

# The Case of Black Millennials

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## Abstract

Sociologists have queried over the utility and effectiveness of generational analysis for some time. Here, the authors contend that intragenerational analyses are needed to critically and comprehensively make sense of the social world. Drawing on four presentations during the presidential session titled, “#NextGenBlackSoc: New Directions in the Sociology of Black Millennials,” the authors use Black Millennials as a case to illustrate how racializing generational studies can strengthen sociological research in four particular subdisciplines: Collective Behavior and Social Movements, Religion, Gender and Sexuality, and Family. They ultimately argue new analytic approaches are necessary to produce significant research on individuals and groups with complex intersectional identities and the particularities of their social experiences.

## Keywords

racial and ethnic minorities, race, gender, and class, collective behavior and social movements, religion, family, sex and gender, Black Millennials, Millennials

## Introduction

Born between 1981 and 1996, Millennials are known for their distinct relationships with prominent social institutions. Traditional news media accuse Millennials of abandoning industries like banks, churches, department stores, diamonds, homeownership, and even soap; however, these discussions rarely provide demographic characteristics beyond age (R. S. Allen et al. 2015; Dimock 2019; Pew Research Center 2019; K. Taylor 2017; Thompson 2018). Although these accusations assume that economic, political, and social changes affect all Millennials equally, we contend otherwise. Millennials' racialized, classed, and gendered identities intersect to inherently affect their experiences. This is especially true for Black Millennials<sup>1</sup> (R. Allen 2019a, 2019b). Our presidential panel “#NextGenBlackSoc: New Directions in the Sociology of Black Millennials” in 2019 drew attention to the social realities of Black Millennials and the complex ways they navigate them. Ultimately, we argue that sociological analysis of Black Millennials nuances our understanding of the Millennial generation at large.

In the following sections, we expand on the complexity of Black Millennial identity. First, we articulate the significance of racializing generational studies in sociology and in doing so

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link the study of Black Millennials to the tradition of Black Sociology. Next, we demonstrate how to center Black Millennials within four prominent subdisciplines of sociology: Collective Behavior and Social Movements; Religion; Gender and Sexuality; and Family, highlighting the theoretical and methodological contributions of studying Black Millennials. This project employs ontological and epistemological frameworks rooted in Black Feminist Theory. As junior scholars, Millennials, and Millennial-adjacent<sup>2</sup> Black women, we contend that the stories of Black Millennials are valid and useful sources of knowledge—knowledge that will crystallize our understanding of the social world (Collins 1989; Sweet 2018). Altogether, the analytic approaches discussed here contribute to the broad sociological toolkit used to make sense of intersectional identities and the complex social experiences that correspond with them.

## Racializing Generational Studies in Sociology

Millennials are an important generation to highlight in social research because of the significant changes in society that parallel their transition from adolescence to adulthood. Millennials have been characterized in a myriad of ways and stamped with a variety of names (e.g., Generation Y; iGeneration; Technology Generation). They are the most educated generation (Ryan and Bauman 2016). They grew up alongside the development of the internet and its corresponding technology (Tapscott 1998), they report high levels of frustration with a precarious labor market (Ng and Johnson 2015), and they actively resist the seeming permanence of social inequality (Milkman 2017).

Of the literature on Millennials, specificities within the generational cohort are often overlooked. Although a few studies mention that Millennials are the most ethnically and racially diverse generation in American history (Pew Research Center 2010), it is here that critical racial analysis on this generational cohort ends. Historically, Black people, across generations, have distinct social experiences (Du Bois [1903] 1995). For instance, Black members of the Greatest Generation (born between 1901 and 1924) and the Silent Generation (born between 1925 and 1945) experienced social isolation and humiliation during Jim Crow's legalized segregation (Litwack 1998). Black Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) facilitated the Civil Rights Movement to collectively critique social and political disenfranchisement in the face of economic growth for white Americans (Morris 1984). Black members of Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) experienced steep discrimination in the workplace and suffered under new hypercriminalization laws (Alexander 2010; Moore 2019). Presently, Black Millennials have been targeted by for-profit higher educational institutions and as a result carry a disproportionate amount of student loan debt compared with their white degree-holders (McMillan-Cottom 2017). The need for analytic tools to comprehensively study race-based generational experiences is clear.

