

Fourth Annual Brown Lecture in Education Research

Lessons Learned and Opportunities Ignored Since *Brown v. Board of Education*: Youth Development and the Myth of a Color-Blind Society

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The scholarship of Kenneth B. and Mamie P. Clark, referenced in the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, emphasized the nation's color line, not only in the Jim Crow South but in American cities overall. The Clarks pointed out the critical role of *context*; however, they applied it narrowly to the issue of "harm" as an inevitable consequence of segregation. The author of this article argues that the Clarks and their social science colleagues missed an opportunity to view Black youth as *diverse human beings engaged in normal developmental tasks under difficult conditions*. She denotes the role of context as key, especially when linked with *human growth and psychological processes*. Her findings from a sample of impoverished multiethnic youth reaffirm that America is not colorblind and suggest that these youths' political beliefs and concerns about government vary by ethnicity, gender, family structure, and skin color preferences.

Keywords: desegregation; equity; human development; social justice; urban education

The program of research conducted by Kenneth B. and Mamie P. Clark in their 1939, 1940, and 1947 "doll studies," which the U.S. Supreme Court noted in its landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), was both critically important and controversial.¹ As reviewed by Cross (1991), the studies focused attention on the needs of Black children in the first half of the 20th century and provided an emphasis on the unabated salience of skin color. Generally underacknowledged as a social problem, the continuing and encumbering relevance of skin color in everyday American life had been predicted early in the century by W. E. B. Du Bois (1902/1990), who descriptively referred to it as

America's "color line." True to Du Bois' prediction, the dilemma was documented not only in the Jim Crow South but in American cities more generally.

The Clarks concluded from their doll studies that Black children developed low self-esteem as a function of race-based segregation. There have been numerous and energetic critiques about the interpretations inferred from social science research and its use in legal briefs, particularly for the *Brown* decision, given the Supreme Court's footnoting of the Clarks' studies (see Balkin, 2001). As a consequence of more than three decades of programmatic research of relevance to the aired concerns reported by Balkin and others, I surmise that irrespective of whether the Clarks considered all of the appropriate constructs and, in fact, failed to make use of a developmental perspective for substantiating their claim, their efforts served a critical function. The Clarks' program of research demonstrated that *context matters for everyone*. That is, *the environment and its attendant experiences are critical sources of influence on human development for all children, independent of a family's social placement* (see Spencer 1982, 1985, 1988, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2008).

My program of research, theory application, and specific statistical analysis conducted for this article suggests that it is critical to acknowledge that (a) *all human beings* represent some level of vulnerability (i.e., the degree of balance or imbalance between risk and protective factor presence; see Anthony, 1974; Spencer, 2006c, 2008); (b) social placement invariably contributes to human vulnerability (e.g., because of greater risk exposure or the high-privileging impact of significant protective factors and their *accessibility*; see McIntosh, 1989); (c) perception-dependent affective responses to vulnerability are linked to context and may be both subjectively and objectively recognized; and thus (d) the psychological consequences of vulnerability are dependent on meaning making that is linked to developmental status or an individual's cognition-dependent interpretations of the context.



In sum, irrespective of the interpretational shortcomings noted by Balkin (2001; also see Harpalani, 2008) and other scholars (both in and outside the field of law) concerning the use of the doll studies, my program of research and theorizing suggests a context-sensitive and human development–relevant conclusion. This posited view is of special relevance given the strident and unabated myth of a color-blind 21st-century America.

Accordingly, my conjecture follows:

The use and footnoting of the doll studies in the *Brown* decision pressed forward a needed insight about 20th-century America. Given policy statements and reassuring beliefs about achieved change, the footnote's inclusion continues to rekindle controversy and a national self-consciousness because racial themes continue to evoke a persistent "national uncomfortableness." The dissonance and discomfort generated may be due to perceived differences between word and deed. That is, there are perceived differences between stated policy and citizens' everyday experiences and actual deeds, which occur in a myth-infused national environment. The resulting social discourse and outcomes have implications for the nation's climate and for youths developing political attitudes and general beliefs concerning opportunity. Thus, as has been observed both nationally and internationally, the unacknowledged dissonance sustains a degree of discomfort 50 years after *Brown*, as evidenced by 21st-century American sociopolitical tensions both at home and abroad. Specifically, although not recognized as having accomplished the intended deed, *the footnoted doll studies drew attention to America's uneven context of human development*. That is—especially for Black children of African descent developing in the United States of America at the midpoint of the 20th century—the contextually relevant and patterned doll studies established that youths' ecology required significant modification. Although the problem was more obvious in that time of segregated conditions and discriminatory policies, the need for significant social change continues unabated in the context of 21st-century America's more subtle socially structured inequalities and injustices. Given normal human development and *the unavoidable impact of context*, the dawning awareness of this dilemma has implications for children's reports of racial values, preferences, and beliefs and the character of adolescents' political attitudes. Data analyzed for this article and presented later in the text demonstrates the complexity of the context-individual interactions for youths' political attitudes as a function of ethnicity, gender, family structure, and skin color preferences.

As suggested, taking a different approach from the one described, and in collaboration with social scientist and legal scholar colleagues, Kenneth and Mamie Clark concluded that integration was the remedy or protective factor that would counter Black youths' (assumed) feelings of inferiority (see Balkin, 2001). However, the assumptions of low self-esteem and inferiority feelings have proved unjustified, as reviewed by Cross (1991) and others (see Spencer 1982, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1995, 2005, 2006c; Spencer, Dobbs, & Swanson, 1988; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990).

Contributions of Ecological Psychology to Problematic Doll Study Assumptions

The insights of ecological psychology, which represent decades of research and theorizing, afford improved interpretations of the

patterned findings accrued from the doll studies. The combination affirms the salience of contextual influences for children's human development and psychological functioning (e.g., coping patterns in response to environmental effects). Context variations have unique influences on the daily lives of all of America's diverse citizens, irrespective of race, ethnicity, stage of development, gender, country of origin, and socioeconomic status. And, although infrequently considered, the consequences of individual-context interactions vary as a function of how individuals, families, and communities manage and interpret the meaning making inferred and coping introduced in response to their specific experiences (e.g., Spencer, Cross, Harpalani, & Goss, 2003; Spencer & Harpalani, 2004; Spencer, Harpalani, et al., 2006). As described elsewhere, the interpreters of the social science research available at the time of the *Brown* case—including the doll studies—assumed that individuals unilaterally internalized untoward social representations of themselves and the group in which they held membership. Thus, for African American children who reported that a Black doll looked bad, was ugly, or was overall negatively appraised, the Clarks and colleagues inferred a simple, linear, and shortsighted conclusion. This team of social scientists concluded that, living under segregated conditions, Black children had internalized self-hatred, untoward emotional functioning, unavoidable psychopathology, and deviance. It was assumed that children's dark pigmentation suggested a "mark of oppression" and untoward psychological outcomes (see Kardiner & Ovesey, 1951).

