undocumented students' experiences with their on-campus DRCs? How does the institutional context shape and pattern these experiences? This study answers these questions through case studies of DRCs across three institutional contexts: a community college, a Cal State campus, and a University of California (UC) campus. Santellano draws on 34 interviews and an academic year of participant observation at these three research sites, each occupying a different position in a stratified public higher education system with varied institutional goals, characteristics, and DRC funding.

How do institutional contexts shape undocumented students' experiences with DRCs? A nested context of reception framework shows that undocumented students' incorporation into higher education is not monolithic but rather shaped by local, state, and federal contexts (Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018). These nested contexts shape undocumented students' educational access, experiences, and incorporation. This approach tells us that students' ability to access institutional support and ties with others similar to them may help foster a sense of belonging (Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018). Here, the local context is the college and university setting, but less is known about how educational institutions in this local context, varied in their organizational arrangements, shape undocumented students' experiences with DRCs. Santellano's use of three sites offers a comparative and complex understanding of the local context through DRCs. Santellano finds three critical institutional characteristics that matter in how undocumented students experience their DRCs: commuter/residential patterns, student demographics, and center funding.

First, community college and Cal State students were most often commuter students and expressed that their DRC was an important place where they generated feelings of belonging on campus. Assuaging day-to-day concerns like where to eat lunch and where to meet peers outside of class, students at these two sites described the DRC as a safe space where they could eat, work

on homework, and form friendships with other undocumented students. During long days on campus without a dorm to return to, the DRC provided commuter students a home base where they could take breaks in between classes. In this way, the DRC was a place to feel at home where they could create social ties as commuter students. These experiences contrasted with the UC students who were majority residential students. They lived on campus or at off-campus, university-affiliated apartments nearby. Residential students described friendships with roommates and residential hall community members. They ate meals at campus dining halls and studied at on-campus study spots including campus libraries. Unlike community college and Cal State commuter students, UC residential students did not understand their DRC as an essential and necessary place where they could eat lunch or develop friendships. Indeed, the commuter/residential distinction adds detailed nuance to the local context of undocumented college student experience by shaping the meanings students attach to the DRC and their campus experience.

Second, institutional contexts intersected with students' demographic backgrounds, shaping what the DRC meant to them. For example, most of the undocumented students at the community college were in their late 20s, where some had returned to school after learning they could apply for state tuition through the California Dream Act. Many held jobs to financially support their families. Similarly, many students at the Cal State site held jobs. Occupying these positions of greater responsibility, taking care of and supporting their families, students expressed how they saw DRC staff members as maternal figures who instead took care of them. Staff asked about students' whereabouts when they did not visit the DRC, knew about their personal stories, and asked how they were doing. Accordingly, undocumented students at the community college and Cal State university understood the staff members as fictive kin which contributed to the sentiment of the DRC as home. These experiences stood in contrast to the UC case where the majority of undocumented students had been high-achieving high school students, driven to higher education through graduate school and professional interests. They understood their DRC as a place that could provide them with services and information to reach these aspirations. Rather than characterizing staff members as maternal or fictive kin, students at the UC described them as "acquaintances" and "professionals." While at all three sites students shared that their on-campus DRC supported their educational goals, student demographics intersected with the local institutional context to shape the way the DRC was made meaningful and impactful for students.

Third, center funding shaped the type of support that the DRC could offer to students. Due to limited funding, community college and Cal State staff often had to use their own resources or navigate bureaucratic funding sources to provide snacks and refreshments for students. While monetary resources were limited in these two DRCs, staff prioritized time and socioemotional care for their students. In contrast, at the UC DRC, funds materialized in the form of new computers in the center, food vouchers, transportation financial assistance, among other resources. The distribution of funding reinforced UC students' understanding of their DRC as a service-oriented locale that granted them access to material resources. These findings show how the organizational arrangements within local contexts pattern students' experiences with their on-campus DRC.

