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## **Beauty standards: negotiations of social life among African American college women**

Sheena Kaori Gardner

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BEAUTY STANDARDS: NEGOTIATIONS OF SOCIAL LIFE AMONG  
AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE WOMEN

By

Sheena Kaori Gardner

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of  
Mississippi State University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
in Sociology  
in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work

Mississippi State, Mississippi

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BEAUTY STANDARDS: NEGOTIATIONS OF SOCIAL LIFE AMONG  
AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE WOMEN

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The literature concerning the relationship between black women and beauty has revealed conflicting findings: some argue that black women are negatively affected by 'white' beauty ideals while others argue for the existence of an alternative 'black' beauty standard. The purpose of this research is to describe and analyze young African American women's awareness of beauty standards and their perception of themselves with relation to these standards, examine whether beauty standards are negotiable, and explore how perceptions of self affect daily social interactions.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with black females between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five that were current students in one of three colleges in Mississippi (N = 21). Results reveal that context is an important element for understanding how black women relate to and use beauty standards. Their understanding of beauty standards and the expectations of others dictates how they manage/present themselves in a variety of situations.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research to my parents, Robin and Yoko Gardner, and my siblings, June and Michael Gardner.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to express her sincere gratitude to those who have provided both assistance and encouragement throughout the development of this project. A great amount of thanks are due to Dr. Lynn Hempel, my thesis committee chair, for her time, effort, and guidance throughout this process. Additional appreciation is also due to the other members of my thesis committee, Dr. Robert Boyd, Dr. Frank Howell, and Dr. Nicole Rader, who each provided valuable and unique insights. Finally the author would like to thank Alicia Aiken and LeKesha Perry for the late-night brainstorming sessions and encouragement that great friends provide.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Women in all societies, to some degree or another, conform to a culturally defined beauty standard. Even though men may be just as concerned about appearances as women, beauty has traditionally been gendered as a female trait of desirability and has therefore been considered a special category of women's experience (Banner 1983). This feminine beauty ideal can be defined as a "socially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of women's most important assets, and something all women should strive to achieve and maintain" (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003: 711).

In the United States the current standard of beauty is oftentimes defined as being "a White, young, slim, tall, and upper class woman" (Patton 2006: 30), yet, to what extent is this dominant beauty standard compulsory? What happens if an individual is incapable of or unwilling to mirroring the beauty standard? How do the effects of its demands manifest themselves in women's daily activities? Women, in general, deal with these issues on a daily basis, when putting on makeup in the morning and while running on the treadmill in the afternoon. However, these questions are especially salient when compounded with issues of race and class.

The relevance of race and class is embedded in the description of the American beauty. The dominant beauty standard does not often include women of color or poor

women. Moreover, historically speaking, white beauty was defined in direct contrast to black (non)beauty (Lipford Sanders and Bradley 2005; Collins 2000). Just as you need bad times to recognize the good, black women's "ugliness" was and is necessary to appreciate white women's "beauty". The use of standards that characterize the ideal beauty as "young women with milky White skin, long blonde hair, and slim figures" (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003: 194) means that black women, by default, could never be beautiful because they can never be white (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003).

Throughout history, black women have had little, if any, choice in how their bodies have been constructed (Patton 2006). Racial ideologies pitting black ugliness against white beauty were used to justify slavery and legitimize racism (White 2001; Hunter 1998). Perhaps the most striking example demonstrating how images of black women have been constructed and the inability of black women to exercise agency concerning these images is the treatment of Sarah Baartman, also known as the "Hottentot Venus."

Sarah Baartman spent several years on display in Europe as evidence of white superiority and black inferiority. Her large buttocks and irregular genitalia were seen as "protuberant and asymmetrical, grotesque and compelling in their excessive sexuality" (Wiss 1994: 13). Baartman was showcased as a freak, examined as a scientific specimen, and became the icon of black female sexuality. Her body was examined to provide scientific proof of otherness, that black women were more primitive and sexually ardent than their white counterparts. After her death in December of 1815, scientist Georges Cuvier, who led the dissection of Baartman, pioneered comparative anatomy and made

the scientific study of races possible (Wiss 1994). By the end of the eighteenth century, it was claimed, scientists and philosophers had established, scientifically, that moral worth was implicated by standards of beauty. This science created racially defined standards of beauty that valued “Whiteness” and Western-European features above all others (White 2001).

Today white, Western, and wealthy are components of a culturally idealized model of female beauty and the use of this standard is significant in terms of race. The representation of white women as the standard of beauty makes all others, by default, unbeautiful (Halprin 1996). Many black feminists writing about issues of body image and beauty have described the potentially corrosive and stigmatizing effect of the white beauty standard. Just as you must have bad days in order to have good days, black feminist scholars argue that white “beauty” needs black “ugliness” and as long as the white model of beauty dominates, black women and their stigmatized features will always serve as a point of comparison (Collins 1990; Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003).

Taking history into consideration, there needs to be a recognition that black women’s experiences with beauty in a white dominated culture may differ from those of white women. Du Bois (1903) argued that black people live in a state of double consciousness. Double consciousness is a state of internal conflict in which black people face the challenge of trying to conform to two different ideals, one white and one black. In terms of this research, the concept of double consciousness views black women as engaging in an internal struggle to define their own beauty in the presence of a hegemonic white beauty standard.

Rather than viewing beauty as a general woman's issue, it should be examined as a condition that can be differentially experienced due to factors such as race, class, age, sexual orientation, among others. An intersectional paradigm (Collins 2005) views these factors "as mutually constructing systems of power" (11) and demonstrates how different forms of oppressions interact and converge, creating unique experiences. An intersectionality framework is an appropriate inclusion because the literature concerning the relationship between black women and beauty reveals two competing perspectives. This contention within the literature demonstrates that beauty is a multifaceted issue that is not easily explained.

On one hand, there are some who argue that black women are deeply, negatively affected by the white beauty ideal (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003; Collins 2000). On the other hand, there are those who suggest that black women are unaffected by the white beauty standard because of the presence of a black beauty standard (Lovejoy 2001; Halprin 1996). Scholars promoting both approaches provide evidence supporting these respective views through the use of textual analysis, interviews, and/or surveys. However, few researchers have explored the possibility that the influence of white and black beauty standards on black women may vary in accordance with the context of a situation in which they are engaged.

Here, the term situation is a general state or condition a person may find herself in. Context, on the other hand, refers to those circumstances relevant to a particular event such as the time of day or the type of people present. Situations can be understood as being relatively stable events while context is much more fluid. For example, there is a general understanding of what constitutes appropriate attire for a formal event, but we

also know not all formal events are the same because the context of the situation varies. Fur coats may be acceptable at the Grammy's but they would be severely frowned upon at a PETA fundraiser.

Context should be taken into consideration when examining black women's relationship to beauty because these women's understanding of the role and importance of beauty may differ in a casual versus a professional setting, a male versus female dominated setting, or being amongst friends, family or strangers. Perhaps the most classical demonstration of the importance of context in the definition of meaning is provided by Goffman's dramaturgical approach. Goffman (1997) contends that the way people present themselves to others is affected by the context of a situation. Furthermore, people present themselves or perform in a manner that fits with the understanding and expectations of an individual's role in a particular situation in a particular society (Goffman 1997).

Expanding upon the work of Goffman, West and Zimmerman (1987) explain how gender is a situated accomplishment that emerges from social interaction. They argue that gender is the product of social arrangements and is used to justify the division between men and women. A later article by West and Fenstermaker (1995) expands upon the logic of "doing gender" into the concept of "doing difference," which examines the accomplishment of race and class, in addition to gender, through social interaction. They sought to understand how gender, race, and class operate together to create unique experiences. They argue that gender, race and class are accomplishments because the ways these identities are displayed are influenced by preconceived "normative conceptions of appropriate attitudes and activities" (West and Fenstermaker 1995: 21).



Social context is an important part of “doing” gender, race, and class because even as situations change individuals still expect themselves and others to manage themselves in gender, race, and class-appropriate ways (West and Zimmerman 1987).

The dominance of a white beauty standard along with a history of race relations that degrades black beauty may make black women’s experiences unique. Conceptions about what constitutes beauty, as well as what is an appropriate way to display beauty, can be affected by context because these conceptions influence the ways in which people present themselves and interact with others in various situations. Because there are varying opinions concerning the affects of the white beauty standard on black women, I propose an examination that takes context into consideration.

The purpose of this research is as follows: (1) describe and analyze young African American women’s awareness of beauty standards; (2) describe and analyze these women’s perceptions of their own attractiveness with relation to these beauty standards; (3) examine whether these women are able to negotiate beauty standards and whether the ability to negotiate is contextually or situationally driven; and (4) explore how perceptions of their own attractiveness affects how these women engage in daily social interactions.

I draw on two theoretical frameworks to examine the relationship between black women and beauty drawing: phenomenology and sociology of the body. Phenomenology provides a method for understanding how meanings are situationally constructed while sociology of the body allows us to explore the cultural meanings attached to bodies and examine how social life and social interaction are mediated through the body. In the attempt to understand black women’s relationship to beauty, we are only scratching the

surface if we do not attempt to understand the meanings of beauty and the body in the lives of these women. In the subsequent sections I provide a brief description of and explanation for the decision to use phenomenology and sociology of the body as my theoretical frameworks. I then discuss how each approach has been used in the literature on black women's relationship to beauty.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology provides a method for studying how black women make sense of their social world by shifting analytic attention to how meanings are constructed and translated into action. This perspective examines taken-for-granted, every day life by questioning how we know what we know. The social world is full of a countless number of sights, sounds, and other information and stimuli that exist as a stream of undifferentiated experiences. Still the question remains, how is it decided what elements are pulled out of the stream of experience and made a meaningful part of an individual's reality? According to Schutz (1999), those differentiated elements are typified and made meaningful because they serve a practical function for the individual.

Our meaning systems develop for pragmatic reasons. James (1995) argued that ideas and beliefs have value and are considered true when they work to profit our lives in some way and when we are better for possessing this idea. People base their reality upon ideas that have proven to be useful. Thinking in terms of this research project, the individual's belief that beauty serves a practical function is a reflection of her meaning system. The time that women devote to beauty practices concerning hair, makeup, and

clothing and the adherence to a white and/or black beauty standard reflects how these women view the meaning and role of beauty in their lives.

The meanings people use to construct their realities are fluid rather than static. Berger and Luckman (1966) provide a framework for understanding how meaning is shaped, internalized, and generationally transmitted. I draw on their theory of institutionalization because it explains the emergence, maintenance, and transmission of standards of beauty through the processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization.