Child Development and Context Character

With an a priori assumption of children's self-hatred, Kenneth Clark and his social science and legal scholar collaborators scoured the literature available from social scientists, which assumed a direct *connection between context and child outcomes*. However, asking the *how* or *why* for children's response patterns appeared to be absent from their approach. For example, the moderating and mediating influences of family and community were not considered. In fact, making a connection between children's *development* and *context* character was not a novel perspective in the 1950s, given the burgeoning work by early ecological psychologists such as Roger Barker and Herbert Wright (1949, 1951, 1954/1971) and Paul Gump (Barker & Gump, 1964). In general, the connections between child development and context features remained somewhat underacknowledged in contemporary conceptual and theoretical efforts. The situation remained the same and the linkages went generally underexamined until approximately 25 years later, with the wide dissemination of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) conceptual contributions. This lack of acknowledgement was not too significant an issue because most child study efforts centered on the experiences of White children whose contextual experiences were not as extreme as those of youth with deep color pigmentation who lived with their families under Jim Crow–like conditions.

The intense, painstaking, and tangible efforts by the early ecological psychologists had already quite dramatically and concretely illustrated links between the nature of human development and the character of a community's ecology (refer to Barker & Wright, 1949, 1954/1971). In fact, the applied research tradition of context assessment and comparative child

studies as implemented by psychological ecologists for the field of child study was conducted in diverse settings that ranged from English hamlets to American small and large towns. Herbert Wright's contributions (1950, 1967; Barker & Wright, 1954/1971), in particular, provided a helpful methodology for valid assessments of child behavior in varying contexts and social settings.

Of course, reviewing the work in retrospect now—as a human development expert and developmental scientist—I can reflect on the program of research ostensibly available at the time of the doll studies and note significant shortcomings. The most salient major glitch was that the ecological psychology research tradition was overlooked by the social scientists referred to by Balkin (2001) in his description and critique of the social science research submitted in support of the *Brown* decision. The conceptual “slight” may have been more consistent among the team of social science researchers engaged in this work, including its leader, Kenneth Clark. More to the point, many in this camp were social psychologists and sociologists, including Clark himself, who had completed his doctoral degree at Columbia University in experimental psychology. In fact, he was the first Black to accomplish that feat!

On the other hand, the ecological psychology research described was conducted and published under the general classification of child studies. Unfortunately, it would appear that the assumptions used in making the case and framing the arguments for the *Brown* decision emanated mainly from sociology. As noted, Kenneth Clark's doctoral degree was in experimental psychology, and his wife's was in psychology. Mamie Clark was the second Black to complete a doctorate in psychology at Columbia. Like their sociology and social psychology colleagues, it would appear that the Clarks were underexposed to early childhood development studies, which may not have been adequately covered in their program of training. Thus the apparent lack of dissonance in response to the argument forwarded in the footnote may have been sustained by “missed opportunities” for exposure to informed analyses and child development knowledge, which remained buried in the library stacks under the heading of Child Studies. The studies sought to explain normal human development—especially for the ecological psychologists—under varying conditions.

An intriguing aspect of the early child-ecology studies, as noted earlier, was that the patterns of outcomes obtained were mainly from observational projects conducted primarily with diverse groups of White youth (i.e., groups varying by location and size). Importantly, these studies did not assume a priori that one setting was worse or better than another for child development. Wright's use and application of painstakingly analyzed conceptual tools such as “synomorphs” (see Wright, 1950, 1967) sought to explain and unpack exactly what was happening in the behavioral settings transected by youths in their everyday forays. That is—familarly stated in late 20th- and early 21st-century parlance—the *ecological psychologists attempted to understand developmental processes of children as a function of the nature of their normally transected contexts*. Thus these contemporary concerns held significant and long-term fascination and interest for the early ecological psychologists engrossed in the field of child study. In their methodological strategies and topic choices for child study, ecological psychologists attempted to understand the processes of development in varying settings (e.g., Barker &

Wright, 1954/1971). Considered overall, the conclusions about human development outcomes for youth suggested—as a fundamental insight and inferred collectively from Roger Barker, Herbert Wright, Paul Gump, and, later, Schoggen and other colleagues over the years—that *context matters for development*.

Their quite laborious observational work with teams of research assistants—the most representative is Barker and Wright's (1951) *One Boy's Day*—illustrated the wide variety of settings “crisscrossed” in a given day. Their hundreds of pages of analytically detailed descriptive statements are replete with observational strategies developed over a long period by Wright (1950, 1967) and colleagues. When considered together, the work of the ecological scholars illustrated the *how* and *why* of obtained outcome variations in light of decades of programmatic ecological research. As suggested, the studies were available in the general area of child study and thus accessible to the teams of social scientists organizing for the *Brown* case. Their use might have aided the team's recognition that *sets of remedies* were needed and that White and Black children of different developmental stages (a) transected their communities in different ways, (b) were exposed to different levels of both risks and protective factors, and (c) processed their exposure (i.e., made meaning) as a function of the cognitive capacities in evidence for their particular developmental period. That is, making adult legalistic interpretations and psychopathology inferences from child responses obtained from the doll studies was inappropriate, at best. Young children report what they “know” or what they have observed. However, whether children are able to make negative inferences and internalize the affect depends on their period of development and the character of their cognitive processing of social phenomena (referred to as *social cognition* by Flavell [1968] and in the current, more nuanced field of children's theory of mind [Frye & Moore, 1991]).

