

Transformative family scholarship: Introduction to the special issue

Dawn M. Dow¹  | April L. Few-Demo²  | Deadric T. Williams³ 

¹Sociology Department, University of Maryland, College Park, College Park, Maryland, USA

²Department of Human Development and Family Science, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, USA

³Department of Sociology, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Knoxville, Tennessee, USA

Correspondence

Dawn M. Dow, Sociology Department, University of Maryland, College Park, 2112 Parren J. Mitchell Art-Sociology Building, College Park, MD 20742, USA.
Email: dmdow@umd.edu

Edited by: Liana Sayer

Abstract

This introductory essay situates this special issue within the context of antiracism and social justice for family scholars. The editors underscore the political and social context that led the National Council on Family Relations' three flagship journals—*Journal of Family Theory & Review* (JFTR), *Family Relations* (FR), and *Journal of Marriage and Family* (JMF) to collectively invite submissions for separate special issues on Transformative Family Scholarship: Theory, Practice, and Research at the Intersection of Families, Race, and Social Justice. This special issue focuses on scholarship using cutting-edge theory, research, and practices to investigate racial injustice and confront white supremacy within the context of the family. The guest editors synthesize the dominant themes cross-cutting the 13 articles, including parenting, racial stratification, health and economic well-being, and racial identity. The guest editors explain how these articles contribute to a more robust analysis of structural racism within families. The introduction closes with an invitation to scholars doing scholarship using critical theoretical approaches to continue their efforts and consider the *Journal of Marriage and Family* as a potential publication outlet for their research.

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, the National Council on Family Relations' three flagship journals—*Journal of Family Theory & Review* (JFTR), *Family Relations* (FR), and *Journal of Marriage and Family* (JMF)—collectively invited submissions for separate special issues focusing on one cross-cutting topic—Transformative Family Scholarship: Theory, Practice, and Research at the Intersection of Families, Race, and Social Justice. The injustice of

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Floyd's death was impossible to ignore in a 24-hour news cycle that replayed that video footage repeatedly within the context of a pandemic that demanded people quarantine in their homes. It also inspired global Black Lives Matter protests, including more than 15 million participants.

Floyd's death represented a threshold moment in the United States. Even more, Floyd's death prompted this special issue for family scientists to expand and refine their approaches to examining and understanding racial inequality. Thus, these journals' joint call aimed to encourage and support scholarship in integrating and further developing approaches to studying family-related aspects of racial and social justice not often featured in Family Science. These efforts aimed to create space for family scholars to pursue novel and underutilized theoretical, methodological, or empirical frameworks to explore the impact of racial inequality, racial unrest, and white supremacy on family life.

The need for NCFR's special issues was inspired by the increasing recognition of and amplified attention to travesties of racial justice in America, with a particular focus on those occurring in the last 10 years. In 2012, Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American teenager, was shot and killed by neighborhood vigilante George Zimmerman while walking home from a convenience store carrying an Arizona-Iced Tea and a package of Skittles intended for his cousin. Zimmerman killed Martin in his father's supposedly "safe gated community." Zimmerman's 2013 acquittal of all charges based on Florida's stand your ground laws served as the catalyst for Alicia Garza's Facebook post that would develop into the Black Lives Matter movement (Alvarez & Buckley 2013). Countless other unarmed people racialized as Black and Brown have been killed at the hands of law enforcement and members of the general public have increasingly received national and international attention. In 2017, newly elected President Donald Trump signed Executive Order 13769, known as "the Muslim ban," prohibiting the travel and admission of refugees from specific predominately Muslim countries to the United States. The ban was not inconsequential. For example, one study shows that women from Muslim travel ban countries residing in the U.S. had higher odds of preterm births (Samari et al., 2020). Trump's order prompted a range of spontaneous collective action, including protests at airports and town squares, strikes by taxi services, and mobilization of legal resources, which drew attention to and challenged this xenophobic policy. In 2018, zero tolerance policies that began enforcing family separation and putting Mexican children in cages at the US-Mexican border brought attention to the structural racism and the inhumanity manifest in immigration policies (e.g., Sabo et al., 2014). The emergence of the coronavirus exposed pre-existing racial inequality by exacerbating racial variation in mortality rates and adverse health conditions (Cowger et al., 2020; Garcia et al., 2021). The pandemic also created economic precarity for many families due to employers deciding to temporarily close their doors or reduce work hours to help mitigate the spread of the disease (Kanter et al., 2021). The widespread closing of businesses, specifically small businesses, disproportionately impacted families of color (Connor & Solomon, 2020). These events reveal how families of color experience challenges produced by local, state, and federal policies and practices and law enforcement procedures that were not designed with their needs in mind.