### *Externalization*

Externalization is the process by which social realities are created and recreated through the habitualization of people's activities. Beauty standards are externalized products of human activity. Historically speaking, the dominance of a white beauty standard in America can be attributed to racial ideologies that stigmatized African physical attributes such as skin color, hair texture, and facial features in general. Craig (2002) argues that "countless reproduction of derogatory images of blacks in the form of cartoon drawings, figurines, or burlesqued portrayal by white actors in blackface established and reinforced the widespread association of dark skin, kinky hair, and African facial features with ugliness, comedy, sin or danger" (14).

Externalization also involves the recreation of social realities. Beginning in the 1960s, black beauty contests fought against the premise that being beautiful meant being white. Producers of black beauty contests and sponsors of black beauty queens used these contests as proof of the beauty of black women. The "Black is Beautiful" social movement was a way of challenging racialized standards and recreating social realities.

“Black is Beautiful” expanded images of beauty even more by supporting black women with tightly curled hair, dark-skin, and full lips (Craig 2002).

### *Objectivation*

Objectivation explains how social realities are maintained. Objectivation occurs when people’s patterned activities become institutionalized and are viewed as preexisting rather than as products of human creation. Craig (2002) provides an excellent example of how certain aspects of beauty practices become institutionalized. She illustrates how, “almost without exception, a girl’s hair was braided until she became old enough to have it straightened, and then it was straightened over and over for the rest of her life” (Craig 2002: 27). Hair straightening has been practiced since the 1800’s and was a given within the black community. It was not until the start of the “Black is Beautiful” movement that the taken-for-granted institution was confronted.

### *Internalization*

Internalization explains how externalized and objectified social realities are incorporated and adopted by individuals. Internalization is achieved through primary and secondary socialization. Primary socialization occurs during childhood and involves the introduction of children to the world views held by significant others. Differences in things such as class and race during primary socialization cause children to have different perspectives of the social world. Secondary socialization involves the discovery of additional realities apart from their caregivers and the integration of new knowledge and meanings. This step in the process of internalization is helpful in understanding the role

that changes, such as moving to a new city or going to college, have on challenging and reshaping these women's social realities.

Applying Berger and Luckman's (1966) work to this research project provides insight into the ways these women acquire a normative understanding of feminine gender roles and the value of beauty. There are multiple sources of socialization, including the family, peers, the community, the media, and cultural belief systems (Arnett 1995). One approach to conceptualizing the process of socialization looks at the combined influences of culture and the family. Haworth-Hoepfner (2000) argues that cultural standards promoting a particular kind of beauty are mediated through the family.

The family, as the initial source of socialization, plays an influential role in women's understanding of cultural norms of beauty and femininity (Haworth-Hoepfner 2000). She argues specifically that the ways in which families transmit cultural ideals about body shape and size are crucial for understanding the development of girls' identities, self images, and body images. Topics concerning parental influence and children's outcomes are covered extensively within the eating disorder literature. Research reveals that parents, mothers in particular, have a strong influence on their children's body image and on the likelihood of eating disturbances (Haworth-Hoepfner 2000; Phares et al. 2004; Warren et al. 2005; Ridolfo 2007). Parents who model dysfunctional eating attitudes and behaviors, are preoccupied with being overweight, and/or make comments or tease their daughters about weight related issues increase the likelihood of eating disturbances and greater body dissatisfaction among daughters (Phares et al. 2004). Conversely, research has shown that "denouncing the thin ideal, minimizing appearance as an indicator of value, and emphasizing traits other than

appearance as determinants of worth” may protect against the development of disturbed eating (Warren et al. 2005: 241).

Other sources of socialization extend beyond the family to include the broader community and media as mediators of cultural influence. Children’s fairy tales, for instance, serve as a source of cultural socialization. In a study of children’s fairy tales over the past 150 years (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003) finds that women’s beauty is a particularly salient feature of the most popular children’s tales and teach girls specific messages about the importance of women’s bodies and women’s attractiveness. For example, messages in these books propose a link between beauty/goodness and between ugliness/evil where beauty is rewarded while ugliness is punished (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003).

Within the media, there are three common stereotypes used to describe black women: Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire (Yarbrough and Bennett 2000). Mammy is the nurturing grandmotherly figure who “is ready to soothe everyone’s hurt, envelop them in her always ample bosom, and wipe away their tears” (Yarbrough and Bennett 2000: 635-636). Within the media Mammy is portrayed as being asexual and overweight and as having a dark complexion and large breasts and buttocks. Jezebel is portrayed as being a sexually promiscuous woman who uses charm and eroticism with the intention taking advantage of men. Jezebels are viewed as attractive and sexually appealing women. Sapphire is “the wise cracking, balls-crushing, emasculating woman” (Yarbrough and Bennett 2000: 636). She is portrayed as being both stubborn and confrontational.

Frisby (2004) examines the effects of idealized images in advertising on black women’s perceptions of body esteem. She found that these women reported lowered self-

satisfaction when they were exposed to idealized images of black rather than white models. Frisby's work suggests that the media can play an influential role in women's satisfaction with their bodies. Frisby suggests that the differences in terms of race are linked with these women's ability to compare themselves with others they feel are similar. This work suggests that the media and the images it presents can play an influential role on the ways women view their bodies.

Berger and Luckman's (1966) work concerning the social construction of reality provides a method for understanding how particular views about black women and beauty are created; how these views become normative; and how individual women adopt these norms as their own. Phenomenology is an appropriate method for this kind of research because it provides a level of flexibility that is necessary for examining how standards of beauty are defined and negotiated and the situations in which these negotiations occur.

### **Sociology of the Body**

Phenomenology is a necessary but not sufficient framework for understanding black women's relationship to beauty because it is not possible to study meaning as some sort of independent entity outside of the individual: meanings are always embodied. Because our understandings of the world are mediated by and displayed through the body, it is important to stress the connection between meanings and the body. This connection is particularly important for this research given the role the body plays in expressions of beauty. Embodied meanings concerning beauty affect how individuals move and act in the world.



The focus on the relationship between meaning and the body is a critique of Cartesian dualism, which draws a distinction between the mind and body (Merleau-Ponty 2002). In this dualism, the body is seen as a material object that is subject to the laws of physics while the mind, in contrast, is a thinking subject that is not limited like the body. The body is separate and subordinate to the mind and is even viewed as a machine enacting the orders received from the mind (Crossley 1995).

Merleau-Ponty (2002) critiques this dualism by arguing that the body is not merely an object to be seen, heard, touched, or controlled; the body is also a subject that sees, hears, touches, and has an agenda of its own (Crossley 1995). As both object and subject, the body is also both a product of society and a producer of society. The body is a product of society because it is shaped and modified in culturally meaningful ways, but the body is also a producer because it is through the activities of the body that these social structures exist and are maintained and altered. The incorporation of Merleau-Ponty's work has moved sociological focus away from viewing the body as only an object and towards viewing the body as a socially and historically located thinking/doing subject that both mediates and is mediated by society (Howson and Inglis 2001).

Literature on the sociology of the body examines the role of the body in the social world by focusing on how bodies are assigned meaning, how the body is used to define the self, and/or how individuals' bodies are controlled and regulated. The body can thus be viewed as a set of social practices that are produced and sustained through regulated activities and practices; as a system of signs that convey culture and shared meanings; or as an expression of relations of power that regulate and control through the assignment of identities and expectations (Turner 1996). For heuristic purposes, this interrelatedness can

be conceptualized as a fluid triangle<sup>1</sup>, with each corner representing either society, the individual, or the body.

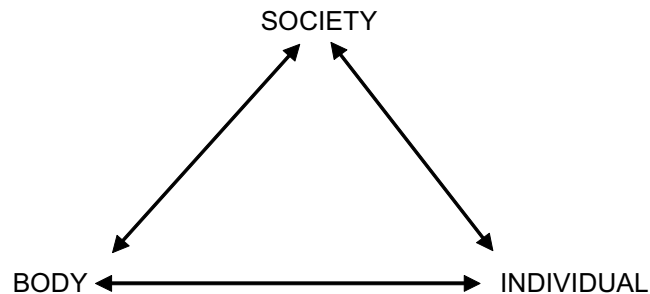


Figure 2.1 Heuristic Model of Sociology of the Body Concepts

1. Society → Individual: The individual is trained, disciplined, and socialized to follow certain rules set by the society. Society structures the actions of individuals through the use of varying socializing agents such as families, peer groups, media outlets, and the education system and it also has sanctions for those breaking the rules society has set.
2. Individual → Society: This relationship refers to the ability of individuals to negotiate society's demands. The individual's accommodation, resistance, or recreation of societal norms and sanctions is an exercise of agency. This agency, however, is constricted by things such as time and place, as it relates to sanctions for improper behavior.
3. Society → Body: This relationship refers to the distribution of power conferred among particular types of bodies and society's ability to control/confine the body. In different societies power is bestowed upon those bodies that are valued. For instance, being tall may be preferred over being short, being young over being old, or being thin over being fat. Also, society consists of norms and sanctions that are designed restrain the body, such as standing in line, and consequences for breaking rules that result in confinement such a prison.
4. Body → Society: In this relationship, the demands of the body affect how society organizes itself. There are biological constraints that affect social life. For example, society designates a sufficient number of restrooms, restaurants, and

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<sup>1</sup> This conceptualization emerged collaboratively in an independent study with Lynn Hempel and Kristi Fondren.

hospitals to attend to the needs of the body and society also has to structure itself in anticipation of events such the increasing age of baby boomers.

5. Body → Individual: Here, the demands of the body can override intentions made by the individual. These are situations when people are most aware of their bodies. For instance, an illness will slow down strong, well-conditioned athletes and productive and ambitious career-oriented women have to recognize their biological clocks if they plan on having children.
6. Individual → Body: This relationship represents individuals' desire to control the biological functioning of the body that are separate from societal demands. This is sort of a mind-over-matter mentality: the will to stay in the movie theater when you need to use the restroom and consuming large amounts of caffeine to stay awake on a long road trip.

Within these relationships, I am particularly interested in the reciprocal relationship between society and the individual as it relates to the body. Society and the individual work both separately and together in the processes of meaning creation and assignment of meanings to bodies. Depending on the direction being examined, the relationship between society and the individual can be understood in two different ways, but in each situation both society and the individual are dependent on the other. In one instance, society can be understood as something that establishes norms and dictates the things people do. On the other hand, individuals can be viewed as being the parts that constitute the whole of society. One focuses on the imposition of structure so that individuals are viewed as products or reflections of society while the other focuses on the agency and activity of individuals as being the producers of society.

This reciprocal relationship is relevant to my research objectives because it provides a better understanding of the role of the body, as both object and subject, in the creation of meaning. As object, the body represents the canvas which society endows

with meaning; and as subject, the body is capable of resisting and transforming systems of meaning.