Taking into consideration this gap, we employ throughout this article the tradition of Black Sociology—the study of Black people by primarily Black scholars using sociological thought and methods, to bring about positive social changes (Wright and Wallace 2015).<sup>3</sup> Black Sociology emphasizes the integration of historical context in examining Black people's interactions with each other and within social institutions (Staples 1973a, 1973b; Wright and Wallace 2015; Wyse 2015). Through the incorporation of historical contextual analysis, Black Sociology illuminates the past processes that led to present situations while emphasizing the roles played by institutional structures (Staples 1973a, 1973b; Watson 1976; Wright and Wallace 2015; Wyse 2015). Merging Black Sociology with intragenerational analysis allows us to see that Black Millennials are culturally different than their white cohort mates, which in turn necessitates research that centers their voices and lived experiences. The following sections exemplify how racializing generational analysis within subdisciplines of sociology is not only appropriate but also necessary to fully understand our complex social world and the specific ways Black Millennials exist within it.

## **Collective Behavior and Social Movements**

In the first panel presentation titled, “Young, Black, and Ambitious: Black Millennial Civic Engagement,” Candice C. Robinson (2019b) examines the relationship between the individual and their community. Through these relationships, she observes how Black Millennials become civically engaged as a way to expand the scope of previous collective behavior research that focuses on protests moments (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Moss and Snow, 2016). Civic engagement allows scholars to depart from traditional social movements literature by incorporating everyday instances of participatory democracy, such as voluntary groups and voting (Robinson 2019a). Robinson makes three conclusions related to this relationship. First, her respondents see civic engagement as a moral obligation, noting “it’s what you’re supposed to do.” Many suggested that their civic involvement began long before increased mobilization moments like the Ferguson Uprisings in 2014, but their dedication was enhanced with the uptick of mobilization. Second, her respondents see traditionally Black civic organizations, such as the National Urban League, as a way to stay committed to their moral obligation of getting involved within their community. Finally, her respondents expressed their civic experience as a unique part of their Blackness, integral to their identity. Black Millennials are not distinct from their equally politically engaged parents or grandparents; however, this generation’s civic engagement manifests differently as they draw on educational and professional opportunities not afforded to previous generations.

Through this presentation, Robinson argues that a current limitation in this area of research is the full incorporation of research subject’s positionalities. Combining ethnographic, interview, and trend data, will yield support for the qualitatively different experiences Black Millennials have in comparison with both non-Black Millennials and Black members of other generational cohorts. Although a push for an inclusion of racial effects and an understanding of the future of democracy has been discussed recently (Bracey 2016; Cohen 2010; Oliver 2017; Ray 2019; Watkins Liu 2018), Robinson concludes that we need to be aware of time period effects for more robust analyses within collective behavior and social movement scholarship.

## **Religion**

In the second panel presentation titled, “Black Christian Millennials: Reconciling Racial and Religious Tensions,” Shaonta E. Allen (2019c) examines how Black Millennials’ refashion and individualize religion. In doing so, she advocates for individual level, rather than institutional level, analyses of religion. Acknowledging how Christianity has both substantiated social inequality at the structural level and inspired social change amongst individuals, this presentation explored how Black Christian Millennials grapple with these disparate truths when constructing identity and embodying their faith. Relying on data from in-depth interviews and survey scales, Allen argues that Black Christian Millennials “do Christianity” in a distinct way, employing comprehensive meaning-making and self-authorship practices which affirm both their racial convictions and racial realities (Allen 2019d).

For example, declines in church attendance among the Millennial generation are often cited as evidence that society is secularizing (Pew Research Center 2012). Allen contends that this decline is not all that surprising or concerning. Just as Amazon and other online markets have facilitated the early demise of brick and mortar establishments like shopping malls, Allen claims that physical church attendance decline could similarly be attributed to technological advances within faith communities. From church YouTube channels to live-streaming on church websites, Allen’s data illustrate that Millennials have several options when it comes to when, where, and how they perform their faith. Black Millennials, for example, reported taking advantage of “Bedside Baptist,” or the process of “attending” church via social media live streams, without ever leaving their homes (Evans 2016).

To truly examine the innovative ways Black Millennials “do religion,” such as this, new analytic and methodological approaches are needed. Micro-level analyses are most appropriate to capture the experiences of groups like Black Christian Millennials whose racial and cultural scripts dictate the way they engage with prominent social institutions like religion. Social research on generations must disaggregate the cohort to examine how subgroups, like ethno-racial communities, cultivate new identities, and generate new practices.