The subsequent application of Wright's ecological psychology methods (e.g., see Wright 1950, 1967) to schools was richly described in Barker and Gump's (1964) *Big School, Small School*. Importantly, their classic study concluded that the experiences of children in diverse environments (e.g., given a variation as basic as school setting size) were quite different—not pathological, deviant, or aberrant—just distinct from one another! In many ways, the contributions afforded by ecological psychologists heralded the influential program of research and conceptual insights provided by Bronfenbrenner and colleagues, who continue to influence the field of human development into the 21st century (e.g., see Bronfenbrenner 1977, 1985, 1989). In addition, the salience of the work and the impact of its findings most certainly also contributed to insights—particularly concerning density—of space psychology and researchers such as Wohlwill (e.g., Wohlwill, 1985; Wohlwill & Heft, 1987). Again, with its emphasis on the ecology of child development, the work examined the *how* and *what* of ecological impact without assuming psychopathology. In other words, the ecology and child development literature was informed by the quite significant and field-based contributions of ecological psychologists. Their message did not assume a priori psychopathology or deviance for their mainly White child subjects but, instead, methodologically demonstrated the insight that context mattered. It is not surprising that the density emphasis of space psychologists would give sway to an orientation, particularly for sociologists, toward the study of neighborhoods.

Race, Context, and Development: Lessons Overlooked

Although contemporary neighborhood studies and their conceptual emphasis represent more inclusive conceptual undertakings and frequent considerations of race and class (e.g., see Burton, Price-Spratlen, & Spencer, 1997; Dupree, Spencer, & Bell, 1997; Halpern-Felsher et al., 1997; Spencer, Cole, Jones, & Swanson, 1997; Spencer, McDermott, Burton, & Kochman, 1997; Wilson & Taub, 2006), there remain problems. That is, with few exceptions, efforts continue to ignore the context-interacting impact of race. The dynamic is best understood or considered through children's ecology and their maturing perceptual lenses tied to their *human* developmental status (an overlooked perspective that explores how children come to understand and make meaning of their experiences). Research programs still fail to disentangle the ways that race and class interact and affect basic human development processes from a "difference lens" as opposed to a traditional "deficit lens." Accordingly, my hypothesis is that differences in experience had by youth and adults require different coping processes.

Unfortunately, the inference-making dilemma described here (the penchant for using a deficit rather than a difference framework to understand youths' coping strategies) is consistent with the interpretational error made with regard to the data generated by the Clarks. Youths' dynamic, developmental, context-linked, and cognition-dependent perceptual processes are infrequently considered. Thus, as a function of developmental status and experience, youths' unique strategies to make meaning of their lives and to cope with adverse circumstances are overlooked and represent another missed opportunity. The necessity for some youths to cope with unacknowledged and adverse circumstances is captured by Chestang's (1972) notion that for economically and socially challenged youngsters, developmental tasks and character formation efforts take place in a hostile environment. At the same time, as described by Whiteness studies scholars (e.g., Jensen, 2006; McIntosh, 1989), unquestioned social privileges and internalized expectations of entitlement occur for Whites but, in general, are unacknowledged. As viewed by some theorists, this meaning-making process may also contribute to enhanced vulnerability for European Americans because of the "downside of privilege" as a source of increased although unacknowledged risk (see Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Latendresse, 2002). This view takes into account normative adolescent risk—including adolescent social cliques, stereotyping, and exclusionary behavior—which appeared to have functioned quite significantly for the students who committed the widely publicized Columbine High School massacre in Littleton, Colorado. Similarly, the Virginia Tech student-perpetrated massacre suggests that older adolescent youth as college students are no less vulnerable to the noted sources of stress.

The 2008 democratic presidential election primary season provides a case in point. Debates and "media led" discussions frequently work the fringes of the discourse concerning gender and race but continue to be limited in scope and depth because of the obvious uncomfortable feelings generated. Thus, on the one hand, it would appear that Whites are uncomfortable with discussions about race; and Blacks, on the other hand, may appear uncomfortable with "White uncomfortableness" when discussing race-relevant topics. For example, discussion about "hardworking

Americans" by a democratic nominee, in fact, was intended as a strategy to refer to White voters; likewise, discourse about a candidate's support from "women" actually was referring mainly to White women. The affective consequence for non-Whites was the sense that only Whites are considered hardworking and that Black women are considered mainly as Black . . . and not so much as women. That is, gender, race, and class continue to be difficult "main effect" factors and are virtually impossible to discuss and unpack rationally as "interaction terms" (e.g., Blacks are not exclusively and solely identifiable as a color-based group but also vary within a racial designation as a function, for example, of social class, gender, and political views). Thus—as was seen in the inferences from the Clarks' doll studies—the dilemma continues to be that having significantly pigmented color trumps all other individual difference factors and human sources of variation. In many ways, the assumption continues the stereotypic belief—made popular by Kardiner and Ovesey (1951)—that pigmentation both dehumanizes and represents an unavoidable "mark of oppression."

Legacy of the Early Efforts to Unpack Human Development for Youth of Color

The long-term assumptions that characterize research on youth of color continue as a legacy of their questionable use in the *Brown* decision, hinging on a view that mainly untoward outcomes emanate from highly pigmented individuals; the situation is believed to represent the group's normative state of development from the cradle to the coffin (Spencer, 2006a, 2008). At the same time, and equally problematic, this point of view affords Whites the role and privilege of the unacknowledged standard. In general, inequitable privileges and entitlement-linked social status are not acknowledged: Whites are situated in programs of research and function as the "healthy standard and norm" against whom all others are compared and judged (too routinely as inadequate). As noted previously, all human beings are vulnerable and embody both protective and risk factors (see Anthony, 1974). However, the latter are emphasized for non-Whites; that is, high-risk conditions are emphasized and strengths ignored. Furthermore, either protective factors are unequally distributed across groups or their access is limited for devalued groups. Structural barriers may prevent protective factors intended to be supportive from actually being accessed and experienced as supportive. On the other hand, for valued groups and generally for Whites, socially structured supports are inequitably made available. There is very little in the literature about the group's enhanced vulnerability (limited risks and disproportionately high supports) as linked to its everyday ecological experiences, which include demonstrations of heightened protection and assets accumulated (e.g., see Spencer, 2006a, 2006c). The group's outcomes are compared with highly vulnerable "others" as if the context of development for both were equivalent. Of course, this conceptual shortcoming feeds into stereotypes and unfounded belief systems. Beliefs of superiority and entitlement infuse the contexts of some (usually Whites) and thus undermine realistic identity formation processes for them (see Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Latendresse, 2002; McIntosh, 1989). What was nuanced and problematic in the legal approach advanced in *Brown* was the pair of one-sided, a priori assumptions that (a) only Blacks were

subject to internalized psychological damage as a function of Jim Crow conditions and (b) an all-Black community lacked, in and of itself, the psychological resources and supports needed to offset race-based structural inequality.