While the nested contexts of reception framework provides scholars a way to examine how interlocking contexts shape undocumented students' educational incorporation, this study highlights the importance of examining the factors shaping the contexts themselves. To understand the complex experiences of a socially homogenized group like "undocumented students," this study explores the factors that shape the local context across institutional settings, their varied organizational arrangements, and the ways this shapes students' experiences of institutional support and feelings of belonging. The emergence of three impactful variables—institutional characteristics, demographics, and resources—joins the other two studies in this article in highlighting both how generational experiences even within the same "group" are not unitary and also how they are patterned.

Toward a Multidimensional Theory of Millennials and Social Change

These illuminating studies of generational processes at work across different spaces—the family, the social movement, the institution—and different places—cross-national, cross-regional—generated a lively discussion from which several generative themes emerged. We argue that these themes offer a starting point for a multidimensional theory of millennials and social change that better accounts for variation in generational experience and its connection to patterns of social change.

First, these studies highlighted the importance of linking the multiple levels of social organization—the macro, meso, and micro—as they shape social processes. Each presentation showed how multilevel and nested contexts shaped the outcomes of interest. These are contexts of the nation, as Johnson's study shows how national cultures and historical racial formation projects shape the ways groups pursue collective action. These contexts are also sociohistorical and temporal, as Council showed with the changing construction of masculinity and breadwinners. The context of time matters for how individuals make sense of their experiences within a generation, as Council found competing perceptions of the same issue for millennials on a Generation X cusp compared to a postmillennial cusp. These contexts also include institutions, for example, Santellano's finding that the *type* of educational institution had significant bearing on the processes that shape undocumented students' experiences of inclusion. For audience members, these studies inspired as many questions about complexity as they answered. How would questions of racialized beauty differ across national contexts where constructions of race vary so vastly? Would findings about the meanings of masculinity and breadwinning have varied across different places and institutional contexts, for example, for congregants of a church? How are educational contexts complicated by an additional level of institutional resources? To better assess and explain variation within a group of millennials, studies can examine how multiple levels and nestings of contexts shape different conditions, which groups make sense of and channel into different forms of behavior and action.

Second, these studies challenged the notion that "intersectionality" is a mere buzz word among millennials. Instead, each presentation offered evidence for how different intersections of social location—including oft-overlooked categories like age, occupational status, educational access, phenotype—generate different perceptions, experiences, and ways of approaching the world. Johnson's activists worked to find common ground and solidarity across a range of social locations, where their hair took on different meanings across different intersections of phenotype, gender identity, and class. The racism that Council's breadwinners experienced in the workplace was gendered and classed, patterning experiences and expectations about a black man's role at home. Santellano's undocumented students' perceptions of belonging on a college campus were shaped through their social locations, their access to particular forms of education, and their embeddedness in social networks with varying forms of social and cultural capital. These insights give rise to more questions about how complex social locations pattern millennials' experiences, perceptions, and forms of collective behavior. Studies of millennial collective action can examine not only whether movements incorporate intersectional lenses into their work, but also how the aggregation of activists' varied social locations motivates and constitutes the movements themselves.

Third, these studies highlighted interesting questions about generational transmission and the mechanisms through which meanings and ideologies are passed on, remade, and resisted altogether. Each presentation either explicitly or implicitly drew on a historical lineage to make sense of the social processes of interest. For example, Johnson described a natural hair movement situated in relation to older social movements, where newly mobilizing groups were mentored and educated by seasoned activists. Councils' respondents drew on notions of breadwinning passed on

by older generations. While some black men reproduced the traditional constructs of hegemonic masculinity, others resisted and remade masculinity. Santellano's DRC student centers for undocumented students were rooted in older models of student centers. These studies showed that social change is not made anew but is always building on the past. How can studies that may not be historical in method better root their analysis in historical context and processes of generational transmission? How does this "passing on" of established frameworks of meaning and action enable or constrain social change? As studies of millennials show, there is no singular millennial experience. Taken together, these analytic realms—multilevel and nested contexts, intersectionality, and generational transmission—can offer scholars and activists theoretical starting points for a more complex analysis of generations and social change.

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