We live in a world of polarizing news media silos (Mitchell et al., 2014); thus, conducting and disseminating research highlighting inequities and privileges experienced by diverse groups of people is more important than ever. As scholars, we must work to provide possible solutions and create opportunities to help improve the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. To accomplish these goals, family scholars who are social justice-oriented employ critical theories to ground their research design, analysis, and findings (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020; Letiecq, 2019) and to situate families within the existing political and social context. By using critical theories, family scholars analyze how individuals and communities navigate their social identities within diverse social and relational contexts and how they enact performativity, power, and agency in both private and public spheres (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). Critical theories decenter and challenge discourses and experiences of people racialized as White as the

foundation of disciplinary paradigms by making visible how, and in what ways, existing hierarchies and power structures impact families of color differently and provide empirical justification for resource (re)allocation (Williams & Baker, 2021).

Family researchers often focus their analysis on the impact of individual-level characteristics that are internal to families, such as income, education, or family structure, on families' experiences and overall well-being (Dow, 2019). In doing so, such research essentially holds societal treatment constant and assumes all families are navigating the same institutional and societal context (Dow, 2019; Williams, 2019, 2020). Indeed, other factors often viewed as external to the family, such as systemic and structural racism, impact the experiences, challenges, and overall strategies of families of color (Dow, 2016). Power structures embedded within institutions, policies, and practices are shaped by intersections of racialized, (cis)gendered, classed, and heteronormative logics that impact all families, whether by producing privilege or disadvantage. Although some fields within education and health-related disciplines have focused on anti-racism and social justice for some time (e.g., Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1998), Family Science has been slow in this regard. Recently, however, family scholars are beginning to offer critiques and paths forward as it relates to social justice frameworks (e.g., Curtis et al., 2022; Jordan, 2022; Letiecq, 2019; Vasquez-Tokos & Yamin, 2021; Walsdorf et al., 2020). The contents of this special issue reflect our efforts to (1) explicitly invite known scholars who study family processes using critical theories and thus disrupting White logic(s) and (2) identify manuscripts that address family life and processes that are understudied. The special issue includes invited submissions from family scholars we knew used critical theories to interpret their data and have worked with complex community-informed data. This special issue also includes submissions from scholars in family science thought communities who answered our call to showcase their empirical research using critical theories. The 13 articles included in this special issue introduce a broad range of topics and underscore how inequitable systems and institutions impact the lives of families of color, including the criminal justice, immigration, and child welfare systems, and the workplace. The invited submissions range from examining the psychic and economic significance of social fathering in the lives of African American young adults, mothers' diaper needs as an exemplar of the intersection of gendered structural oppression and racial stratification, and interlocking structures of oppression that produce intergenerational exploitation and marginalization in the context of illegality.

THEMATIC OVERVIEW

The articles in the special issue engage with four general themes: (1) parenting, (2) health and economic well-being, (3) racial stratification, and (4) racialized identity. Although family scholars have long focused on these topics, the authors present their findings with a level of nuance that has the potential to move Family Science forward by placing families within a larger social, political, and racial context. Collectively, the articles in this special issue present facets of racial and ethnic minority life that are underdeveloped or underexplored in conventional family scholarship. They also used analytical and theoretical frameworks that are often underutilized. These articles provide examples of how society does not function the same way for racially minoritized families. They illustrate the palpable effects of those differences and the creative strategies families use to navigate those differences. We elaborate on the four themes below.

Parenting

Four manuscripts focus on parenting and explore how family structure, poverty, racial socialization, and parenting practices are shaped by structures of racial and ethnic inequality. Using a

sample of 728 respondents from the Add Health survey, Cross and Zhiang document the prevalence of nonresident social fathering among African American youth. They also examine the quality of those relationships in terms of closeness, contact, and receiving financial support in young adulthood and whether the quality varied across social fathering types and biological fathers. Participants were more likely to report feeling closer to nonresident social fathers than biological fathers. A quarter of respondents reported having a nonresident father as their main father figure, while 44% reported a nonresident biological father. Over two-thirds of respondents reported regular contact and strong feelings of closeness with nonresident social fathers, with over 40% receiving financial support. Cross and Zhiang's research challenges deficit frameworks often used to examine African American family processes, particularly within single-mother households. By examining the quality of relationships between Black young adults and biological and social father figures, this research underscores the potentially overlooked assets of such family configurations that demand additional exploration.