This body as object/subject approach to understanding meaning provides another way of understanding the current literature concerning black women and beauty. Scholars who view the body as object focus on the influence that societal or cultural meanings have on the individual. This line of research argues that the dominant white hegemonic standard of beauty in America negatively affects black women's attitudes towards their bodies and their level of attractiveness (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003). In contrast, scholars emphasizing the body as subject focus on the agency of black women in defining and representing themselves through their bodies. From this perspective, black women are affected little by the white standard of beauty because they have created and embodied a standard of beauty all their own (Halprin 1996).

The subsequent sections review the literature surrounding the two lines of research: an examination of the literature focusing on the body as object and an overview of the literature focusing on the body as subject.

#### *Society-Individual: Body as Object*

In this relationship the individual is trained, disciplined, and socialized to embody societal values concerning the body. The arrows run in one direction here from society to the individual: society defines bodies and dictates the "rules" of proper body management which are then internalized and applied to the individual's dealings with his/her body. Freund (1988) argues that bodies are constructed through social contexts such as

historically changing modes of production and consumption, modes of social control, and power relationships based on things such as class, race, and gender. The ways in which bodies are socially constructed and performed serve as embodied evidence of society's ideological structures about people and their "innate" differences.

Bodies endowed with socially constructed meaning are valued according to those meanings. Value is an important word whose impact should be considered. Research in the area of physical attractiveness has produced findings which argue that bodies considered attractive, and thus valuable, are given more power and/or prestige than those deemed to be ugly (Patzner 1985). The "physical attractiveness phenomenon" (Patzner 1985) reveals that the effects or consequences of appearance are beneficial to people who have higher levels of physical attractiveness and detrimental to those who have lower levels of physical attractiveness. Attractive people have greater social power; are better liked; are assumed to possess more positive and favorable characteristics; and have different effects on others and receive different responses than unattractive people. Although preferences and definitions of beauty may change overtime, the never-ending pursuit of physical attractiveness demonstrates that the value of beauty remains high (Patzner, 1985).

Understanding bodies as social constructs which are valued differently according to socially constructed meanings is important for understanding the experiences of black women's dealings with beauty. Cultural perceptions towards black women that were created in the past and continue to persist presently must be examined to understand black women's bodies as social constructions (Brewer 1993). Moreover, a woman's body image is greatly influenced by ongoing cultural factors: the individual woman's

interpretation of her culture's beauty standards, the woman's perception of how she compares to those standards, and her belief in the importance of matching those standards (Spurgas 2004). If black women are using white women as a reference group for beauty then it is very possible that the white beauty standard has an extremely negative affect on black women.

There is evidence of a stigmatizing effect of the white beauty standard on black women. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) describe the existence of a "lily complex", which is the belief that the only way to be beautiful is to look as close to "White" as possible. The "lily complex" leads black women to alter, disguise, and cover up their physical selves in order to be accepted as attractive (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003). Evidence of black women's desires to change their physical appearance to align with the white standard can be viewed through participation in cosmetic surgery. Figure 2.2 breaks down the four most common facial cosmetic surgery procedures by race in 2006. Whites are more evenly split between blepharoplasty (eyelid) and rhinoplasty (nose) at 32% and 29% respectively. African American, Asian American, and Hispanics on the other hand, have clear preferences for a particular type of cosmetic surgery procedure. In 2006, 62% of African Americans and 53% of Hispanics undergoing cosmetic surgery got rhinoplasty. Of Asian Americans undergoing cosmetic surgery, 44% got blepharoplasty.

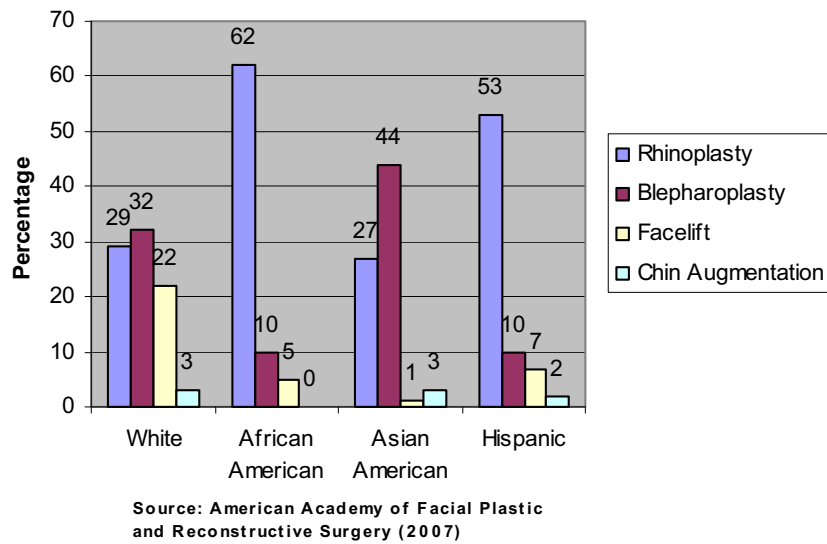


Figure 2.2 Facial Cosmetic Surgery in the United States, 2006.

There is tendency for race and ethnic based surgeries to focus on the most caricatured physical features such as the Jewish nose, Asian eyes, and African American noses and lips (Haiken 1997). The overwhelming propensity for African Americans to undergo rhinoplasty over other forms of facial cosmetic surgery can serve as an indicator of the existence of a “lily complex” which stigmatizes African American features and influences the desire to conform to a white standard of beauty (Jones and Shorter-Gooden. 2003).

Studying black women’s bodies as social constructions provides an explanation as to why scholars believe that black women are negatively affected by the white beauty standard. Scholars who view the body as object focus on two factors, society’s promotion of a white beauty standard and society’s ability to define, control, and regulate meanings that are attached to bodies. Together, these two factors account for the negative feelings black women experience in relation to the white beauty standard. The relationship

between society and the individual is an important aspect of my research because, as I have noted, there are disadvantages that arise from defining bodies in ways that place value on some bodies but not on others.

*Individual-Society: Body as Subject*

Studying the influence of society on the individual alone is not sufficient if we want to fully understand black women's relationship to beauty. The opposite side of the reciprocal relationship between society and the individual examines the individual's negotiation of societal "rules" in dealing with the body. Our modern consumption based culture regards the body "as a changeable form of existence which can be shaped and which is malleable to individual needs and desires" (Turner 1996: 5) and can provide a means of creative self-expression. Viewing the relationship between society and individual from the opposite direction portrays beauty as a repertoire of characteristics and attributes that can be an exercise of freewill and/or an avenue for power (Gagne and McGaughey 2002; Davis 1995).

Whiteness has been considered the ideal beauty standard throughout American history. Black women have used different strategies to deal with this hegemonic standard of beauty through acts of accommodation and/or resistance (Weitz 2001). Black women's dealings with hegemonic white beauty norms extends back to the 1800s with the politics of respectability and into the 1960s with the "Black is Beautiful" movement.

The politics of respectability is concerned with countering negative stereotypical images that devalued black women's beauty through the presentation of positive images (Griffin 2000). Starting in the late-1800s, black leaders and middle-class club and church women countered racism through "neat attire, conventional hairstyles, and even



prudishness battled degrading images born of racist stereotypes” (Craig 2002: 34). This method of countering the consequences of racism requires the women to accept and internalize white beauty norms as a means of empowerment.

The “Black is Beautiful” movement that emerged during the 1960s was an effort to reject notions that “blackness” was inherently ugly. During this time “being black and proud meant not straightening one’s hair [and] holding a standard of beauty that favored dark skin” (Craig 2002: 18). The “Black is Beautiful” movement provided a completely different way for blacks to view themselves. The goal of this movement was to combat negative perceptions of blacks, and its result was the creation of a new and positive black identity (King and Price 1979).

The previous discussion of society’s affect on the individual cited Spurgas (2004), who stated that women are influenced by a number of cultural factors, including the individual woman’s interpretation of her culture’s beauty standards, the woman’s perception of how she compares to those standards, and her belief of the importance of matching those standards. In the relationship where society places its demands on the individual, black women attempt to align with the white beauty standard without resistance. Here the situation is different. Individual women may choose which aspects of the white beauty standard to adopt or reject or they may adopt another beauty system altogether. Because notable differences concerning beauty and beauty practices exist between black and white women (Spurgas 2004), race becomes an important component for understanding how black women are able to show resistance and exercise agency.

Cultural differences between black and white women and the adoption of an alternative beauty standard may make black women less susceptible to the influence of

the white beauty standard. There are a number of cultural explanations which suggest that a combination of a strong sense of racial identity, a strong positive self-valuation, the use of an alternative beauty ideal to resist stigmatization, and social support in the resistance of negative social images all contribute to black women's ability to resist (Lovejoy 2001 and Hesse-Biber et al. 2004).

A strong sense of racial identity has been linked to positive self esteem and rejection of the dominant white standard of beauty (Hesse-Biber et al. 2004). For various social and historical reasons, within the black community<sup>2</sup> young black girls are "raised to be strong, independent and self-reliant, rather than passive, dependent, and deferential" (Lovejoy 2001: 254) and this may contribute to a positive body image. The socialization practices of black mothers in particular are credited as being one of the most important sources of influence and support in the development of a positive self image among black girls (Ridolfo 2007).

In addition to socialization, the feminine gender role within black communities garners a great deal of power, prestige, and authority. The feminine gender role is a source of self-worth that is not reliant on a woman's level of physical attractiveness. The black community also supports black women through its cultural definitions of beauty that accept a wider range of body shapes and sizes and the devaluing of the white standard of beauty (Lovejoy 2001; Milkie 1999; and Sekayi 2003). In short, black culture plays a role in black women's ability to adopt an alternative standard of beauty while resisting the influences of the white beauty standard.

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<sup>2</sup> Lovejoy (2001) argues that ethnic differences account for black women's ability to resist the mainstream American beauty ideal. She singles out the black community as source of support for the resistance and empowerment of black women since black women's beauty has been stigmatized within mainstream American culture.

An approach that analyzes the relationship between the individual and society supports the perspectives of scholars who argue that black women have created and shaped beauty standards that are all their own. The idea that black women are negotiators of beauty standards is an explanation that is just as valuable as an explanation that argues for the existence of a white hegemonic standard of beauty. The presence of two approaches to study the relationship between black women and beauty reveals that this relationship is multifaceted. This study seeks to explore whether the combination of these two explanations may provide insight into the possibility of a contextual or situational aspect of beauty.

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### **Description and Justification of Proposed Method**

This qualitative study examines the literature concerning black women's relationship to beauty standards. There is a tendency within the literature for scholars to either focus on the stigmatizing affects of a white beauty standard on black women or to argue for the existence of a liberating alternative black beauty standard. I argue in contrast, that the influence of white and black beauty standards on black women varies in accordance to the context and situations in which these women find themselves. My research questions explore the possibility that the relationship between black women and beauty standards is contextual or situational in nature. I examine black women's awareness of beauty standards; their perceptions of their own attractiveness with relation to beauty standards; the extent to which they are able to negotiate beauty standards and whether the ability to negotiate is contextually or situationally driven; and explore how perceptions of their own attractiveness affect how they engage in daily social interactions.

