Armoring: Learning to Withstand Racial Oppression

ELLA L. J. EDMONDSON BELL *
and
STELLA M. NKOMO *

"And Still I Rise . . ."
Maya Angelou

INTRODUCTION

Writings by Black women, whether fictional, biographical, autobiographical or poetic, seem to share a resounding theme that speaks to Black women’s inner resiliency and emotional strength (Bolton, 1994; Gibson, 1995; Jacobs, 1987; Lightfoot, 1988; Morrison, 1987; Murray, 1987; Walker, 1982). Maya Angelou’s “And Still I Rise” (1978) powerfully underscores this theme. Lisa Jones (1994) offers another spin on this theme. Her archetypical bulletproof diva is a self-reliant Black woman, “whose sense of dignity and self cannot be denied; who though she may live in a war zone, goes out everyday greased, pressed and dressed . . . she has the lip and nerve, and she uses that lip and nerve to raise herself and the world” (p. 3).

Scholarly writing about African American women clearly reveals their perilous social position in society because of the interlocking and interactive forces of race, sex and class (Collins, 1990; Davis, 1981; Dill, 1979; Hooks, 1984; King, 1988). In response to living a bicultural existence, where the Black and White cultural contexts are divided by barriers encrusted with racism, sexism and classism, African American women must be taught how to survive. They must learn what it means to be a Black woman in a society that has not granted them the traditional “courtesies for femininity” (Greene, 1990:211) and has treated them inhumanely. More importantly, they must develop both fortitude and strength to raise themselves up and out into the world.

In this article, we analyze life histories of professional African American women to illuminate the process of “arming among women raised in two kinds of family systems. What do we mean by “armor”? Armor is a form of socialization whereby a girl child

* Belk College of Business Administration, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, North Carolina 28223, USA, (704) 547-2062

1 In her research, Bell has used the term “bicultural” to describe both the life structures and social positioning of career-oriented African American women. Biculturality has also been used to describe how African American women relate to the dominant culture. For further clarification of this concept see, Bell 1986, 1990; Dill, 1979; and Valentine, 1971.
quires the cultural attitudes, preferences and socially legitimate behaviors for two cultural contexts. Armoring is also a "political strategy for self-protection" whereby a girl "develops a psychological resistance" to defy racism and sexism (Rogers, 1991:38).2 We believe the armoring process is a critical element of African American women's psychosocial development. Elements of the armoring process begin to appear in the women's narratives when they talk about their preadolescent experiences. It seems to be an ongoing process until the women reach late adolescence. These women were taught by their families and communities to develop a protective shield as a buffer against unsavory elements of the outside world—a world where they quickly discover Black women are invisible, devalued and dishonored in particular ways because of their race and gender. Armor enables a Black girl to develop and to maintain a sense of self-worth, dignity and beauty in the face of social standards clearly signaling otherwise.

ARMOR: ITS THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The term "armor" has been used in the psychotherapy literature to describe an adaptive mechanism for coping with racial oppression (Greene, 1994; Sears, 1987). Faulkner (1983:196), in her group work with women involved in interracial relationships, uses the concept of armoring when referring to "specific behavioral and cognitive skills used by Black and other people of color to promote self-caring during direct encounters with racists experiences and/or racist ideologies." Faulkner believes young women of color are taught by their families ways to armor themselves against racism at a very early age.

Elsewhere in the social science literature, armor is strongly related to several other concepts, including dual-socialization (Hale-Benson, 1986; Greene, 1990) and racial-socialization (Greene, 1992, 1994; Peters, 1985). Both concepts emphasize the role of African American parents, especially mothers, in socializing their children to function cognitively and emotionally in two cultural contexts divided along racial lines. Hale-Benson (1986:62) asserts that "Black children have to be prepared to imitate the 'hip,' 'cool' behavior of those of the culture in which they live and at the same time take on those behaviors that are necessary to be upwardly mobile." She refers to this process as dual-socialization.