Hitchens, Aviles, and McCallops draw attention to the intersection of race, poverty, and illegality among street-identified Black American mothers. Using qualitative data, the authors identified three adaptive strategies mothers used to respond to and cope with structural inequality: constrained mothering, racialized mothering, and aspirational mothering. Letiecq et al. examine 22 Central American mothers living in an immigrant enclave in a region of Washington, D.C. Using a community-based participatory action research approach, the authors partnered with the informants to shed light on the intersections of race and gender in the context of illegality, highlighting the mothers' challenges and opportunities to work, live, and do family. They also identified their methodology as a *resistant knowledge project* (Collins, 2019), a project in which community informants provide a privileged standpoint to assist cultural outsiders in analyzing data and developing action steps to address structural inequities. Using this collaborative framework, Letiecq et al. describe ways in which undocumented mothers demonstrate agency and adaptability in their parenting strategies in spite of having to raise children under poor housing and overcrowding conditions and threats by employers, peers, and abusive romantic partners to call attention to their undocumented status. Together Hitchens, Aviles, and McCallops' and Letiecq et al.'s articles underscore how intersections of race, gender, illegality, and inequality shape the mothering experience.

Using qualitative interviews with a diverse group of 25 White adoptive parents in terms of age, income, gender, and sexual orientation raising adopted Black and multiracial children entering adolescence, Goldberg et al. explore their racial socialization practices. Their analysis is attuned to how these practices were impacted by intersections of the race, gender, and developmental stage of parents' adopted children and parents' own sexual orientation, age, and social class. Expanding upon Feagin's (2013) white racial frame, the authors present a four part typology that captures parents' racial awareness and racial socialization approach: (1) minimizing and reluctant, (2) worried and fumbling, (3) aware but cautious, and (4) reflexive and purposeful. In developing this typology, Goldberg et al. consider the sociopolitical climate, gender, and developmental stage in racialization. The authors show that while White parents are often constrained by their white racial frame, some who are younger or have monoracial Black children have heightened racial awareness, resulting in more substantive action. Goldberg et al.'s research shows how social and political events connected to children's racial identity and how they and their families are received by society can impact their parents' racial socialization practices and racial awareness.

Although parenting is a fundamental feature of families with children, these articles demonstrate that parenting as a process is not universal across racial and ethnic groups and is impacted by the different experiences they negotiate in the broader society. Parents create adaptive strategies in response to anti-Blackness and anti-immigration in the United States to enhance their families' well-being.

Health and economic well-being

The three papers focusing on *health and economic well-being* incorporated an analysis of the impact of the racialized context (e.g., legacy of enslavement and poverty, women's roles, and child support debt) on different well-being measures. Baker and O'Connell use data from the Luxembourg Income Study, the American Community Survey, and the Historical 1860 Census to investigate the impact of individual-level factors such as family structure versus structural factors on poverty rates. Baker and O'Connell use the historical concentration of enslaved people in 1860 as a proxy for measuring the legacy of slavery. Using multilevel models linking individual- and state-level data and separate models focused on counties, the authors assess the legacy of slavery's relationship to Black–White inequality in poverty among single mother households and married with children households in the US South. Their analysis reveals the impact of the legacy of slavery on Black–White inequality in poverty within-family type, and shows that it is stronger for married with children households than single mother households. While Family Science tends to focus on individual-level factors, Baker and O'Connell's research reveals how examining the impact of structural racism on families may be central to understanding the racial diversity in their economic well-being.

Robbins et al. examine the association between child support debt (arrears) and three measures of well-being (fathers' physical health, depression, and material hardship) among disadvantaged families of color using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. The authors reveal that fathers with arrears and with higher arrears are more likely to experience poor physical health, depression, and material hardship, and these associations are more pronounced for fathers with high arrears burdens relative to their incomes. The authors suggest that child support policies often take a race-neutral approach that tends to reinforce a logic of colorblind racism.

Erving, Wright, and Lara integrate role theory and intersectionality to understand the impact of women's social roles on their mental health and how that impact varies by race and ethnicity. The authors examine data from 7370 respondents from the nationally representative Collaborative Psychiatric Epidemiology Surveys using ordinary least squares regression analysis to assess the relationship between role volume, role type, role configuration, and mental health for women across nine ethnic groups. The authors found role accumulation was psychologically beneficial for Non-Latina White, African American, Puerto Rican, and Chinese women. For Cuban, Mexican, and Filipina women, the psychological benefits of social roles diminished after accumulating three social roles. Their findings highlight how existing social psychological frameworks must incorporate an understanding of how intersections of race, class, and gender at both the individual and societal level impact how women experience combining different social roles.