A qualitative approach for collecting data is chosen because it is the most appropriate method to use when the goals of the research are to gain an understanding of the meanings these women hold. Qualitative analysis captures the fluid nature of meaning

because it seeks to understand the whos, whats, whens, wheres, and whys of social action: who feels the way they do; what exactly are they experiencing; when and where do they have these experiences; and why do they feel the way they do (Basir 2003)?

Open-ended, in-depth interviews are used to examine the relationship between black women and beauty. This method is chosen over other methods such as using secondary data, or conducting surveys for a number of reasons. The use of secondary qualitative data often negates one of the most valuable advantages of collecting data: the ability to place the data within a context. Slight things such as pauses, twirling of hair, shifts in the body, the use of eye contact, and facial expressions are meaningful actions that provide additional insights that are not visible through secondary data. Additionally, although surveys can be designed with open-ended questions, they are inappropriate for this study because they do not allow me to probe respondents for additional information. Focus groups are not used because there is the possibility of group pressure or influence that may affect respondents' answers. Some of the topics may be considered sensitive by some and I want respondents to feel comfortable talking about them. There is also a certain level of skill that is necessary to successfully moderate a focus group containing multiple individuals versus having a conversation with a single individual in an in-depth interview.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The sample consists of twenty-one black females between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five who attend four-year colleges or universities. I chose these criteria for a number of reasons. The decision to study black women in particular stems from the historical use of racialized images to define not only black beauty but white beauty as

well. Black women's beauty, or perceived lack thereof, has been disparaged and used as a point of contrast in the definition of white beauty. This negative representation of the black female body throughout history has largely been out of the control of black women. Focusing on black females provides an opportunity to gain some insight into how black women construct and define themselves.

The other criteria are that these women are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five and that they attend an institute of higher education. I have chosen this age group because it is at this point of the life course that women are in the process of defining themselves as individuals apart from the direct influence of family. Colleges and universities were chosen as sites to recruit participants because of availability of women within the designated age range. By recruiting only students I homogenize the sample in terms of education and to some degree class; however a degree of variability is maintained by choosing schools with different characteristics.

The findings of this research are based on data collected through audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews. In collecting the data, an interview guide approach (Patton 2001) was used because this approach provides both flexibility and structure. Questions will follow the flow of the conversation and participants are encouraged to elaborate on topics that interest or concern them. A certain degree of structure, however, is necessary given my research objective to ensure that specific topics will be discussed.

The final questionnaire is the product of multiple revisions. Pilot interviews were conducted prior to the collection of data to help determine the types and wording of questions that were most appropriate for my research goals. The questionnaire was constructed with three main goals in mind. The literature (Spurgas 2004, Lovejoy 2001,

Milkie 1999, and Sekayi 2003) reveals that family, friends, and the media play a role in developing women's understanding of what constitutes beauty, so the first set of questions examines the role of these socializing factors on women's understanding of and definition of beauty. The second set of questions is related to concepts found in phenomenology and sociology of the body. Together, phenomenology and sociology of the body explain that our meanings and understandings of the world are mediated by and displayed through the body. This set of questions examines these women's beauty practices as expressions of their embodied understanding of the actions necessary to reach a particular beauty goal. The last set of questions directly addresses the competing explanations concerning black women and the effects of white and black beauty standards. These questions examine whether these women believe in the existence of a white and/or black beauty standard; whether the respondent uses one, both, or none of these standards as a measure for her own beauty; and whether their decision to use a particular beauty standard is contextual in nature. See Appendix B for the complete list of questions posed.

The three sites for this research include Mississippi State University which is located in Starkville, Mississippi and Jackson State University and Millsaps College, which are both located in Jackson, Mississippi. These sites were chosen because of their varying demographic characteristics based on enrollment, tuition, male to female ratio, and racial/ethnic composition (Appendix A). Mississippi State University is a four-year public university with the highest enrollment of any institution of higher education within the state. The school offers undergraduate, graduate, and professional degree awarding programs. It is known for its agricultural and engineering programs (Mississippi State

University). Millsaps College is a small, private liberal arts college. It is best known for its writing intensive curriculum and offers undergraduate degree programs and graduate degrees in business (Millsaps College). Jackson State University is a historically black university (HBCU) that focuses on public service programs and offers undergraduate and graduate opportunities (Jackson State University).

These sites were chosen because studies reveal that schools provide different experiences for black students depending on the environment and culture of the school. Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) differ from traditionally white institutions (TWIs) in terms of support and campus involvement and the cultivation or diversion of energy. Students at HBCUs feel more ‘at home’ because of the support they get from faculty and peers which in turn increases their confidence and provides momentum for the accomplishment of goals (Fries-Britt and Turner 2002).

Initial respondents were cold contacts approached in high traffic areas such as student unions, libraries, main quadrangles, and laundry mats. From there, additional respondents were obtained using snowball sampling. I believe that using this method increased participation because a certain level of trust or rapport existed between myself and the potential respondent throughout mutual connection to the referring respondent.

Interviews were conducted after obtaining either written or verbal consent from each participant. Participants were ensured confidentiality: access to data is limited to my thesis director and me, participant names are changed, and audio recordings and written transcripts are held in separate, secure storage spaces.



## **Data Analysis Procedures**

Completed interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for emergent themes. Analyses are guided by Charmaz (2003) who provides a set of procedures for qualitative data analysis. These procedures include open coding, focused coding, and memo writing (see Appendices C and D for example of the coding process). During open coding, the researcher analyzes the transcripts line-by-line to separate data into categories and to identify processes. In this process, the researcher asks a number of questions: 1) what process is at issue here and how can I define it, 2) Under what conditions does this process develop, 3) How does the research participant think, feel, and act while involved in this process, 4) What are the consequences of this process? Open coding generates numerous codes that will be whittled down through the process of focused coding.

During focused coding, the researcher reviews the numerous topically labeled codes generated during open coding into more abstract categories (Charmaz 2003). Focused coding condenses data into more manageable segments by synthesizing the most significant and/or frequently used codes and eliminating less useful ones. Now, the researcher is better able to compare experiences, actions and interpretations across multiple interviews.

The third stage of analysis is memo writing. Memo writing is a process that prompts the researcher to develop codes and categories into narrative form. For example, codes saying things such as “people in media aren’t regular people,” “media is smoke and mirrors,” “media makes you feel bad about self,” “admires celebrity’s for reasons other than beauty,” “cannot pick a celebrity model,” and “identifies with family member” all combine and develop into a memo discussing these women’s use of celebrities as role

models. This process encourages the researcher “to elaborate processes, assumption, and actions” in the narrative (Charmaz 2003: 102). Memos serve as bridges between the stage in which you define categories and the first draft of completed analysis. Charmaz (2003: 102) suggests a number of points that should be included in memos:

1. defining each code or category by its analytic properties
2. spelling out and detailing processes subsumed by the codes or categories
3. making comparisons between data and between codes and categories
4. bringing raw data into the memo
5. providing sufficient empirical evidence to support your definitions of the category and analytic claims about it
6. offering conjectures to check in the empirical research
7. identifying gaps in the analysis

The memoing process provides a method for reaching my research objectives. Using this method, I can analyze each woman’s thoughts line-by-line to gain insight into her awareness of beauty standards, their perceptions of their own attractiveness relative to these beauty standards, and their negotiation of beauty standards. Then through memoing, I can consolidate and compare the many experiences and interpretations from the interviews to gain insight into the relationship between black women and beauty standards.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

Conflicting opinions are found within the literature that examines black women's relationship to beauty standards. Some argue for the stigmatizing affects of white beauty standards while others argue that black women are unaffected by white beauty standards. Is it possible that both approaches represent black women's experience? Could scholars' emphasis or preference for one over the other be an issue related to context? To explore this possibility, the interviews were examined for emergent themes using the previously described memoing approach.

#### **Defining Beauty**

For most respondents, beauty is understood as a characteristic that consists of more than just outer, physical attractiveness. Respondents argue that inner beauty is a contributing factor in determining beauty in individuals. In addition to a certain level of physical attractiveness, many definitions of beauty include characteristics such as the personality, attitude, and character of individuals which, in many cases, were seen as equally if not more important than physical characteristics. As one participant explains:

*I'm kinda conflicted cause I, you see someone and you think they're "oh they look really pretty" or whatever. But I think it's a mixture of your personal appearance and your inner self. Because you know just because you could be pretty on the*

*outside but on the inside you could have the worst attitude ever and that just makes you less attractive. And I think that you have to have a good personality.*<sup>3</sup>

These women's definition of beauty mirrors the common adage that "beauty is only skin deep." Beauty is considered a multidimensional concept that consists of both outer and inner characteristics. Outer characteristics refer strictly to an individual's level of physical attractiveness. Inner beauty is comprised of characteristics that relate to an individual's personality and behavior.

### **Beauty Messages**

The family is often cited as a key source of the respondents' definition of beauty. Although brothers were mentioned, mothers, aunts, and sisters were chosen at a much higher rate as individuals who helped the respondents define beauty as a combination of inner and outer characteristics. Mothers were recognized as the single most important person who influenced the respondents' perception of beauty. The methods mothers used to instill this definition of beauty were both explicit and implicit. One respondent describes the rather blunt way her mother instilled the notion that beauty is on both the inside and outside:

*Just like with me and my sister growing up, we...I'm not gonna say we were always thought of as pretty, but that's really how everybody was always treating us like. Oh like the Jones sisters are so pretty and they're cool and all that stuff. But my mom would not let that get to our head. She was like you still have to, you know, have a good personality, treat everybody like you want to be treated. Don't, just cause you thing you're cute, don't just take that to the head and be like I can do whatever I want cause it's not like that.*

Another respondent describes how she developed her definition of beauty by watching the example set by her mother:

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<sup>3</sup> The names of the respondents have been changed into pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

*She always carried herself as a woman should. Very respectable woman. Never takes any tea for the fever. She is just the epitome of what a woman should be and so I think on the inside and out. She's very, yes, outspoken but she knows how to say what she has to say in love. And so, and she's very wary of other people's feelings and stuff like that. So I think that played a big role in how I treat people... And her being an example or being the example that she was before me and before the people in our church and stuff she didn't just say one thing and then live another way.*

In addition to families, respondents stated that experiences with friends, acquaintances, and strangers have also influenced and solidified their conceptions of beauty:

*I think myself because having personal experience with people. And as a human being I think it's natural to like pretty things when you see them, but then as you age you kind of gain wisdom and you learn additional things that are more important than looking for beauty.*

Whether the experiences came from friends, acquaintances, or significant others, encounters with attractive people with unappealing attitudes reaffirmed their idea that beauty involves both inner and outer characteristics. In contrast, respondents have also found that the beauty of people of average attractiveness is enhanced through the possession of a great personality, attitude, and willingness to help others:

*It seems like there is cause some people are so kind hearted it makes them seem...so much, you know more attractive. Like you can hang out with them and you think they're so cute. Then someone else who like you can look at initially and say you know that person is cute and when you get to know them its like...you know that happens a lot with me and twins, like identical twins. Like you can meet one of them and it's like, you know, please don't ever talk to me again. Then you meet another, the other one and you're like I really like you...you know, you're really cool.*

The mass media in general are viewed by the respondents as sources that provide inaccurate representations of beauty and unattainable role models for beauty. Women who discussed the influence of the media argue that images in the media are not representative of the norm by pointing out that celebrities have lighting, professional makeup artists, and other beauty enhancing services at their disposal. These feelings

towards the media reveal a fairly consistent relationship between these women's definition of beauty and the people they single out as role models. Although respondents were oftentimes hesitant to identify celebrities as models of beauty, those who managed to name one usually made mention of the celebrity's perceived inner beauty such as talents, philanthropy work, and "down to earth-ness" in addition to physical beauty.