However, both Peters and Greene in their definitions of racial-socialization underscore this process as a way to help African American children cope with the debilitating affects of racism. Peters (1985:161) stresses that racial socialization is the responsibility of parents to raise their children physically and emotionally healthy "in a society in which being Black has negative connotations." Racial-socialization is also a term used by Greene (1992) to describe a complicated process through which African American parents communicate to their children the roles, expectations, cognitive skills and strategies necessary to manage

---

2 In this context, we base our definition of socialization on the work of several scholars. Boykin and Toms (1985:33) write that "ideally [socialization] is the principal process by which the codes and sanctions of a social order are imposed on individuals." They also provide other definitions of this concept. According to Boykin and Toms (p. 33), Baldwin (1980) defines socialization as the "preparation of children to take on the adult roles and responsibilities of society." Finally they offer Zigler and Child's (1973:4) notion of socialization as being one that "deals essentially with the practical problem of how to rear children so that they will become adequate members of the society to which they belong."
within both the Black and White cultural contexts. Research suggests that this socialization is gendered. African American parents—mothers in particular—fear more for the safety of their sons, understanding that too much temper and ambition might cost them their lives. Girls are perceived less vulnerable to this kind of danger because they spend more time sharing domestic responsibilities with their mothers (Goldrick et al., 1991). Thus, African American boys and girls are taught different ways to manage their interactions with the dominant White culture. Greene (1990), for example, refers to racial-sexual socialization, a process by which African American mothers prepare their daughters to cope with the societal ills of both racism and sexism. She asserts, "Black mothers must prepare their daughters to become Black women" (p. 218).

In Greene's (1994:23) clinical work with African American women, she identifies three components of the racial-socialization process, including: "(1) learning to label racism accurately and to acknowledge its extent; (2) role models as demonstrators in a young woman's life... who can model appropriate responses to situations and demonstrate the importance of self-advocacy; and (3) understanding the experience, which may be fraught with feelings of difference, rejection, and confusion."

**DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY**

Our study "Life Journeys of Black and White Women in Corporate America" is an effort to make explicit the barriers faced by African American Women managers when compared to White women managers. The growing body of literature on women in management primarily concentrates on the experiences of White women (Bell et al., 1993). As such, we have little knowledge about the effects of race, gender and class on the status of women in management positions (Bell and Nkomo, 1995). Hence, one goal of this project is to begin to fill this existing void in the scholarship through the investigation of life courses and career experiences of African American and White women employed in private sector companies.

Life-history methodology was employed in order to obtain systematic, holistic portrayals of the women's lives. A semi-structured, open-ended interview format focused around four major life dimensions: (1) early life experiences, (2) education and college years, (3) career entry and development, and (4) personal life sphere. This format allowed for greater exploration of social roles, racial identity formation, and the impact of systems of oppression over the course of the women's lives. Interviews were conducted in two or three sessions, with each session lasting three to four hours. Most life-history interviews were eight to ten hours long. Life histories of the African American women were gathered by a race-alike, gender-alike research team. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using an ethnograph computer program. The analysis presented in this article concentrates only on the sixty life-history interviews conducted with African American women.3

Participants for this study were recruited through different African American professional networks and organizations, as well as by referrals from participants. Selected

---

3 In the spirit of comparative analysis, it is interesting to note that in our analysis of the White women's life histories, we did not uncover any evidence of an armoring process for gender, ethnicity or race.
participants demonstrated a positive motivation for self-exploration, a willingness to share their life experiences, and a commitment to the project by giving their time. Participants lived in the Northeast and Southeast regions of the country. A majority of them were born in what Sheehy (1995) identifies as the “Vietnam Generation,” between 1945 to 1955; however, a small number of the women were from the “Me Generation,” born in the late fifties. Our participants held jobs in a wide range of industries. A majority of the participants were in middle-management positions, although there was a good representation in upper-level management.