## Gender and Sexuality

In the third presentation titled “That Was the Sin That Did Jezebel In: Black Women’s Recollections and Reclamations of their Sexuality,” Ifeyinwa F. Davis (2019) examines Black Millennial women’s remembrances of their sexuality/ies using sexual scripting theory (Simon and Gagnon 1984), interrogating the intersections of identities and corresponding systems of oppression. She examines how Black women are prepared for womanhood, how they experience simultaneous socialization in Blackness and womanhood, and how these processes influence their sexual identities in adulthood. Using semi-structured, in-depth interviews and snowball sampling techniques, she investigates Black Millennial women’s personal histories of sexual identity development.

These women’s narratives elicited memories of their bodies being surveilled and policed by family members and school officials, particularly during puberty. Participants also revealed tensions they experienced while being socialized into womanhood, such as expectations for how to present in their physical bodies before participating in sexual activity. Most importantly, they spoke openly about rejecting sexual identity ideals to recover sexual subjectivity. They spoke of taking control of their sexual identities by rejecting stereotypes impressed on them as adolescents, seeking mental health interventions such as therapy, and resisting or abandoning religious framings of gender, sex, and self. These findings highlight the need for sociological research on gender socialization and sexual expression to incorporate methods where Black Millennials speak for themselves, revealing healing strategies they pull from increased information available via social media. Research of this nature is significant precisely because it assesses the totality of Black Millennials varied and intersectional experiences.

## Family

In the final presentation, titled “The Everyday as Problematic: Using Millennial Pop Culture to Explicate Social Theory,” Maretta McDonald (2019) explores Black Millennials’ engagement with, and communications on, social media. Much of Millennials’ social interactions and exchange of ideas occur via online platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram (Brock 2012; Florini 2014; Manjoo 2010; Sharma 2013). Guided by Black Sociology, McDonald examines public responses to Cardi B’s pregnancy announcement on Black Twitter and pop-culture blogs to investigate Black Millennials’ understanding of family. McDonald’s preliminary findings indicate Black Millennials still hold traditional values about family formation. Their condemnation of childbearing out of wedlock contradicts the popular perception that Millennials as a cohort resist traditional values prioritizing parenthood over marriage (P. Taylor et al. 2011). McDonald also claims that Black Millennials engage in stereotypical thinking about multipartner fertility among Black men, reflecting a continuation of historically controlling images. Furthermore, Black Millennials are concerned with economic stability, believing it should be a prerequisite of childbearing, which partially explains the increasing age before first birth for segments of the Black community (Smock and Greenland 2010). These findings suggest distinct differences within the Millennial cohort regarding ideals about family, supporting the argument for comprehensive intrageneration analyses.

## Conclusion

The Pacific Sociological Association's call to engage Millennials speaks to the necessity of including generational studies. Furthermore, creating space for the study of Black Millennials in particular exposes the benefit of prioritizing racially specific research. Black Millennials, when examined with a Black Sociology and Black Feminist Theory lens, reveal the intricacies of their lives, including the ways they differ from the larger patterns experienced by Millennials of other racial groups. Thus, an extension of sociological research into the dynamic ways Black Millennials operate proves valuable and essential.

Our research reveals Black Millennials and their experiences exist in a distinctive manner, not only when compared with other generational cohorts but also when related to the broad, race-neutral Millennial category. Moreover, by bringing together the experiences of Black Millennials across matters of collective behavior and social movements, religion, gender and sexuality, and the family, we glean more insight into the interconnected nature of various subdisciplines as they play out in society. Prioritizing research about Black Millennials that builds on the traditions of Generational Studies, Black Sociology, and Black Feminist Theory can significantly strengthen the broader discipline of sociology.

Social scientists, equipped with the unique analytical methods exemplified in the presentations above, while also embracing the broader tradition of Black Sociology, can produce critical and comprehensive examinations of Millennial life. In sum, sociologists must seek to understand how Millennials fit into the landscape of the social world. When considering how race impacts experiences, our work compels social scientists to further develop innovative analytical strategies that capture the significant and diverse lives of Black Millennials.

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## Notes

1. Throughout this research note, we draw on the capitalization practices of Kimberlé Crenshaw when stating, "I capitalize 'Black' because Black people, like Asians, Latinos, and other 'minorities,' constitute a specific cultural group and, as such, require denotation as a proper noun. By the same token, I do not capitalize 'white', which is not a proper noun, since whites do not constitute a specific cultural group." (Crenshaw 1991:1244).
2. We use the term Millennial-adjacent to represent individuals who do not fall within the generation's age range but whose work and personal networks are predominantly comprised of Millennials, resulting in their hyperawareness of and engagement with Millennial culture.
3. While recently, named as such, the tradition of Black Sociology can actually date as far back as the late 1800s and early 1900s (Du Bois [1903] 2003; Wells-Barnett 1892; Wright 2016).

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