In fact, given what is now known about the role of context in human development and education, there were obvious underestimations and inadequate interpretations regarding the transmission and processing of beliefs concerning race, ethnicity, and social status (i.e., their impact on inferences about both inferiority and superiority status). In many ways, the pivotal aspects of the Clarks' use of data demonstrated two important but underexamined insights (see Spencer 2006c, 2008): first, that context is an extraordinarily salient element of human development; second, that acknowledging the existence of perception, an aspect of cognitive processing, is unavoidable given its fundamental and foundational linkages to maturation and social experience (i.e., biology-based maturational processes means that avoiding "awareness" is difficult). Considered together, contemporary interpretations during the half century following *Brown* lead to the conclusion that context and perception not only are important but, in fact, matter tremendously and are part of the shared human condition of vulnerability.

Vulnerability and Human Development

Vulnerability as described by Anthony (1974) suggests that all human beings possess both protective factors and risk factors. The long-term dilemma for human development scholars and social scientists more generally, as suggested, has been the penchant to equate darkness or skin color pigmentation with pathology, problems, and deviancy. This perspective has characterized research efforts, service delivery, and training content where people of color are concerned (e.g., Kardiner & Ovesey, 1951; Pettigrew, 1964). John Hope Franklin's (1968) classic treatment of the color dilemma demonstrates its long-term and global stability as a value (i.e., the association of color pigmentation with views of deviancy). On the other hand, Jablonski's (2004, 2006) perspective on color or skin pigmentation and its etiology quite authoritatively describes its natural history. Rogoff (2003) and Lee (see Lee, Spencer, & Harpalani, 2003) focus on the contribution of culture: the contemporary features of families and communities that represent particular styles of coping with the task of raising healthy and competent children—styles of coping that are provided and modeled as cultural traditions. Cultural patterns suggest strategic coping and identity formation patterns. The necessity of coping with normal human development needs is described in Havighurst's (1953) thesis concerning the normal confrontation of developmental tasks. However, particular devalued and oppressed groups confront the traditional tasks along with the additional challenges associated with inequitable conditions linked to skin pigmentation. The reality of an imbalance between the available supports and the normative *and* structural challenges for some citizens continues to elude many programs of research in the social sciences.

The oversight has important implications for the training of professionals, including teachers and teacher educators; for the conduct of research; for the application of research as policy; and, finally, for societal loss (i.e., the undereducation of American youth of color). The impact is immeasurable. The conundrum

contributes to societal risk, thus increasing everyone's vulnerability and undermining the efficacy of multilevel systems as described by Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979, 1985). The result is a catch-22, given the increased risk of uninformed or inadequately performing systems, whose insufficient functioning diminishes their efficacy and increases the vulnerability of all citizens. Thus systems conceptualized and designed to represent protective factors and to provide support instead contribute to *unintentional systems injury*. For the most part, the systems alluded to (a) emanate from families, schools, and communities at the micro level of the ecology, often lacking resources to adequately monitor and support young people; (b) represent practices at the exosystem level of the ecology (e.g., in school systems, boards, decision-making bodies that affect the workplace; in organizations that determine the quality, availability, and accessibility of health care; and in social service systems); and (c) potentially fuel the sustenance of stereotypic beliefs, media-hyped messages, and Internet-transmitted urban legends as context-associated policies and persistent stereotypic beliefs at the macrosystem level. Thus, as a system of persistent impact, the macrolevel dilemma fuels microlevel daily experiences of the child and those with whom the child has direct contact. At the microlevel, the adverse challenges encountered—given the character of macrolevel-communicated values, attitudes, and beliefs—potentially transform risk conditions encountered on a daily basis into significant challenges requiring proactive coping.

Frequently ignored is the translation of this system of "normative human development experiences" into beliefs that contribute to persistence over time. Some people, beginning in childhood, internalize beliefs concerning superiority and earned status; and, equally problematic, others experience dissonance and greater risk in the form of patterns of daily challenges confronted. The greater risk and dissonance experienced by some evokes responsive coping beyond that associated with everyday developmental tasks.

A critical race perspective suggests that themes having to do with inequality and injustice are uncomfortable for Whites, given assumptions about "earned status" (see Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). At the same time, Blacks—particularly young people—may lack adequate coping skills for proactively and "healthfully" responding to unacknowledged American inequality and injustices, which youth, particularly adolescents, are virtually programmed to understand! (This dynamic is labeled in various ways, for instance, as stereotype threat; see Steele, 1997, 2004.) The difficulty of coping is critical, given youths' cognitive maturation irrespective of "objective" school outcome data and reported disparities in achievement. That is, the morphing of children and youths' racial attitudes and beliefs about the nation's policies, practices, and politics into political attitudes represents an important opportunity to demonstrate the role of continuing cognitive maturation for adolescents' emerging views about race, ethnicity, and social status in America.

Beliefs Concerning Inequality and Adolescents' Political Attitudes

Insights and discussions about social inequities, inequality, and injustice are infrequently incorporated or considered as part of

the “normative context” of social science training and research efforts. Thus “the context” has been generally ignored except to analyze data by group membership and to label the “disparities” as representing a problem emanating from individuals themselves rather than a responsibility to acknowledge the institutionalization of inequality as the normative context for diverse youth of color in America, particularly non-Asians. Furthermore, the need continues for developmental analyses that consider how youth see or make inferences about their contexts and that determine how these perceptions affect them as a function of skin color–linked experiences. Chestang’s (1972) analysis of youths’ efforts at character development in a hostile environment represents a classic statement of the dilemma. In sum, and consistent with the use of the Clarks’ classic doll studies, the penchant has been to focus narrowly on risks for Blacks (such as skin color biases and assumptions of self-hatred) and to spotlight protective factors for Whites (while not acknowledging the fact). The latter tendency is particularly salient since it has been established that coping with vulnerability is a universal human problem (even for Whites!). A good illustration is that social science research minimally focuses on the coping efforts of poor and working-class Whites. Instead, low- and working-class Blacks are consistently compared with middle- and upper-income Whites. The underacknowledged circumstance of White privilege is most often addressed by critical race theorists (e.g., see Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, 2001). There is a significant downside to unacknowledged privilege. For one, its invisibility distorts identity formation processes. The fact that the context of development and social discourse for Whites may disproportionately represent socially constructed and skin color–linked access to privilege remains invisible. The honing of coping skills is also compromised because skin color–linked opportunities deny youth “in the moment” learning opportunities with normative challenges. As noted, the Columbine massacre and parallel secondary- and college-level cases around the nation provide vivid and horrendous demonstrations of the dilemma.