These three papers demonstrate the value of historical and social context for understanding families. Specifically, the authors highlight how omnipresent, inequitable systems (e.g., structural racism, child support enforcement) and societal changes (e.g., women's roles) affect families' and individuals' economic and health outcomes.

RACIAL STRATIFICATION

Racial stratification was a dominant theme in four papers. This research highlights the unequal distribution of resources and experiences across racialized groups within different institutional contexts. Randles uses racial stratification and intersectional family justice frameworks to analyze under-resourced mothers' experiences addressing diaper need and navigating institutional constraints that make the acquisition of diapers, an essential and basic daily need of families, challenging. Her methodology includes interviewing diaper bankers who not only provide

insider knowledge about diaper bank policies, but also serve as a triangulating data point that mirrors the mothers' accounts of challenges. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 70 mothers who experience diaper needs and 40 diaper bankers, Randles found mothers of color were more likely to report racialized stigma, stress, surveillance, and social exclusion associated with diaper need.

Delgado examines how the legal status of the adult children of undocumented immigrants impacts how they manage their parent's illegality and the kind of resources they can provide to their parents in Latinx families. The author draws on 41 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 19 DACAmented and 22 US-born citizen college students (18–27) who had at least one undocumented parent. DACAmented refers to youth who applied for and received documentation via the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, providing them with protection from deportation and giving them a work permit. Citizen and DACAmented college students use distinct strategies when mediating illegality for their undocumented parents. Citizen adult children use their protected legal status to help their parents become lawful permanent residents and protect them from threats of deportation. DACAmented adult children use their experience with legal precarity to help their undocumented parents navigate punishments associated with their immigration status. Despite achieving a protected legal status, Delgado finds that citizen adults are more limited in their ability to assist their undocumented parents in their daily negotiations of illegality.

Boen, Olson, and Lee document life course patterns of vicarious exposure to the criminal legal system among parents and siblings in the United States. They used longitudinal data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, Kaplan–Meier survival curves, and Cox regression models to estimate cumulative risks of vicarious exposure to arrest, probation, and incarceration among parents ($n = 3885$ parents) and siblings ($n = 1875$) and to examine disparities by race-ethnicity, gender, and education, and at their intersections. The results indicate that racially minoritized parents and siblings had greater levels of risk and earlier risks of exposure, and racialized inequities in risks of vicarious system exposure widened at higher levels of education. Zambrana, Hardaway, and Neubauer describe how work demands and family caregiving obligations are associated with work–family life among underrepresented minority faculty. Using in-depth individual and group interviews ($N = 58$) conducted with US-born African American, Mexican American, and Puerto Rican faculty at research universities, three themes emerged from their analysis: (1) excessive work demands/role strain; (2) commitments and caregiving obligations to their family of origin and nuclear family; and (3) few coping strategies and resources to maintain a balanced life.

By integrating an analysis of structures outside of the family, including the criminal justice, immigration and child welfare systems, and the workplace, these papers demonstrate how interactions with those institutions and systems produce different outcomes and stigmas for families depending on how they have been racialized.

RACIAL IDENTITY

Finally, two articles reflect the theme of racial identity and focus on how identity construction varies across contexts. Dunn explores collegiate relationship formation by examining heterosexual Black HBCU women's romantic aspirations for identity formation. The author uses 30 in-depth interviews with cisgender, heterosexual Black women at an HBCU to investigate their romantic and sexual experiences and expectations. The results show that HBCU women's romantic aspirations are organized by their race, gender, and aspirant class locations. Women expressed barriers to obtaining this relationship structure within their campus landscape and sought to otherwise negotiate romantic opportunities in accordance with respectable middle-class Black feminine identities. This research demonstrates how controlling images are

internalized and play a role in shaping the relationship choices of these women. In the second article, Reyna examines thematic content and discourse surrounding multiracial socialization between Black and non-Black multiracial families on multiracial mommy blogs. Using a Multi-Crit framework, this study analyzes the racial socialization practices presented on 13 mommy blogs written by mothers of color with multiracial children. Reyna argues that mothers' orientations to multiracial socialization vary depending on whether the blogger has Black or non-Black multiracial children. For example, bloggers who are mothers to Black multiracial children frequently blogged about their engagement in safety socialization, whereas mothers with non-Black multiracial children did not. In both of these articles, the researchers demonstrate how minoritized individuals or parents of minoritized individuals negotiate Western, heteronormative notions of "appropriate" identity through the contexts of romantic scripts and skin tone socialization.