WOMEN RAISED IN FAMILIES OF NURTUREANCE AND SUPPORT

In our study, women raised in families of nurturance and support were from two-parent family systems that also included siblings, grandparents, and extended family members. A majority of these families were solidly middle-class. Parents had college degrees and were employed as educators, social workers, businessmen, and entrepreneurs. A small number of the women in this group were raised in working-class families. In these cases, parents had completed high school and worked in blue-collar occupations. Overall, these women reported that their parents were loving and gave them unconditional support. However, they also noted that within their families there was strong parental authority, discipline and structure. Their life histories revealed very limited, if any, family turmoil. Analysis of these women’s life histories indicated two components of the armoring process: (1) being respectable, and (2) developing courage. Neither component seemed to be more salient than the other; rather, the two components appeared to be interwoven throughout the women’s stories without distinguishability.

Being Respectable

Being respectable emphasizes the importance of a girl being in control of her sexuality and learning to carry herself in a dignified manner. Another way to think about respectability is an internalization of a moralistic code through which a Black girl child learns how to present herself in public beyond any reputable doubt. There was some evidence of learning to be respectable in both groups of women. However, the particular behaviors, the rules reinforcing respectability, and the specific parent responsible were more pronounced and detailed in the narratives of women raised in families of nurturance and support. Every woman in this group referred to the importance of being respectable.

In African American communities, the need for women to carry themselves in a respectable manner carries a great deal of weight. No doubt, the spectre of the stereotypical, promiscuous Black woman, that can be traced back to slavery, remains a poignant determinant of African American women’s behavior. A woman’s behavior must not be

4 Historian Elsa Barkley Brown (1993) acknowledges the deep concern African American families have historically shown in regard to their daughters being respectable. According to her, “a collective memory of sexual harassment runs deep in African American communities, and many Black women, especially those born before the 1960’s Civil Rights Movement would likely recognize sexual harassment not as a single experience, but as a part of a collective and common history” (p. 207). She continues, “While respectable behavior would not guarantee one protection from sexual assault, the absence of such was certain to reinforce racists notions of Black women’s greater sexuality, availability or immorality” (p. 211).
seen as sexually soliciting men. She must not come on too strong in the company of men, for that could be interpreted as making herself sexually available. In this context, we are referring to both Black and White men.

For women raised in families of nurturance and support, mothers were the primary agents for teaching their daughters to be respectable. Their mothers did not give their daughters explicit messages to conceal their sexuality. There was no evidence of a family’s overt worry that their daughter would one day encounter sexual harassment or sexual abuse in their careers. All these parents expected their daughters to go on to college and even to attend graduate school. Expectations of graduate degrees, combined with the dismantling of workplace segregation and expanding job opportunities, may have decreased parents’ anxiety about their daughters’ encountering overt sexual harassment. Of course, women always face the threat of sexual abuse; therefore, mothers did give their daughters explicit messages on how to be a lady, especially in the company of young men. As one woman related, “My mother told me to make sure a man would protect my sense of dignity, my sense of being a lady, my sense of comfort, and to make sure I could trust him. Do only what you want to do with a man, but before you do anything sexual, make sure he respects you.”

A young girl’s lesson of respectability usually began when she was in her preteens. It was instilled in her to dress like a lady, which meant wearing clothes that were never too tight, never too short, and definitely never too revealing. Breaking the dress code, if discovered by her mother, usually resulted in receiving a stern lecture. Then there were rules of what not to do when in the company of the opposite sex: young men were always introduced to the young girl’s parents; sitting in the back seat of a boy’s car was out of bounds; staying out after curfew meant being grounded; going to a house party where a girl’s parents did not know the parents was also discouraged; participation in group activities that included boys and girls was encouraged.

