

Not like the other black girls

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The presumed sisterhood between young black women in the United States doesn't exist between the different classes. In fact, a tense relationship is actually par for the course between poorer black women and their more affluent counterparts, with those in the middle and upper classes feeling like shunned "stepsisters." Young middle-class black women feel "different" or even isolated, and this also applies to women who grow up in biracial families or are adopted by a white family. Their connection to the white community alienates them even further from other young black women, reports Colleen Butler-Sweet of the Sacred Heart University in the US, in a study published in Springer's journal *Gender Issues*.

Butler-Sweet's findings are based on 25 in-depth interviews she conducted with middle to upper class black female college or university students between the ages of 18 and 25 years old. They were either raised in a monoracial family with two black parents, a biracial family with one white and one black parent, or were adopted into a transracial family by white parents. The young women all spoke more passionately about their difficult relationships with other [black women](#) than about any other issue.

"They rarely mentioned [white women](#), while they described other black girls as generally negative, and anything from alienating or terrorizing," recalls Butler-Sweet, who says that many interviewees have experienced this tension since high school.

According to the interviewees, young black women of lower classes

often accused them of "acting white" or not "being black enough", looking too pretty or not being pretty enough. They were also accused of receiving too much attention from black men in particular. Affluent young black women feel under pressure to look beautiful by white standards, and compete with both black and white women for the attention of the same small pool of eligible young black men.

Most of the interviewees kept their conflicts with other black women to themselves. They were also hesitant to attribute tensions with others to class differences, despite acknowledging that such differences existed.

"While social class was not directly referenced in any of the accusations, the detractors were almost always of a lower socioeconomic status than the informants themselves," Butler-Sweet comments. "The issue of class is 'an invisible force' in these encounters."

Young middle-class women from biracial or transracial families tended to rationalize and explain these tense relationships in terms of the family structure that they found themselves in. Transracially adopted women for instance frequently talked about how their [white](#) parents did not know much about African-American hair and skincare, and how it left them feeling silly at school where they were teased.

"Women from monoracial families do not share this 'benefit' of explanation, and essentially do not have a place to put the criticisms they face or a way by which to explain them away," says Butler-Sweet. "They therefore may suffer a greater sense of anxiety and stand a greater risk of internalizing their struggles."

More information: Colleen Butler-Sweet, Not Like the Other Black Girls: How Class and Family Structure Impact Young Black Women's Experiences of Competition and Alienation, *Gender Issues* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s12147-017-9185-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-017-9185-x)

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