CONCLUSION

The articles in this special issue represent a "starting point" for scholars interested in integrating more holistic, social-justice approaches into family science research. Although the themes and topics covered in this special issue are not necessarily new to Family Science, the authors provided more nuance to these topics by anchoring their manuscripts within a larger social, political, and racialized context. These nuances are warranted because conventional family research tends to take these contexts for granted, which, in turn, runs the risk of (re)producing socially constructed categories (e.g., gender, race, etc.) as ontologically (or biologically) real. An objective of this special issue is to think critically about how to advance theory and methodology while being attuned to intersections of gender, race and ethnicity, class, and sexual identity. This issue aims to identify empirical or analytical omissions or biases in the field and recognize the complexity and diversity of families in the United States and internationally.

This special issue also allows family science researchers to contemplate conducting social science wherein an aim to enhance the well-being of individuals, families, and communities is synonymous with conducting research with racial justice aims. Racial justice means establishing racial equity. Racial equity exists when there is the elimination of racially discriminatory practices and policies (The Anne E. Casey Foundation, 2014). Racial justice involves praxis; it is a commitment for social science to contribute to the justification and development of institutional policies, systems, and practices that foment racial equity. A common thread that ties all of these articles is the explicit goal to expose how the intersection of systemic racism and gendered racism (and other forms of inequality) complicates the execution of everyday activities, motivations, and behaviors of individuals and families, as well as identity and relational processes.

For future research, we encourage Family Science scholars to be bold in their conceptual and theoretical frameworks and their analytical strategies. For example, let us reconsider how we analyze and operationalize racial inequality in family life. First, instead of treating race as an ahistorical, demographic characteristic (Williams, 2019), scholars should explicitly conceptualize race as a social construction and employ theories of racism as frameworks to understand why racial inequality persists in the United States and globally. Second, and relatedly, scholars should be mindful of not treating variables and social processes as race-neutral; and instead should point out how and in what ways such mechanisms maintain and reproduce racial inequality. This approach will require a level of nuance that moves away from simply examining variables and social processes because they vary along racial lines toward understanding why these variations exist in the first place. Last, scholars should employ within-race analyses to isolate the factors that contribute to the stability and reproduction of racial inequality in families to understand how the variables and social processes of interest undermine racial equity. Qualitative scholars have long explored the internal diversity of social groups often assumed to

be homogenous to identify their internal diversity. While often constrained by the size and diversity of their sample, quantitative scholars strive to do the same. Ultimately, we believe that the scholarly ground is fertile for more critical conceptual and theoretical frameworks that take into account the social, historical, and political context that produces real adverse outcomes for socially constructed groups. The manuscripts across all three NCFR journals show that the future of Family Science looks promising. We implore scholars to continue to push Family Science forward with novel and critical research agendas accompanied by robust theorizing.

Editors' reflections

Under normal circumstances, putting together a special issue like this demands additional intellectual and physical labor and time. However, doing so while many authors and reviewers were negotiating challenges related to a global pandemic and amplified attention to racial injustice intensified these demands. As the editors of this special issue, we sincerely thank the contributors to this issue. The authors, and reviewers, managed to continue their scholarship in extraordinary circumstances, including experiencing challenges related to the pandemic, racial unrest, or some combination in their own lives, their family, or their community. Among the reviewers of these manuscripts, we saw a hunger for this kind of research, a desire to cultivate this body of scholarship, and a commitment to supporting the kinds of questions being asked. Family research does not typically include a rigorous analysis of how structural racism impacts the experiences and functioning of the family. These scholars provide examples of how to explicitly connect micro-, meso-, and macro-social processes by unpacking how everyday inequities are tied to racial stratification, legacies of structural racism, and institutionalized racism. These researchers also underscore families' agency and creative adaptability within structural constraints.

We also extend our thanks to and appreciate the support from the *JMF* editorial staff, including Layne Amerikaner, Robyn Moore, and editor-in-chief Liana Sayer. We hope this special issue lays the foundation for future scholars to continue to engage with critical theories and frameworks in their research on families. Our aim in the special issue was to create an open invitation that extends beyond this issue for additional examples of high caliber, robust social science research using transformative methods and frameworks that help us better understand the structural underpinnings of society that influence all families.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

ORCID

Dawn M. Dow  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6311-8570>

April L. Few-Demo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3117-7282>

Deadric T. Williams  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4627-5160>

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How to cite this article: Dow, D. M., Few-Demo, A. L., & Williams, D. T. (2022). Transformative family scholarship: Introduction to the special issue. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 84(5), 1241–1249. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12882>