**Developing Courage**

Courage is a girl’s ability to go boldly forth into the White world to actualize her dreams. Parents taught their daughters courage by encouraging them to dance to the beat of their own drum. They instilled in their daughters an individualistic sense of beauty, grace, style, and intellect. Parents also gave their daughters the message that they could conquer the White world. One participant put it this way: “My parents gave me the feeling that I could do whatever I wanted in the world, as long as I put forth the effort.” In this context, an expectation was made explicit: success required diligence and work. Another woman recalled, “I was told by my father that I was a person of this world and I was entitled to everything the world had to offer.”

---

5 Annie G. Rogers (1991) also writes about courage. She presents an interesting life history on the word courage taken from the English language, demonstrating how the word has been disassociated from the “feminine” qualities in Western culture over the course of five centuries. In Roger’s clinical work with young girls, she explores the practice of courage, “the art of being playful and outspoken, a vulnerable and staunch fighter, someone who transgresses the conventions of feminine goodness to invite, in fact to welcome, a struggle for real relationship” (p. 41).
These parents had the financial resources and personal connections in a time when there was the dismantling of overt segregation. Consequently, they could expose their daughters to the arts, historical monuments, and finer restaurants within White America. However, they were highly selective of the places and events they chose. We call this selective exposure. These parents intentionally selected only those activities that would reinforce the self-images of their daughters. For instance, it was not simply a coincidence that the first ballet one interviewee’s parents took her to see featured the acclaimed prima ballerina Maria Tallchief, a woman of Native American and European ancestry. Our participant still remembered Ms. Tallchief as being somewhat “nonballerina-ish” because, unlike the other ballerinas, she was brown-skinned and had an awesome physical presence. Another participant told of the time when her parents took her to the opera *Madame Butterfly*, starring the African American diva Leontyne Price. She sat through the performance mesmerized. “Price was simply regal,” recalled the woman in the interview. Both of these examples reveal how each woman discovered at impressionable ages that women of color were beautiful and talented and in fact could take center stage. These images of womanhood mirrored their younger self-reflections.

In addition to attending cultural events, the participants also mentioned spending summer vacations touring different cities to visit historical sites. One participant’s father was one of the few Black men to play in the U.S. Open Chess Tournaments. Her father’s way of showing his daughter that there were no limits was to coordinate the family vacation around the location of the chess tournament. These trips introduced the young girl to the elitist world of chess, where she observed and interacted with Whites with whom she would not have normally come into contact.

At a time when Black women were growing up in segregated communities, selective exposure gave these girls opportunities to glean deeper insights about the social norms, behaviors and attitudes operating in the White world. This element of a woman’s armor increased her confidence, enhanced her social skills, and gave her the courage to comfortably move back and forth between two cultural contexts.

**WOMEN RAISED IN FAMILIES OF STRUGGLE AND SURVIVAL**

Families of struggle and survival consisted of several different family structures. In some cases, women were raised in two-parent, nuclear family systems. Other cases represented women raised in a single-parent household during some period of their childhood, usually with the mother being the primary caretaker. Still another example was women who lived with their grandparents or other relatives for an extended period of time. Yet, a distinguishing feature was found in the life histories of all these women: their families experienced some kind of periodic trauma that temporarily unstabilized a woman’s life. Divorce, death, job loss, fights between parents, a parent’s bout with alcoholism, and

---

*According to Olga Maynard (1961), one biographer of Maria Tallchief’s career as a prima ballerina, Tallchief’s father was a full-blooded Native American of the Osage tribe Wazhazhe and her mother was of Irish, Scottish and Dutch ancestry. Tallchief spent the earliest years of her life with her family, living on an Indian reservation in Fairfax, Oklahoma before relocating to Beverly Hills, California. To learn more about Tallchiefs life, read Maynard’s *Bird of Fire* (1961).*
Armoring: Learning to Withstand Racial Oppression

Sometimes of extreme financial strain were examples of the kinds of trauma these women faced while growing up. The families of these women represented different social classes, including the middle-class, non-working poor and the working poor (Billingsley, 1992:46). Analysis of these women’s life histories reveal two components of the armoring process: (1) becoming self-reliant, and (2) being strong.