A context of privilege functions as a protective factor and, remaining unstated, contributes to a distorted self-image. That is, unrealistic identities may be internalized and constructed on a belief that efficacy and competence represent “earned” outcomes rather than outcomes due to socially constructed conditions. Thus “impostor beliefs” contribute to identity anxieties and problematic coping responses (see Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Lattendresse, 2002). Likewise, underperformance or inadequate performance by those not privileged, although coping with parallel normal human development tasks (achieving academic success, healthy psychological functioning, physical well-being, and healthy relationships), is interpreted in stereotypical ways (i.e., is assumed to result from lack of effort, ability, or capacity). Such interpretations contribute further to impostor beliefs and a distorted self-image for privileged individuals. As suggested, the “inferior” or “inadequate” outcomes observed for others are viewed as emanating from within. The situation contributes to a problematic societal and political social context by adding to stereotypes and distorting self-processes (e.g., motivation based on the sense of efficacy and effectance, or belief that one can make a difference; see White, 1959, 1960), both for inadequately supported individuals and for highly privileged

individuals. In this situation, the special privileges enjoyed by some are not fully recognized or acknowledged; rather, those individuals’ advantaged status functions as the “norm” against which others (who are not adequately supported) are compared. As a life-span and cross-context dynamic, the situation contributes to persistent and problematic social dynamics and aids in explaining the nation’s persistent disparities (e.g., see Darity & Myers, 1998).

As I emphasized in a recent book chapter (Spencer, 2008), from the beginning of life all human beings attempt to make sense of the world, its people, its objects, and myriad everyday context-linked experiences. Likewise, in addressing common human developmental tasks as described by Havighurst (1953), everyone attempts to make sense of the world; this propensity is aided by social cognition, which is a gradual and unavoidable process that takes place from the “cradle to the coffin.” Given the unstated problem of American inequality and socially constructed conditions of privilege for many Whites, the position taken in the social sciences has been that the state of inequality only results in myriad expressions of pathology, problems, and deviancy for individuals of color. As noted, Kenneth and Mamie Clark quite correctly demonstrated that context matters (i.e., children frequently learn that all things of dark pigmentation are negative). Independent of school achievement, young children are quite proficient in their use of observations for determining what and who is “valued.” Particularly, when asked, preschoolers quite enthusiastically respond to questions about their observations of social life. Consistent with empirical findings that assess both self-esteem and beliefs about color and race, children state their “insights about American life” when questioned *without internalizing negative affect about self* (e.g., see Spencer 1982, 1985, 1988, 2006c). Nonetheless, in the “scholarship” on child development and education, shortsighted views and assumptions about youth of color and those disproportionately privileged and their “equivalent” social “contexts” persist well into the 21st century. The continued distortion affects the vulnerability of all, albeit in different ways. In fact, even the term *vulnerability* is generally used interchangeably with a “risk” label. This unfortunate language miscue further prevents discussion of the unacknowledged privileges enjoyed by Whites and the existence of protective factors for Blacks, which are honed and made use of at the individual, family, and community levels. The *resiliency* of socially disadvantaged youth—the acquisition of good outcomes in the face of significant challenges—is not often recognized or incorporated into programs of research, training, and prevention and thus is overlooked as a potential protective factor and opportunity for support of those youth. This represents yet another missed opportunity.

Thus the positive esteem and benefits accrued from acknowledgment of inequalities is neither enjoyed by the individual nor applied to offset the stereotypes that burden contemporary scholarship. Furthermore, on an empirical note, the insight is very infrequently used to explain the patterned finding of positive self-esteem for youth of color (e.g., see Hare & Castenell, 1985; Spencer 1985, 1988). A review of contemporary scholarship that refutes the assumption of Black psychopathology spawned by the interpretations made of the Clarks’ findings provides a case in point. As indicated, the conclusions inferable generally ignore the twin influences of context and the normal human development

processes that form perception and social cognition. Both of these influences are critically important as individuals navigate time and place; they (a) affect individuals' meaning making, including perceptions about stress; (b) influence specific coping responses evoked; and (c) determine the subsequent character of identity formation processes (see Spencer 2006c, 2008).

Considered jointly, the twin influences—context and perception—determine how individuals make meaning of their everyday experiences and how they form inferred perspectives about their future as citizens and about the world in which they live (i.e., political attitudes; see Flanagan, 1994). Given the broadening number of social spaces that youth navigate beginning in late childhood and the early teen years, it is not surprising that political attitudes more often are assessed and explored during adolescence and that the interest literally circles the globe.

The Clarks' groundbreaking work and the subsequent decades of patterned replications provide distinctive insights regarding the context of normal human development for diverse youth of color and, more generally, the potential for extending more enlightened views and developmental theorizing about the unique challenges of 21st-century America. An improved synthesis can explain and unpack the ways in which the social construction of race is associated with skin color beliefs, race/ethnicity status, and the character of youths' self-processes, including their contemporary political attitudes and learned beliefs concerning justice, equity, and equality.

Youths' Political Attitudes

In addition to the many insights provided by Constance Flanagan concerning youths' development of political attitudes (Flanagan, 1994), Carol Hahn also explores *how* such development occurs and the situations that promote it and the development of democratic values in young people (Hahn, 1998). In keeping with the international flavor of much of the scholarship on political attitudes, Hahn acknowledges diverse views and processes and includes interviews with teachers and students in five nations, including the United States. An interesting aspect of the literature is that terms are used in various ways. The intent may be to examine how young people view the government in a traditional sense as the site of politics and how citizens view its dynamics. Or the intent may be to look at how individuals view politics in terms of a general social climate. A third approach is to look at political affiliation and political activism as associated with community service; this approach might emerge from a recent event of social conflict. Also worth noting is that most attention to the topic represents global programs of research. Efforts in the United States, more often than not, focus on civic engagement of mostly White college students. Does this mean a continuing lack of interest in the experiences of less privileged young adults?