In addition to the assessment of inner and outer beauty, respondents chose celebrities they felt they could relate to in terms physical attributes. Alisha, a full-figured respondent, describes her choice:

*Someone I've always admired her personality actually, and it just so happened that we have some things in common as far as body shape and size and even hair is Queen Latifah...I just admired Queen Latifah a lot growing up, and I like some of the movies she's been in...not all of them. I always liked her music. I love U.N.I.T.Y. and stuff like that. And so...then when she became a Cover Girl I remember being like yeah!*

It is also important to note that every celebrity mentioned was African American. When this was brought to the respondents' attention many realized that had been completely unaware of that fact. Some respondents were surprised by the knowledge and unable to provide an explanation while others were able to describe their logic. As before, there is an issue concerning the ability to relate. Black models of beauty were chosen because those standards were both attainable and desirable. One respondent's statement provides an example:

*I feel like if I ever wanted to look like them I could possibly. But I can't...it's, it's impossible to look like any Caucasian actor or singers or whatever. So that's why.*

Another respondent used value laden words that described black women as being more beautiful than white women:

*S – Alright so you picked three women of color, right? So if you had to choose somebody that couldn't be black who would you pick?*

*R – (gasps) They don't got no lips (laughs)...I think the white woman's shape is so not good compared to blacks. Blacks have the waist, the hips, and the thighs and all of that, but the white women have like the hips too wide or hips too small and the thighs too small. I mean it's not a proportion to them...to me though. But their face, it's some pretty white girls faces. But like the whole, their shape is, can't even compare to a black.*

Although the respondents named celebrities that served as a model for beauty, family members, friends, and acquaintances were much more readily identified as role models for beauty. I believe this is the case for two reasons (based on the interviews). First, these women represent a “real” beauty that is not achieved using Hollywood magic. The same reasons used to criticize images in the media are used to justify admiration of family and friends:

*R – I say my grandmother, but she's deceased now.*

*S – What was it about your grandma?*

*R – Cause she...she was pretty much all natural. She didn't wear makeup. She didn't have...she didn't even have a perm in her hair. She had it pressed. And I just thought for her to be so simple she was pretty.*

Second, the respondents are exposed to these individuals' personality characteristics. As stated earlier, inner beauty is an important factor that is considered when determining an individual's level of beauty. Knowledge of these individuals' personalities provides the respondent with additional measures to judge beauty:

*So, you know she's my big sister so I've always looked up to her. You know she, she's different from...but she has a lot of aspects and characteristics that I look, that I think are just great and make her a great person. So I kind of try to adopt those even though I can't do it like her. And she dresses pretty and I think she's beautiful inside and out. So I look up to her.*

These women's definitions of beauty are influenced by a number of socializing factors. As the initial source of socialization, families have the greatest impact on these women's understanding and definition of beauty standards. Subsequent exposure to other

messages, particularly those from the media, concerning beauty standards are filtered through these women's initial understanding of beauty as a combination of inner and outer characteristics.

### **Perceptions of Beauty Standards**

A main goal of this research is to explore the role context plays in understanding black women's relationship with beauty standards. I found that the women used a number of different approaches to understand beauty standards. A little more than half of the respondents believed there were two separate beauty standards for black and white women. In addition, there were also two smaller groups of women who believed in either a singular, white standard or they argued there was no distinction in standards.

Respondents who believed in the separation of standards distinguished between characteristics that constituted the white and black standards of beauty. The white beauty standard was associated with being thin, having few curves, and having long, straight hair. Descriptions of the white beauty standard were brief in comparison to descriptions of the black beauty standard. When the respondents described the white beauty standard, they focused solely on physical characteristics. For the black beauty standard, respondents mentioned not only physical characteristics but also included characteristics that referred to aspects of the personality. Jasmine, a respondent from Millsaps, put it this way:

*I feel that with black standards it's more with the confidence area. You, if you feel like you're beautiful you're beautiful because there are some short haired actresses that are just as beautiful as the actresses with long hair. Monique is just a comfortable as Beyonce and she's very heavy set. You know, it's just the confidence that you have. And the white standard is actual the physical beauty. You have to be – you have to look it you just can't act it. So that's the difference between them.*



In terms of physical characteristics, the black beauty is almost always associated with a full, curvy and voluptuous figure. Scholars who argue that black women use an alternative beauty standard suggest factors such as a strong sense of racial identity, a strong positive self-valuation, and strong social support contribute to black women's ability to resist stigmatization from the dominant white beauty standard. Examples of each explanation were cited by these women as they explained why they believed in two separate beauty standards.

To begin, the belief in two separate standards is linked to issues of racial pride. "Black is Beautiful" was a movement that sought to instill a sense of pride in black features. Some of these respondents have embraced the ideas of this movement and this appeared to influence their understanding of beauty standards:

*But I've always been taught though to be proud of the black man. And to be proud of just racial identity in general and so I think part of it has to go with my idea of what's really beautiful. And because of that if I see a black woman and a white woman side by side and had to pick the most beautiful one. I think I'm more inclined to pick the black person just because I have this idea that I'm supposed to be more proud of black people.*

Believing in separate standards also provides these women a way to value and be more confident in their appearance. A respondent, who describes herself as full-figured, states that "associating full figured-ness with black beauty has helped me be more confident in my appearance. Cause if I did I could say well I'm beautiful by black standards." Believing in a black standard of beauty appears to allow the respondent to be more confident in her appearance because she feels she is capable of fitting this model of beauty.

Also included in the definition of the black beauty standard is this idea that black beauty develops out from premise of self love – that black people are more accepting of who they are. Beauty is viewed as something that can also be achieved by embracing yourself as you are and having confidence:

*Yeah. I think that, I think the difference between black and white culture when it comes to beauty is blacks are more...blacks, from my experience, I think that it's – you appreciate yourself as you are. You don't want to change yourself. You love yourself. You love yourself as you are.*

Strong social support, particularly from mothers, is another explanation. Raven, a student from Mississippi State describes the reassurance she received from her mother:

*R – Yeah, cause I thought I was ugly (laughs). Um, you know how African American moms are. Do you?*

*S – My mom's Japanese so... I don't (laughs).*

*R – (laughs). Nevermind.*

*S – So you're gonna have to explain that to me.*

*R – Alright. So African American moms are always like – always working on our self esteem. You're beautiful, yada yada. That's how my mom was.*

Most of these respondents also recognized that there was overlap between the two standards. When asked if there were any ways in which the two different beauty standards were similar, most of the women responded that there was overlap in what is considered a pretty face. Characteristics such as facial symmetry and a smooth, clear complexion were listed as universally beautiful traits. In addition, the women agreed that in both standards, long hair is considered beautiful.

A small number of respondents felt that whites were dominant in American society. They argued that because whites hold this position, the accepted standard of beauty is one of “whiteness”. Regina, a respondent attending Jackson State, explains:

*With being beautiful I think – the standards I think they're all just about the same. Because like I said it might be more of a effort for a black women to be considered beautiful than for a white woman. I mean cause I can say born with it,*

*but I think the standards the typical beauty for a white woman would be blonde hair, blue eyes – at least that's what they say. So of course you're pretty much born with that except the hair part. And, it's like they're automatically considered ok, accepted.*

While these respondents claim that a single, white beauty dominates, this is not a situation where the respondents fail to recognize the existence of black beauty. Many of the respondents saw Blacks as being, more or less, forced to mimic the white beauty standard in order to be accepted as beautiful in society. One respondent argues that the white standard is oppressive, but only for those black women who want to be accepted by mainstream society:

*I think there are women that uh, you know their...black women culture or their standard of beauty is oppressed by the white beauty. And so you have that with people like Halle Berry or Laila Ali. But then, you have people like Jill Scott who, they have – she has her own, her own style of beauty and it's kind of afrocentric. You know, black in other words. And she doesn't probably feel pressured to you know. I mean cause you never see her wearing what these, what these white women wear or whatever. She just kind of has her own thing. But, yeah. I think that the white, well the standard of beauty which is ultimately in the end white because it's the majority and I think it can oppress the black beauty because they kind of feel like they have to look that way or... or be that way because I mean in order to get accepted I guess...yeah, to be accepted.*

The last set of respondents felt there was no black or white standard – there is simply beauty. This approach to understanding is similar to the previous approach because it argues for the existence of a single standard, but it differs from the previous approach because respondents did not designate this single beauty standard as either black or white. These respondents argued that believing in the existence of either two separate standards or a single white standard draws a distinction between people that does not exist:

*Yeah cause I don't – you can't really split beauty as a black and white. I mean it's just, beauty is beauty. Whether you're black or white, Hispanic I mean it's on you how you want to portray your beauty. It's not really a beauty for whites a beauty*

*for blacks and Hispanics. It's one. And each of those categories can take from it what they want. So it's not more than one.*

These particular women did not personally believe in labeling beauty standards. They recognized that black and white beauty are often portrayed as being separate within the media and that many people believe that there are two separate beauty standards for black and white women. As Faith commented:

*But as far as my own opinion if we're still talking about inner beauty, beauty is determined by your inner self as well as your outside self it's the same for both. But if you're talking about how it's perceived by television shows or whatever or from the point of view of guys. If you talk about beauty in terms of black and whites from the point of view of guys according to TV shows I think there is definitely a difference.*

As we can see from the interviews, exploring black women's relationship to beauty becomes complicated when we closely examine their understanding of beauty standards. The distinctions between the two dominant approaches found in the literature became blurred within individuals' understandings of beauty standards. These women's understanding of beauty standards cannot be solidly placed within the rubric of one particular perspective. The findings reveal that women's understandings of beauty standards are flexible rather than rigid constructions.