Becoming Self-Reliant

Self-reliance, a woman’s ability to take care of herself, is instilled in her at a young age. For the African American women raised in families of struggle and survival, it was a critical component of their armoring. One participant summarized it all when she said, “I was told to depend on no one else but myself, period.” Another participant reflected poignantly, “As I think back, I always wanted to make sure I could take care of myself. I am clear about it, even though I’m not sure I really understood what it meant.” Her comments reveal a young girl’s inability to comprehend exactly what it meant to take care of oneself.

Learning to become self-reliant took on different forms. As children, they watched their mothers and fathers struggle every day to keep a roof over everybody’s head and to put food on the table. Women raised in single-parent households observed their overworked mothers fight uphill battles, trying to fill in the family’s monetary gaps while simultaneously holding the family together. They saw their mothers get worn out, even with support from extended family members. In certain cases, the women had to take care of themselves and their siblings, becoming the parental child (Minuchin and Fishman, 1981) in the family. Under these circumstances, a girl child had little choice but to become self-reliant.

Sometimes learning took a different twist. Such was the case for one woman. When she was nine years old, her father died from a lifetime heart condition. Up until this point, the family lived an upper middle-class lifestyle. Her father was a physician and her mother was a housewife. The death of her father drastically changed this woman’s life. The family had to relocate to a new city and were forced to build a different lifestyle. “I think a lot of my need to be independent has to do with my father’s dying, his death cut the cord,” she lamented. However, it was her mother who drove the point home by continually reminding her daughter “not to end up like her.” Her mother explicitly reinforced the importance of getting an education, choosing a good career path, and building a financially secure life. She had no intentions of allowing her daughter to fall in her footsteps. Our participant especially remembered one of her mother’s more serious talks, when she told her, “You are married to someone and one day you look up and he’s gone. You are left with children or it’s just you—either way you always have to be in the position to take care of yourself.”

Being strong to the point of becoming invincible—even to physical pain—is a habit of survival for Black women (Scott, 1991; Wallace, 1978). Such habits are “responses to pain and suffering that help to lessen anger, give a sense of self-control, and offer hope” (Scott, 1991:200). An eerie silence exists when it comes to African American women talking about their pain, whether it is emotional or physical. Silence is one way African American women have adapted to living in a world of interlocking oppressions. In addition,
for the women raised in families of struggle and survival, the importance of being strong was inculcated until it was solidly fused into their armor.

Mothers were the primary agents armoring their daughters to be strong. One participant’s story is an excellent case in point: “My mother had some very strong views on being a woman; she believed Black women had additional crosses to bear in life.” Thus her mother set out to prepare her to cope with what she believed to be the extra burdens of life. When our interviewee was in eleventh grade, during one of her classes, she began to menstruate. She had terrible cramps accompanied with a bad case of nausea. She went to the school nurse to get some aspirin to help ease the pain. The school nurse felt it would be better for the girl to go home for the rest of the day, since she was so miserable. She called the girl’s mother to tell her that she was sending her daughter home early. But, our participant’s mother had other thoughts. She informed the school nurse that getting a period or having cramping was no excuse to send her daughter home, not then and not any time in the future. Our participant returned to class only to spend the remaining school day running back and forth to the bathroom.

To make matters worse, by the time our participant reached home, her mother was solemnly sitting in the kitchen. “My mother was waiting to do a little preaching,” she recalled. Her mother told her to sit down and then she began to explain why girls did not come home just because they got their period or had cramps. As far as her mother was concerned, cramps and periods were all part of a woman’s normal bodily function. A little pain was to be expected. There was certainly no reason to act foolish by whining or to stop working. “Girl, you’re just going to have to adjust like the rest of us do,” is what this woman remembered as her mother’s last words.

Now as a grown woman, our participant understands the need for African American women to be strong, although she remembers being angry with her mother for weeks after the “period episode.” She makes sense of this experience by rendering, “I will tell you something that is in me, in all of us . . . you keep going no matter what the pain. My mind keeps on saying the pain’s not that bad.”