Culturally sensitive and context-linked developmental content is frequently missing from training protocols for teachers and service providers. As youth navigate diverse social contexts (both in and out of school and independent of their academic standing) and confront normal human development tasks, their cognitive sophistication and unavoidable cultural awareness are critically important. Thus, for better or worse, the issue of developmental processes in the formation of adolescent political attitudes remains underexplored.

Given the short-sighted interpretation of the Clarks' doll studies and as a continuation of findings having to do with attitudes, beliefs, and preference behavior around color connotations and race, I focus attention in this article on an examination of skin color preferences, political attitudes, and ethnicity for a very diverse sample of urban adolescents between the ages of 14 and 17 years. The professional training shortcomings mentioned earlier can compromise the efficacy and outcomes of policy-mandated "social supports." Specifically, no matter how well intended the effort, if supports are neither perceived nor experienced as helpful by those for whom they were intended, the outcomes may be disappointing . . . at best. Students' political attitudes represent their views about society and thus may have implications for their school-based experiences, engagement, and preparations for becoming productive citizens. The illustrative adolescent study design combines diverse youths' notions about skin tone preferences with their political views about opportunity. Data analyzed for this publication and obtained from a recent research project conducted at the Center for Health Achievement Neighborhoods Growth and Ethnic Studies (CHANGES), which I direct at the University of Pennsylvania, provides a helpful illustration of the individual-context interaction suggested.

Method

Sample and Procedures

The sample for the present study consists of a subsample of youths attending public high schools in a large Northeastern city in the United States who participated in a longitudinal randomized field trial examining the effect of monetary stipends on academic resilience and coping among high-achieving (A/B) and marginally achieving (C/D) low-income urban youth (for a detailed description of the study, see Spencer, Noll, & Cassidy, 2005). Adolescents whose household income met the financial criteria guidelines for the Federal Free Lunch Program (130% of the poverty line) were eligible to participate in the study. The data for this study come from baseline data collected in 1999 and 2000 and follow-up data collected in 2000 and 2001. Only those participants who provided data at both time points were included in the present sample ($N = 623$). Seventy percent were female; 35% were marginally achieving students; 34.75% had a household income that fell more than 50% below the cutoff for the Federal Free Lunch Program; 33% lived with both parents; 15.4% were Asian or Asian American; 57.7% were Black or African American; 10.25% were Hispanic; 6.4% were White/European American; and 10.25% were Multiracial.

Measures

Race/ethnicity. Adolescents indicated their race/ethnicity by selecting from multiple-choice options, including an open-ended option. These responses were used to create a 5-level categorical variable (Asian, Black, Hispanic, White, Multiracial) as well as a dummy-coded variable that used Black as the reference group ($Black = 1$; all other racial/ethnic groups = 0).

Academic achievement. Academic achievement was dummy coded using high-achieving youth, defined as A/B students, as the reference group, in comparison with marginally achieving youth,

defined as C/D students (*high-achieving youth* = 1; *marginally achieving youth* = 0).

Gender. Gender was dummy coded using male students as the reference group (*male* = 1; *female* = 0).

Family structure. Adolescents were asked to list all of the individuals who lived in their households. For the purpose of these analyses, family structure was dummy coded using “live with both parents” as the reference group (*live with both parents* = 1; *do not live with both parents* = 0).

Poverty level. Poverty level was determined from various forms of household income documentation (income tax return, payroll stub, etc.) that were required as part of the eligibility screening process for the study. Poverty level was dummy coded using “less than 50% below the cutoff for the Federal Free Lunch Program” as the reference group (*less than 50% below the cutoff for the Federal Free Lunch Program* = 1; *50% or more below the cutoff for the Federal Free Lunch Program* = 0).

Skin color perceptions and attitudes. Adolescents’ perceptions of, and attitudes toward, skin color were assessed using the Skin Color Opinions and Perceptions Evaluation (SCOPE), a 17-item questionnaire assessing, among other things, adolescents’ perceptions of their own skin color and the skin color they would most like and least like to have. Adolescents made their skin color selections using the Visual Inventory for Skin Tone Assessment (VISTA), consisting of 10 colors arrayed across the bar from lightest to darkest (see Fegley, Spencer, Goss, Harpalani, & Charles, 2007, for more details). The variable skin color preference was based on adolescents’ responses to two items: (a) *Select the skin tone color that you think best represents the color of your facial skin*; and (b) *Select the skin tone color that you would most like to have*. If adolescents selected the same skin tone colors for these two items, they were classified as “consonant” for skin color preference; if they selected two different skin tone colors for the two items, they were classified as “dissonant” for skin color preference.

Political attitudes. Adolescents’ political attitudes and beliefs were assessed in the follow-up survey using the Political Attitudes Survey–2 (PAS-2; Flanagan & Tucker, 1999), a 15-item survey assessing the degree to which respondents agree with statements about America’s political environment (e.g., *In America you have an equal chance no matter where you came from or what race you are*). Participants responded using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from zero to 4 (*strongly disagree* = 0; *strongly agree* = 4).

Results from an exploratory factor analysis of the PAS-2 yielded a reliable three-factor solution. Mean scores were created for each factor, yielding the following three subscales: (a) Inequality (items that suggest unfulfilled institutional promises or structural inequality); (b) Equality/Fairness (items that suggest perceptions of fairness and equality); and (c) Anger-Futility (items that suggest negative affect in reaction to perceptions of inequality). The subscales were found to be reliable with Cronbach’s alphas of .74, .71, and .71, respectively. Finally, two single items that did not load on any of the three subscales were also used in the analyses. One item (*It’s not right for there to be very rich and very poor people in America. There should*

be more equality) was labeled Economic Apartheid, suggesting belief in the unfairness of economic extremes. The other item (*We have the ability to change the government if we don’t like what it is doing*) was labeled Hope, suggesting positive beliefs concerning change and hope.