### **Impact of Perceptions of Beauty on the Self**

These women's definitions and understandings of beauty are not abstract concepts confined to the minds of individuals. These women's understandings become tangible through the process of embodiment. Their recognition of beauty and the ways they manage their bodies are the physical manifestations of these women's definitions of beauty. The embodiment of beauty is a multifaceted process, and it serves as another way

to examine the meanings individuals hold. Given my research objective to examine the reciprocal relationship between the individual and society as it relates to the body, I asked these women a series of questions to explore their understanding and experience with different aspects of the beautification process by asking about their diet and exercise habits as well as their beautification routines.

In response to questions about dieting and exercise, many of the respondents indicated that they currently or in the past engaged in such activities. The goals and reasons for dieting and exercising varied among the respondents. Some exercised for health reasons to “feel good [and] maintain a healthy weight.” A few longed for the figures they had prior to births and the “freshman fifteen”:

*S – So, do you diet or exercise or anything like that?*

*R – No but I should. I’ve tried a whole bunch of diets but I never stick to ‘em. As far as the exercise, I will walk. I love to power walk. But other than that...*

*S – So what was the goal of dieting?*

*R – To try and lose my stomach. Everything else I’m comfortable with. It’s just my stomach. After I had my baby it was like – it would not go away!*

Others wanted to work on specific body parts for spring break. A couple of respondents dieted and exercised because of a transition they were experiencing in their life. Alisha has had issues with her weight most of her life. She felt she had conquered her low self image until she joined a sorority her freshman year:

*Cause I joined it for service, I joined it for sisterhood, and I was never a stepper or a strutter. And to be honest I probably joined it because -- AKA, you know, are like the pretty girls. And guys, when you wear letters or colors or jacket, they’re like all over you like hey what’s up. That’s why I say I reverted, I went back. My relapse came around the time I decided to become a Greek and decided to go so that I could be prettier.*

Few admitted to having elaborate beauty practices. The most basic practices for almost all of the women were washing their face and wrapping their hair at night. A large

portion of the women stated that they do not normally wear makeup and that it is usually reserved for occasions such as dates, photos, and graduations. All those who wore makeup regularly said they were not completely dependent on it and could go out without it:

*R – At night I wrap my hair. Um and then I wash my face with Oxy. And then I put this acne medicine on it if I have a bump. And then my moisturizer, brush my teeth, take out my contacts. You know and if I know somebody's gonna come knock on the door or if I'm going to get laundry I keep my earrings in. It's this thing. I have to have earrings when people are going to see me. And in the morning I do the same thing and I put on makeup almost everyday. So...*

*S – What happens if you can't put your makeup on for whatever reason?*

*R – It's, I can go without makeup. I did earlier this week.*

There was a wide variety of reasons why these women engaged in exercising and dieting behavior. With the exception of one woman who has struggled with weight most of her life and those women who exercised for its health benefits, the rest of the women who engaged in these types of behaviors exercised and/or dieted inconsistently to address what they viewed were problem areas. The majority of the women invested a relatively low amount of time and effort put into beautification routines. A few others had a more elaborate beauty routine, but all of them stated it was a personal preference rather than an absolute necessity. Both of these findings suggest that while physical/outer aspects of beauty play a part in these women's lives, beautification practices are not an extremely high priority among most of these women.

### **Perceiving and Judging the Self**

I was particularly interested in how dynamics of gender, race, and class affect the ways people present themselves and interact with others. Does the adoption of a particular beauty standard affect the orientation of these women towards the world? Does

the existence of beauty standards affect the way they feel they are perceived by others?  
Does their knowledge of beauty standards affect how they interact across different contexts?

Although there were a few respondents who used both white and black standards, the majority of the respondents who believed in separate beauty standards adopted the black beauty standard as a guide for their own beauty practices. Those who believed in the white beauty standard judged themselves according to the white standard. With one exception, those who did not designate the existence of a black and/or white beauty standard stated that they did not use any beauty standards to judge themselves.

The respondents were also asked what standard they believed others used to judge their attractiveness. For respondents who believed in either the existence of both standards or a single white standard, the responses were consistent. If they judged themselves according to both, they felt others did the same. One respondent described the situation:

*S – So do you feel like you're judged by others according to one or both of these standards?*

*R – Yeah.*

*S – Okay. Which one?*

*R – Both.*

*S – So in what situations do you think like you're judged according to the white standard or the black standard?*

*R – Well I mean I think that when I'm, when white people look at me they're judging me based on their standards. I think it's the same for black people. When they're looking at me they judge me by their standards.*

Likewise, if they used the either the black or white standard, they felt others used black and white standards respectively. Candice, a student from Millsaps, judged herself according to a black standard of beauty and felt others did the same:

*S – So you think there are two standards. Do you think that you're judged by either one of them or both of them simultaneously or... how do you feel about that?*

*R – Me personally? Or...*

*S – Yeah, you personally. How do you feel others I guess those others out there judge you?*

*R – I think each society black and white, but I think we put pressures and judgments on our respective people more so than white putting on black and black putting on white. I think each race or each ethnic group is harder on itself and I feel like I should uphold the standards of what black society says is right or true or you know good. More so than I would care about white society, what white society says is good and fashionable and beautiful. So yeah I think that like for me to be skinny yet shapely is more important than to be just skinny. So, I think not so much as being judged by what others would say or what others say, well personally, I think there is a judgment that blacks put on blacks and whites put on whites. And yeah I think we're all our biggest critics.*

The pattern varied for those individuals who did not personally believe in either the separation of black and white standards or the domination of a white beauty standard. There was, however, a common thread. Most of these individuals seemed quicker to say they were less concerned about the opinions of others than the women who believed in black and/or white beauty standards:

*S – Okay so to you you're either ugly or you're pretty. But at the same time like, males judge females according to – like white males judge white females by a certain standard of what's beautiful and black males do the same thing for black females.*

*R – Uh huh.*

*S – Okay so we have that and so do you, do you feel that you're judged according to the standards that these guys have set up?*

*R – Uh, huh. Yes.*

*S – So how, what do you think about that? Or how do you feel about that?*

*R – I don't care (laughs). I mean I could care less because personally myself with the whole guys judging women according – I'm not gonna be Beyonce. I'm not gonna be J-Lo. You not gonna have J-Lo. You not gonna have Mariah. None of those. Take what – you might as well take the original society, you know?*

There were others who described a different situation, however. A number of respondents felt, despite their feelings about the use of beauty standards, that they were



judged by others according to a standard that differed from their own – either both standards or by a black standard of beauty:

*S – So um, so do you think that you're, that others judge you according to either one of those standards. Or ...*

*R – I mean I'm sure there are people who do judge me according to them. I won't say that I think everyone is judging me, no. But I think there are people, yeah – according to the black standard.*

*S – You think more the black standard than the white standard?*

*R – Yes, definitely.*

*S – Um, so you think maybe that both white and black people judge you according to the by the with the black standard of beauty?*

*R – Yeah. Yeah cause society tells everyone that oh blacks have to have curves and that white people, white people really aren't really as curvier. So I think that society sends the same message to both white and black people. So I think yeah they judge you based on that.*

*S – Based on their race?*

*R – Yeah.*

*S – And from our, just talking with you I already know that you don't judge yourself according to either one of those.*

*R – No, no. Cause I don't think I should change myself for society. I really don't. I'm a firm believer in that. I'd rather be, I'd rather be not popular at all than trying to change and not be myself.*

None of these particular respondents felt others judged them by a white beauty standard alone. This is interesting since the literature suggests that black women's understanding of beauty is linked to white hegemonic beauty standards. To the contrary, these women do not view society as one that is strictly dominated by a white hegemonic beauty standard. This may have implications in terms of these women's feelings of stigmatization.

I also asked respondents whether knowledge of beauty standards influenced their daily interactions. The respondents' awareness of themselves varied along with changes in group composition. Some respondents claimed to be least aware of their appearance when they were with family and close friends as opposed to being with strangers.

However, a few others felt that college provided a certain level of anonymity that allowed them to care less about their appearance:

*S – So are there places or situations where you're completely unaware or you just don't care what you look like.*

*R – College.*

*S – College in general? So what's the difference between college and high school?*

*R – High school – cause everybody knows you. But college, don't nobody know you out here. I mean if you look around people they dressed in pajamas, flip-flops, and shirt. It don't even have to match. They can have on some yellow pants with a blue shirt with some pink flip-flops. I mean don't nobody care.*

People's level of awareness also changed depending on both the racial and gender composition of the people present. Of those who said their awareness of their appearance changed in predominately white versus predominately black environments, all but one felt more aware of their looks in predominately black settings and less aware in white settings. Only one person was more concerned about her appearance in a predominately white setting rather than black settings. There was a general consensus as to the reasons for the increased awareness in black versus white settings. First, many felt that white people do not view them in terms of their beauty:

*But I could never be judged from a white point of view cause I don't even think I'm looked at you know from them...from a white person's point of view. They don't look at me to see if I'm pretty or not. It's just, I'm judged more so by the people I look close to.*

Another respondent echoes this sentiment by saying that she was least aware of her looks while on Millsaps' majority white campus:

*S – So in what situations are you unaware of how you look? Or maybe not as concerned?*

*R - Probably Millsaps College campus. In fact when I go to classes and everything I'm aware of what I look like everyday, but I don't stress out over it. I'm sure if I went to a historically black college or university, I would be very aware of it everyday. And I would probably dress to the nines every single day. Whereas at Millsaps I can go you know sweats, you know. I can wear heels one*

*day and sweats for the next three days and not care. You know if I go out to a party at the fraternity houses on Millsaps' campus I'll throw on some jeans and flip flops and not care. If I go to a party at a fraternity house you know at another school like Jackson State or Tougaloo, I'm gonna have on heels and an outfit and be you know. So I'm definitely, I think the most I'm aware most when I know that the crowd of people I'm gonna be around is another race. If I'm gonna be around mostly whites I really don't care. If I know I'm gonna be around blacks I put effort into what I look like.*

The second issue concerning these women's awareness of their appearance is related to their perception of the male gaze and female competition. The respondents wanted to look nice around the males as it relates to the dating scene, but the respondents also felt that they were in competition with other women for male attention:

*S - Are there any particular situations where you do care what you look like and you're more aware that...*

*R - Maybe a football, maybe a basketball or football game. Or you go to a party or something. That's when you, you know, cause there's gonna be guys and other girls that, you know. You want to try to look good for the guys and you know you don't want the other girls to try check you or anything.*

The race and gender dynamic also worked in conjunction. One respondent describes that she did not experience the tensions of female competition in a predominately white setting:

*Um, but in an all black setting though I don't know...I still constantly feel insecure of my looks because I look like "oh she's really pretty" or something like that. But I don't necessarily think about that in an all white settings. That's kind of weird. And that...I never thought about it since you asked that questions. Now it's like I do that, you know? (Laughs)*

Results also reveal that the women's use of beauty standards to judge themselves and their awareness of their appearance across different situations may vary depending on the school they attended. The women from Millsaps College differed slightly from the women from both Jackson State University and Mississippi State University. Respondents from Millsaps were more likely to state that they judge themselves

according to a black beauty (four out of seven women) standard than women who attend Jackson State (two of seven) and Mississippi State (one out of seven). More than half (4 out of seven women) of the women from Mississippi State stated that they did not use either a white or black standard to judge themselves while three out of four Jackson State respondents stated that they did not use either beauty standard. Respondents from Millsaps also stated that they felt more aware of their appearance in predominately black settings (four out of seven women) than women from Jackson State (two out of seven) and Mississippi State (one out of seven). The majority of Jackson State and Mississippi State women stated that they were equally aware of their appearance in both predominately black and white environments (five out of seven for both groups of women).