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This article describes the process of armoring among professional African American women raised in two distinct family systems: families of nurturance and support, and families of struggle and survival. In the literature, armoring is described as a psychological buffer for self-protection against racism. In our analysis, however, a woman’s armor is as much a coping mechanism against racism as it is against sexism, or what Essed (1991) identifies as gendered racism. In fact, in the narratives taken from both groups of women, we find that parents did not teach their daughters explicit ways for dealing with racism.

One key factor seems to distinguish the armoring process for these two family systems. Class membership was a salient moderator of the armoring process. Class determined the adults and events responsible for initiating the differing components of this process, what components were emphasized, and how the process was reinforced as girls developed into
women. Thus, it is not surprising that a divorced mother or a mother with an alcoholic husband who could not hold a job would stress the importance of being self-reliant to a daughter. As Greene (1990:212) points out, "It would seem logical that a young Black woman’s understanding of what it means to be a Black woman may most certainly be heavily influenced by her mother’s phenomenological understanding of racism and sexism and their respective roles in shaping her mother’s own life."

Another prominent feature in the narratives of women raised in families of struggle and stress is that there was no mention of their parents’ selectively exposing them to the White world. Developing courage to be able to go forth and claim one’s place in the world was reinforced by both mothers and fathers for women raised in families of nurturance and support. Developing this type of courage through selective exposure was a luxury only afforded to those from middle-class backgrounds. Working-poor parents and parents stressed out from familial turmoil did not possess the monetary resources or energy to expose their daughters to high culture. Participation in sophisticated cultural events were not attainable within their limited universe. Other researchers have also suggested differential emphases in parents’ socialization because of class background. For example, poor and working-class mothers emphasize morality, honesty, hard work, and keeping a good name while school achievement and repression of sexual and aggressive impulses are emphasized to a greater extent by middle-class mothers (Goldrick et al., 1991).

Questions still remain concerning the armoring process. While the benefits of this process are evident, what are the possible costs associated with being armored? Armor can protect, but too much armor can immobilize. Does a woman’s armor get in the way of her capacity to be vulnerable or diminish certain parts of herself? Being strong, for instance, is a necessary component of an African American woman’s armor. However, it can heighten her need to become a superwoman. Moreover, in the process, a girl growing into womanhood may lose the ability to seek help, to allow herself to be out of control, if only for a little while. Worse yet, she may not be able to admit she is in pain, not even to herself.

REFERENCES

Angelou, Maya

Baldwin, Alfred

Bell, Ella L.

Bell, Ella L. and Stella M.
1995 "Theorizing race and gender in organizations: Expanding the women in management paradigm." Unpublished manuscript.
Bell, Ella L., Toni C. Denton, and Stella M.

Billingsley, Andrew

Bolton, Rutie

Boykin, W.A. and F.D. Toms

Brown, Elsa Barkley

Collins, Patricia Hill

Davis, Angela

Dill, Bonnie Thomton

Essed, Philomena

Faulkner, Janette

Gibson, Aliona L.

Greene, Beverly

Hale-Benson, Janice

Hooks, Bell
Armoring: Learning to Withstand Racial Oppression

Jacobs, Harriet A.

Jones, Lisa

King, Deborah K.

Lightfoot, Sarah L.

Maynard, Olga

McGoldrick, Monica, Nydia Garcia-Pretto, Pretto, Pauline M. Hines, and Evelyn Lee

Minuchin, Salvador and H.Charles Fishman

Morrison, Toni

Murray, Pauli

Peters, M.F.

Rogers, Annie G.
1991 "The development of courage in girls and women." Unpublished manuscript.

Scott, Keisha

Sears, V.L.
1987 "Cross-cultural ethnic relationships." Unpublished manuscript.

Sheehy, Gail

Valentine, Charles

Walker, Alice

Wallace, Michele

Zigler, Edwin and Irwin Child