Results

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) and *t* tests were used to examine differences in scores on the political attitudes subscales and individual items by demographic characteristics (race/ethnicity, gender, achievement level, poverty level, and family structure) and skin color preference (consonance and dissonance). In addition, *t* tests were used to examine differences in political attitudes by gender, academic achievement level, poverty level, family structure, and skin color preference within each racial and ethnic group.

Differences in Political Attitudes by Race/Ethnicity

Racial and ethnic differences in political attitudes were examined first. There were no statistically significant differences in youths’ responses on the item for individual political attitudes—Economic Apartheid—or their scores on the Inequality subscale by race/ethnicity. However, there were significant racial and ethnic differences in responses to the individual item Hope, $F(4, 619) = 3.91, p = .004, r^2 = .024$, and in scores on the PAS-2 subscales of Equality/Fairness, $F(4, 619) = 6.63, p < .0001, r^2 = .04$, and Anger-Futility, $F(4, 619) = 3.48, p = .008, r^2 = .02$. Post hoc analyses using Duncan’s Multiple Range Test indicated that Asian American ($M = 2.15$) and European American ($M = 2.11$) youth perceived more equality than African American youth ($M = 1.72$). Equality/Fairness subscale scores for Hispanic ($M = 1.92$) and Multiracial youth ($M = 1.89$) did not differ significantly from each other or from those of the other three racial and ethnic groups. Conversely, Multiracial youth ($M = 3.20$) reported significantly higher levels of anger and futility than European American ($M = 2.91$) and Asian American youth ($M = 2.84$). Hispanic youth ($M = 3.17$), although not significantly different from Multiracial and European American youth, were also significantly higher in feelings of anger and futility than Asian American youth. African American youth ($M = 2.94$) were not significantly different from their peers in other racial and ethnic groups in their reported levels of anger and futility. However, when it came to feelings of hope, the scores of African American youth ($M = 2.01$) were significantly lower than those of Multiracial youth ($M = 2.48$), Asian American ($M = 2.35$), European American ($M = 2.18$), and Hispanic ($M = 2.11$) youth did not differ from each other or from their Multiracial and African American peers in feelings of hope. In other words, the two extreme groups (African American and Multiracial youth) were significantly different from each other; however, the three moderate groups (Asian American, European American, and Hispanic) were not significantly different from either of the two extreme groups.

Differences in Political Attitudes by Gender

There were no statistically significant differences in responses to the two individual political attitude items—Economic Apartheid and Hope—or in scores on the Equality/Fairness and Inequality

subscales of the PAS-2 by gender. However, scores on the Anger-Futility subscale differed significantly by gender, $t(622) = -3.20$, $p = .001$. Specifically, girls reported higher levels of anger and futility ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 0.75$) than boys ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.76$).

Gender differences within race/ethnicity. There were no statistically significant differences in responses to the two individual political attitude items—Economic Apartheid and Hope—or in Equality/Fairness, or Inequality, on the PAS-2 by gender for any of the racial and ethnic groups. However, among African American, European American, and Hispanic youth (but not Multiracial or Asian American youth), scores on Anger-Futility differed significantly by gender, with girls in each of these racial and ethnic groups experiencing higher levels than boys. For African American youth, $t(358) = -2.01$, $p = .04$ ($M = 3.0$, $SD = 0.80$ for girls; $M = 2.81$, $SD = 0.78$ for boys). For European American youth, $t(38) = -3.15$, $p = .003$ ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.57$ for girls; $M = 2.4$, $SD = 0.66$ for boys). For Hispanic youth, $t(62) = -3.23$, $p = .002$ ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 0.50$ for girls; $M = 2.86$, $SD = 0.62$ for boys).

Differences in Political Attitudes by Academic Achievement Level

There were no statistically significant differences in responses to the two individual political attitude items—Economic Apartheid and Hope—or scores on the Equality/Fairness and Anger-Futility subscales of the PAS-2 by academic achievement level (high or marginal achievers). However, scores on the Inequality subscale differed significantly by achievement level, $t(622) = 2.22$, $p = .02$. Specifically, marginally achieving (C/D) youth perceived higher levels of inequality ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 0.73$) than high-achieving (A/B) youth ($M = 1.80$, $SD = 0.66$).

Achievement level differences within race/ethnicity. Given that there is a confound between race/ethnicity and achievement level (significantly more Asian American and European American youth being in the high-achieving group), differences in academic achievement level could not be examined within each racial and ethnic group. Therefore, race/ethnicity was dummy coded with “African American” as the reference group (*African American* = 1; *Other* = 0). There were no significant differences between high- and marginally achieving youth in political attitudes within the “Other” group (everyone except African American youth). However, there were significant differences within the group of African American youth as a function of academic achievement level. Marginally achieving youth scored significantly higher on Equality/Fairness, $t(356) = 2.43$, $p = .02$ ($M = 1.83$, $SD = 0.84$ for C/D students; $M = 1.62$, $SD = 0.79$ for A/B students); Inequality, $t(356) = 2.58$, $p = .01$ ($M = 1.97$, $SD = 0.72$ for C/D students; $M = 1.78$, $SD = 0.67$ for A/B students); and Economic Apartheid, $t(356) = 2.24$, $p = .03$ ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.12$ for C/D students; $M = 2.14$, $SD = 1.25$ for A/B students).

Differences in Political Attitudes by Poverty Level

There were no statistically significant differences in responses to the individual political attitude item—Economic Apartheid—or in scores on the Inequality and Anger-Futility subscales of the

PAS-2 by poverty level (although it should be noted that all youth in this study were low income, and thus at risk economically). However, there were significant differences in responses to the individual political attitude item, Hope, $t(568) = 2.09$, $p = .04$, and in scores on the Equality/Fairness subscale by poverty level, $t(568) = 2.80$, $p = .005$. Specifically, youth who experienced higher levels of poverty perceived lower levels of equality ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 0.82$) than those with lower levels of poverty ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 0.87$). Interestingly, the same youth showed higher levels of hope ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.04$) than their peers who lived in less financially dire circumstances ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 1.10$).