The adoption of a particular beauty standard influences how these women feel others judge them and it also affects how they interact socially across different contexts and situations. With the exception of the group of women who did not believe there was a distinction between beauty standards, there is consistency between the standards the women used to judge themselves and how they felt others judged them. Those women who believed in two separate standards were the only one who said that their awareness of their physical appearance changed depending on the context. These women felt more aware of their appearance in predominately black settings.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This research was inspired by the competing approaches used by scholars to describe black women's relationship to beauty. In brief, there are those who argue that black women are stigmatized by a dominant white beauty standard and there are others who believe that black women are unaffected by this standard. The multiple approaches to studying this relationship led me to investigate what role context and the process of negotiation play in these women's understanding and use of beauty standards. To what extent is this dominant beauty standard compulsory? What happens if an individual is incapable of mirroring the beauty standard? How do the effects of its demands manifest themselves in women's daily activities? Using phenomenology and sociology of the body as theoretical frameworks, the objectives of this research were to: 1) describe and analyze young African American women's awareness of beauty standards; 2) describe and analyze these women's perceptions of their own attractiveness with relation to these beauty standards; 3) examine whether they are able to negotiate beauty standards and whether the ability to negotiate is contextually or situationally driven; and 4) explore how perceptions of their own attractiveness affects how they engage in daily social interactions.

Through this research I have found that context and the process of negotiation play a role in shaping women's understanding and use of beauty standards. There are three key insights that emerged as I analyzed the interviews: 1) although the women oftentimes re-embraced the ideas they learned early on, the women's definitions of beauty were challenged by different sources of socialization; 2) the struggle for the power of self-definition was an issue for some but not most of the respondents; and 3) contrary to the work of Du Bois and Collins, some of the women define and use beauty without reference to whiteness.

Phenomenology explains that meanings are fluid concepts that are constantly created and recreated. The majority of the women cited their families as the primary source of socialization that helped shape their definition of beauty. This finding supports the literature discussing the important role that family plays in developing young girls' understanding of norms related to beauty (Arnett 1995; Berger and Luckman 1966; Haworth-Hoeppner 2000; Phares et al. 2004; Warren et al. 2005; Ridolfo 2007).

An analysis of these women's definitions of beauty would be incomplete without examining how competing definitions of beauty from secondary sources of socialization impact the way these women define beauty. For instance, Alisha, who grew up in a home that celebrated their African-American culture, recalls the time in kindergarten when she told her mother she wished she had white hair because it was "good" hair. Contrary to what she had been taught by her mother, Alisha felt she had "bad" hair because she could not get the same hairstyle as her white schoolmates. Other women experienced similar instances of dissonance when the things they were told by significant others during

primary socialization differed from how they felt about themselves as they engaged with larger society.

In this research, those women whose definitions of beauty were subject to, influenced, and modified by competing definitions of beauty from alternative forms of socialization usually returned to their initial understanding of beauty. Rather than be unhappy with themselves because of their inability to fit a newly incorporated idea of beauty, these women refocused their attention on their initial definition of beauty as a combination of both inner and outer characteristics. with a renewed understanding. This return to past definitions of beauty and acceptance of oneself is seen as being a result of maturity, time, and a renewed understanding. Although these women returned to previous definitions of beauty, those challenges and subsequent changes in these women's understanding and definition of beauty emphasizes the importance of context, in terms of the environment and people one is exposed to, in the creation and recreation of meaning.

Looking at black women throughout history, one of the arguments made by scholars is that black women have had little control over the ways in which their bodies have been and still are constructed (Patton 2006). They argue that dominant/mainstream society have constructed black women's beauty in negative ways. Findings from this research reveal that the struggle for power over self-definition was an issue for some but not most of the women. Phenomenology and sociology of the body can be used to examine meaning creation and recreation within the reciprocal relationship that exists between society and the individual.

The women were asked two questions related to beauty standards: what beauty standard(s) they used as a reference to judge themselves and what beauty standard(s) they

felt others used. The group of women that believed in two separate standards and the group that believed in a single white standard experienced a high level of consensus between their choice of a beauty reference and how they felt others judge them. If they used both black and white standards to judge themselves, they felt others did so as well. The same is true for those who used either the black or white standard of beauty. Discrepancies emerged among the group of women who stated they did not use either a black or white standard of beauty to judge themselves. Although they refused to choose a standard of beauty as a reference for themselves, they felt that others still used one or both standards to judge their appearance.

These women had two different reactions: some were vocal about their dislike of being judged while other adopted a dismissive attitude claiming they did not care about the opinions of others. Their reactions to the thought of being judged by others differed from the other two groups of women. In these cases, none of the women were visibly upset that others judged their appearances according to a black and/or white beauty standard, and those who did state an opinion adopted a dismissive attitude rather than showing agitation. There is a sense that the women who experience a disconnect between the way they view themselves and the way they feel others view them lack control over the ability to define themselves – they cannot make others view them the way they wish to be seen.

Goffman's dramaturgical theory explains that context, and the expectations that accompany them, influences the ways in which people present themselves to others in different situations. Women whose use of beauty standards differs from their perception of how others' use beauty standards may experience feelings of disempowerment because



of others' expectations about the appropriate display of beauty. The message these women are trying to convey is not received by others. The larger group of women who experience consensus between their use and others' use of beauty standards do not struggle over the power of self definition because the way others perceive their "performance" is not affected by the context of varying situations. The symmetry between their perception of others' and their use of beauty standards may lead them to believe that the way in which they view themselves is valid.

The findings from this research may have implications for the literature on symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism examines the ways in which the interpretation of symbols affects individuals' behavior (Blumer 1986). The ways in which people present themselves, whether through avenues such as the maintenance of a particular body type or the style of clothes worn, function as symbols. Through the presentation of self, individuals' use of different symbols of beauty will evoke a particular reaction from others as they interpret the messages being sent.

The third finding from this research challenges both Du Bois (1903) and Collins' (1998) concepts of double consciousness and outsider-within. Du Bois' double consciousness refers to the state in which a person experiences the world as "two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (1903: 3). In this dual perception, individuals struggle between self identification and their identification within larger society. For this study, application of the concept of double consciousness views black women as engaging in an internal struggle to define their own beauty in the presence of a hegemonic white beauty standard.

Collins' (1998) term outsider-within refers to black women's holding knowledge about two different communities. Collins argues that black people in general and black women specifically have access to insider knowledge as they move through mainstream, white society. The opposite is also true; because mainstream society is characterized by whiteness, white people would have little knowledge of the black experience. In terms of this research, black women's marginalized position as an outsider-within would give them insight into the inner workings of hegemonic white beauty standards.

The literature is split on how black women have responded to the hegemonic white beauty standard. Scholars who point to the negative effects of the white standard on black women argue that it has a negative and detrimental affect (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003; Haiken 1997). Other scholars argue that black women have created and used an alternative beauty standard in opposition to the hegemonic white beauty standard that functions as a safe haven (King and Price 1979; Hesse-Biber et al. 2004; Lovejoy 2001). In both of these cases, black women's definition and use of beauty standards is experienced through a state of double consciousness. Black women are seen as being not only aware of the white beauty standard because of its hegemonic presence; they are also dependent on it in order to create an alternative beauty standard in opposition.

Contrary to the work of Du Bois, Collins, and the literature examining black women's relationship to beauty, there are some women who do not experience double consciousness or have additional insight into the inner workings of mainstream, white society. These women believed in separate standards for white and black women, used a black beauty standard, and believed that others used a black beauty standard. There were three respondents for which this was very obviously the case – their idea of beauty was

distinctly separated from the white standard of beauty and it did not function as a sort of protection from the negative effects of the white beauty standard. These women did not even know how define white beauty:

*S – So do you think there are two separate standards of beauty for white women and black women? Or are they the same? Or...*

*R – I want to say yeah, but I'm not exactly sure what the standard of beauty is for the white race. But I know they try to alter themselves. It seems like they kind of try to alter themselves – not to look like black women cause that's not true, but I'm thinking of like lip injections and stuff. And you know that's more common in the black race and I don't really see many black people doing that.*

As for the other women within the same category, there was not as sharp of a distinction made between black and white standards. Although these women made reference to the white beauty standard, there seemed to be an understanding among them that black women are not expected to look like white women – they are judged by black instead of white standards. Additional support for this argument comes from an examination of the women's concern about their appearance in varying environments. With the exception of one participant, these women were more concerned about their appearance in a predominately black environment rather than a predominately white one. I think that there are two possible explanations as to why some of these women's understanding of beauty is made without reference to white standards of beauty: it may be linked to the pragmatic value of beauty and/or the increased salience and objectivation of a black beauty standard following the “Black is Beautiful” movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Considering their understanding and use of beauty standards, when and where is it most practical for these women to be concerned about appearances? Because they believed that all others judged them according to a black standard of beauty, the women

expressed no concern over their ability to model a white standard of beauty. The biggest reason that may explain why these women do not experience double consciousness is related to the notion of invisibility. Some of the women stated that they care less about their appearance in a predominately white environment because they do not think that white people are assessing their attractiveness. In contrast, the women were very aware of their appearance in a predominately black environment. I believe that this difference may be linked to whether the women feel others have an understanding of what constitutes the black standard and whether they have the ability to critique them based on a black beauty standard.

The second explanation as to why black beauty standards are used without reference to white standards draws from the work of Berger and Luckman (1966). They argue that newly created or recreated social realities eventually become objectified and taken-for-granted. Originally the “Black is Beautiful” movement was a recreation of black women’s understanding of beauty standards. Over time, as Berger and Luckman (1966) explain, the reason for the development of an alternative beauty standard becomes separated from the actual use of the beauty standard, and this may be why young black women today use a black beauty standard that is independent from a white beauty standard.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This research project was limited in several ways. In order to make this a manageable project, a strict set of criteria were chosen to limit the sample size. The sample was fairly homogenous and consisted of twenty-one black, female college

students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. With the exception of one individual, all the women were also heterosexual. Although there were three well-defined approaches to understanding beauty among the participants, more than half of the respondents fell into a single category. I believe that interviewing a larger sample of women would reduce any concerns about the authenticity of the pattern in the responses.

The strict set of criteria also limited my ability to compare across additional characteristics such as class, education levels, age, and regions. This inability is linked to issues related to sample size as well. Many aspects of beauty require both time and money investments. Both class and education are related to one's level of disposable income and they may also affect how and with whom individual interact. There are also other non-economic aspects of class such as consumption patterns, tastes, and aesthetics (Bourdieu 2001) that could be investigated. Age is a characteristic that I suspect would have a large impact on women's perspectives on beauty. How does coming of age prior to the "Black is Beautiful" movement instead of the 1990s influence women's understanding of beauty? The life experiences and perspectives of these women have been shaped by history. Region, like age, is important to consider because of the role that history plays in shaping the present day. How does living in the south with its close ties to slavery and racial segregation and oppression differ from living in the north or west? Future research should incorporate these other aspects to gain additional insight into how black women in general relate to beauty standards.

Because I interviewed black women, my gender and race may have had both a positive and a negative impact on my interviews. Because I closely resemble the characteristics of the women I interviewed they may have felt that we could relate to each

other and, as a result, been more comfortable disclosing information. On the other hand, this level of comfort may have led to women to be less explicit in their responses because they felt that I already understood what they were talking about. For example, as part of their beauty routine, many women wrap their hair at night. None of the women provided an explanation and assumed, because I am usually identified as black, that I knew about the process of hair wrapping.

This research examined how black women deal with hegemonic white beauty standards. One may argue that a black beauty standard may have just as corrosive of an effect on black women as a white standard of beauty. I use Berger and Luckman's (1966) theory to explain how an alternative, black standard of beauty is created through the process of externalization. I recognize that in Berger and Luckman's (1966) theory, newly created or externalized meanings may at some point become an objectified reality. In this research I did not examine the effects that an objectified black beauty standard may have on the women because it was outside of the scope of this research project which focused on the supposed ever-present, objectified nature of the white beauty standard in American society.

This research indirectly touches on issues related to theories of ethnic relations. Instances of assimilation and pluralism emerge when discussions turned such as the women's efforts to participate in or avoid mainstream society or their beliefs concerning the convergence or separation of black and white beauty standards. Future research should further examine the implications of the findings and conclusions on issues involving assimilation, separatism, and pluralism in American society.

This research revealed that context influences the way that women present themselves. Although the methodological approach of in-depth interviewing provided great insight into these women's understanding of beauty standards, this particular method may have also been censored, which could have obscured unconscious or taken-for-granted processes. To gain even deeper insight into the relationship between women's understanding of beauty in varying contexts, I would need a method of observing these women as they act in their daily lives. I would be better able to see under what conditions they negotiate the use of beauty standards. Even with methodological shortcomings, this research demonstrates that black women's relationship to beauty standards is complex and is still in need of additional research.

This research shows that it is not an issue of white beauty standards being either corrosive or non-existent for black women. Whether it is corrosive or non-existent depends on context. How were these women raised? What ideas about beauty have they been exposed to? What are their understandings about others' expectations about beauty and how does it affect the ways they do beauty? The research shows that all of these nuanced issues matter and that women's use of beauty standards is complex. It is about the context of the situation guiding how black women use beauty standards and engage with the world. The findings show that women's understanding of beauty standards affects how they engage in the world.

The women are carrying their understanding of beauty into every situation that they go into (how they do beauty when they are at Millsaps versus JSU), but with an understanding of what is expected of them in various situations (they don't dress up at white events because no one is looking/cares but they dress up at black events). Having

an understanding of the situation means that the women understand when it is pragmatically useful to present themselves in accordance with a particular beauty standard.

Through this research I have learned that context is an important element for understanding how black women relate to and use beauty standards. From the beginning context, through the process of socialization, plays an important role in women's understanding of the role of beauty and the use of beauty standards. The social context in which you were raised lays the foundation for women's understanding of beauty standards. Context matters in terms of socializing the women about beauty standards. Context is important for how women use beauty standards. Their understanding of beauty standards and the expectations of others (which comprise the context of the situation) dictates how they manage/present themselves in a variety of situations.



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APPENDIX A  
CHARACTERISTICS OF EACH INSTITUTE OF HIGHER LEARNING

Table A.1 Characteristics of Each Institution

	<b>Jackson State University</b>	<b>Mississippi State University</b>	<b>Millsaps College</b>
<b>Enrollment</b>			
Undergraduate	6524~	11697^	1085*
Graduate	1,735	2,725	69
Total	8,259	14,422	1,154
<b>Tuition (undergrad)</b>			
In-State	\$4,182~	\$4,550^^	\$21,900***
Out of State	\$9,482	\$7,528	\$21,900
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	37%~	47%^	51%*
Female	63%	53%	49%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>			
Black	93.5%~	19.6%^	12.2%****
American Indian	<1%	<1%	<1%
Asian	<1%	1.4%	3.3%
Hispanic	<1%	<1%	1.4%
White	4.1%	74.0%	81.9%
<b>International Students</b>			
	1.3%	4.0%	<1%
<b>ACT Composite Score</b>			
	17~~	23.3^	26**

^Office of Institutional Research at Mississippi State University:

<http://www.msstate.edu/dept/oir/profile06.pdf>

^^Mississippi State University:

<http://www.controller.msstate.edu/sas/account.htm>

\*Millsaps College:

[http://www.millsaps.edu/get\\_to\\_know/profile.shtml](http://www.millsaps.edu/get_to_know/profile.shtml)

\*\*The Princeton Review:

<http://www.princetonreview.com/college/testprep/testprep.asp?TPRPAGE=295>

\*\*\*Millsaps Business Office:

<http://www.millsaps.edu/busoff/stufees.shtml>

\*\*\*\*College Search:

<http://www.scholarships.com/ViewCollege.aspx?uid=175980>

~Institutional Research and Planning:

<http://www.jsuom.edu/jsuom/research/06factsfiguresweb.pdf>

~~College Search:

<http://www.scholarships.com/ViewCollege.aspx?uid=175856>

APPENDIX B  
INTERVIEW GUIDE



## Questionnaire

First I'd like to ask you a few background questions:

- How old are you?
- What kind of town did you grow up in?
- Describe your childhood environment:
  - Home life
  - Community
- What was your high school like?
  - What type of activities did you participate in?
  - What was the racial makeup?
  - What kind of people did you hang out with?
- Did your parents go to college?
- What do your parents do for a living?

Now I'd like to focus on beauty.

- How would you define beauty in general?
- Who in your family has had the most influence on your ideas of beauty?
  - In what ways did he/she influence your ideas?
- How did your friends shape your perception of beauty?
- Were there any differences between your friends', parents', and your views on beauty?
- Do you have a beauty routine for your (hair, skin, and makeup)?
- How do you feel after you do your routine?
- How do you feel if you can't do this routine?
- Why don't you concern yourself with (whatever beauty practices she did not do)?
- Do you diet or exercise?
  - Why or why not?
- Is there a person who serves as a model for you on how to do beauty?
  - Why not someone "more" or "less" beautiful?
  - Is this person someone you feel you can relate to?
- If you could look like anyone who would you choose? Why?
  - If black woman, is there anyone outside of your race you would want to look like?
  - If non-white, is there a reason why you didn't pick a white person?
- Is there anyone that you wouldn't want to look like?
- Do you feel pressured by society to look a particular way?
  - If yes:
    - What are you supposed to look like?
    - Who or what makes you feel pressured in this way?
    - Does it bother you that this pressure exists?
  - If no, why is it that you don't feel any pressure?
- If you could, would you change anything about your appearance?
  - If yes, what would you change and why?

- If no, why wouldn't you?

Now I'm going to focus more specifically on notions of white and black beauty.

- What is the white beauty standard?
- What is the black beauty standard?
- In what ways are these two versions similar or different?
- Do you feel you are judged by others according one or both of these versions of beauty?
- Do you judge yourself according to one or both of these versions of beauty?
  - If yes:
    - How closely do you follow these standards, and
    - How does the comparison affect your self esteem?
  - If no:
    - Is there a reason why you don't compare/align yourself with either of these versions of beauty?
    - Have you created your own version of an ideal beauty to follow?
    - How does the comparison affect your self esteem?
- Does your knowledge of beauty standards affect your confidence or how you act in certain settings?
- In what kind of situations are you most aware of how you look?
  - What is it about those environments that make you feel more aware of how you look? (Who is doing the judging and why does it matter?)
- Are there situations where you are unaware of how you look?
  - What is it about those environments that make you comfortable with how you look? (Who is not judging you?)
- Do you think that the way people look at you affects how you see yourself?

APPENDIX C  
EXAMPLE OF CODING SCHEME

Question: "What in this course has helped you the most?"		
Response	Initial Coding	Focused Coding
<p><i>I appreciate how much the instructor encouraged us to voice our opinions and to ask questions in class. As much as possible, he took the time to respond to everyone's questions and opinions, to explain concepts, and then to make sure everyone understood his answers. This helped me because I felt like I was being heard and I became more involved in learning the material.</i></p>	Encouraging expression of viewpoint	Encouraging student participation
	Encouraging questions	
	Responded to questions	Presentation of content
	Explained content	
	Check for understanding	Student empowerment
	Student feels valued	
Student feels involved in own learning		

(Instructional Assessment Resources 2007)

APPENDIX D  
EXCERPT OF CODING SCHEME

Question: How would you define beauty in general?

Response

Well, I am...and part of this I learned in weight watchers (laughs). Beauty, you know that cliché that beauty is skin deep. I mean clichés are clichés for a reason. I've seen some of the most...what someone would call physically attractive people, especially women, that I've met in my life. But because of their attitude...I hate to say. I just get turn...not turned off. Not in a sexual way, but just as a turnoff from that person in general. Like God you suck. And I started learning that in high school. And then...I kept, I felt beautiful.... to be honest I was definitely like looking at the television or looking at my friends who were getting hit on when we go to the mall and that was kind of my idea of beauty. And the more I realized that, the further I was from that idea. That I wasn't there. And so, that was my idea for a while. Like that size 2 or 4 girl, you know? 5'5'' and long hair and you know whatever else. But now that I have to define it...I am honestly I don't take consideration many physical factors. I mean yeah it does have bearing, but I look at skin. And as far as like clear skin or the color of skin and eyes maybe. But beauty though is something that you possess. It's not something that you just...it's not something that, it's not physically...you can't capture it physically. It's definitely something that you have, like that you just have. I...yeah it's kind of hard to explain. Now that I think about it.

Open Coding

Focused Coding

secondary influence

beauty not just on the outside

confirmation of definition of beauty

secondary socialization

media influences

primary definition

outer beauty has bearing but not only factor

beauty not only physical

secondary sources of socialization (media & friends)

beauty not just on the outside

return to initial definitions