Poverty level differences within race/ethnicity. There were no statistically significant differences in political attitudes by level of poverty among Asian American and European American youth. However, African American and Multiracial youth in the most dire financial situations perceived higher levels of fairness than their counterparts in less financially dire situations. For African American youth, $t(320) = 2.15$, $p = .03$ ($M = 1.84$, $SD = 0.87$ for higher levels of poverty; $M = 1.63$, $SD = 0.79$ for lower levels of poverty). For Multiracial youth, $t(60) = 1.98$, $p = .05$ ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 0.84$ for higher levels of poverty; $M = 1.73$, $SD = 0.93$ for lower levels of poverty). African American and Hispanic youth also differed in their responses to the Economic Apartheid item as a function of poverty level. In addition, African American youth in the highest poverty level scored lower on Economic Apartheid, $t(320) = -2.03$, $p = .04$ ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.22$ for higher levels of poverty; $M = 2.35$, $SD = 1.16$ for lower levels of poverty), than those in the lower poverty group. Conversely, Multiracial youth in the highest poverty level scored higher on Economic Apartheid, $t(320) = -2.03$, $p = .04$ ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.22$ for higher levels of poverty; $M = 2.35$, $SD = 1.16$ for lower levels of poverty).

Differences in Political Attitudes by Family Structure

There were no statistically significant differences in responses to the two individual political items—Economic Apartheid and Hope—or in scores on the Inequality and Anger-Futility subscales of the PAS-2 by family structure. Although the mean difference between scores on the Anger-Futility scale reached trend level, $t(592) = 1.90$, $p = .06$, youth who did not live with both of their parents reported higher levels of anger and futility ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 0.76$) than those who live with both parents ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.74$). However, scores on the Equality/Fairness subscale differed significantly by family structure, $t(592) = -4.41$, $p < .0001$. Specifically, youth who reported living with both parents perceived higher levels of Equality/Fairness ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.79$) than those who do not live with both parents ($M = 1.74$, $SD = 0.84$).

Family structure differences within race/ethnicity. There were no statistically significant differences in political attitudes by family structure among African American and Multiracial youth. Among Asian American and European American youth, those living with both of their parents perceived higher levels of equality than those not living with both of their parents. For Asian American youth,

$t(89) = -2.52, p = .01$ ($M = 2.22, SD = 0.67$ for those living with both parents; $M = 1.77, SD = 0.59$ for those not living with both parents). For European American youth, $t(37) = -2.62, p = .01$ ($M = 2.40, SD = 0.87$ for those living with both parents; $M = 1.67, SD = 0.80$ for those not living with both parents). Among Hispanic youth, differences in scores on the Inequality subscale by family structure reached a trend level, $t(58) = 1.94, p = .06$. Hispanic youth living with both parents perceived lower levels of inequality ($M = 1.76, SD = 0.44$) than those who did not live with both parents ($M = 2.08, SD = 0.82$). Finally, among Asian American youth, those living with both parents reported lower levels of anger and futility ($M = 3.17, SD = 0.54$) than those who did not live with both parents ($M = 2.76, SD = 0.78$), $t(89) = 2.01, p = .05$.

Differences in Political Attitudes by Skin Color Preference

There were no statistically significant differences in responses to the individual political attitude items—Economic Apartheid and Hope—or in scores on the Anger-Futility subscale of the PAS-2 by skin color preference (i.e., consonance or dissonance). However, there were significant differences in scores on the Equality/Fairness, $t(570) = 2.55, p = .01$, and Inequality, $t(570) = 1.96, p = .05$, subscales of the PAS-2. Adolescents who were dissonant in their skin color preference (preferred a different skin tone from the skin tone they selected as being most like their own) perceived higher levels of equality ($M = 1.91, SD = 0.84$) than those who were consonant in their skin color preferences ($M = 1.74, SD = 0.82$). Skin color-dissonant youth also perceived higher levels of inequality ($M = 1.91, SD = 0.72$) than skin color-consonant youth ($M = 1.8, SD = 0.67$).

Differences by skin color preference within race/ethnicity. There were no statistically significant differences in political attitudes by skin color preference among Asian American, European American, or Hispanic youth. Among Multiracial youth, responses to the individual item Hope differed significantly by skin color preference, $t(57) = -2.80, p = .007$. Multiracial youth who were dissonant showed lower levels of hope ($M = 2.13, SD = 0.97$) than those who were consonant in their skin color preference ($M = 2.83, SD = 0.95$). African American youth who were dissonant perceived higher levels of equality, $t(328) = 2.10, p = .04$, and higher levels of inequality $t(320) = 2.35, p = .02$, than those who were consonant in their skin color preference. On the Equality/Fairness subscale, $M = 1.79, SD = 0.86$ for the dissonant group; $M = 1.61, SD = 0.76$ for the consonant group. On the Inequality subscale, $M = 1.98, SD = 0.74$ for the dissonant group; $M = 1.80, SD = 0.67$ for the consonant group.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings reported provide overall support for the premise stated that *context matters*. The ethnically diverse sample of adolescents shared the study's participation criterion of living under economically high-risk conditions. That is, their human vulnerability included economic risk, given preset and clear study participation criteria. As a potential source of protective factors, the sample varied on several demographics. The dependent variable, Political

Attitudes, included three reliable subscales (Inequality, Equality/Fairness, Anger-Futility) as well as the two items of the PAS-2 (Hope and Economic Apartheid; Flanagan & Tucker, 1999).

Considered overall, the pattern of findings related to racial and ethnic differences in youths' perceptions of the political context of the United States raises questions about the assumed homogeneity of the experiences of equally low-resource but ethnically diverse youth. Specifically, the finding that the Asian American and European American youth in the study reported higher scores than African American youth on the Equality/Fairness subscale and the parallel finding that Hispanics and Multiracial youth did not differ significantly from each other or from the other racial and ethnic groups on perceptions of equality and fairness in the United States is informative, given the fact that all of these youth come from economically distressed families. In some cases, the patterns generate more questions and suggest specific follow-up. For example, do the findings indicate that perceptions of equality and fairness are viewed as more elusive for African American youth than for other ethnicities and mixed-race youth? Do the findings suggest that, on a daily basis, African American youth must cope with challenges that go beyond the normative developmental tasks confronted by same-age peers of other ethnicities? Given the myriad disparities reported for these youth and families, the findings would benefit from additional exploration. For example, Multiracial and Hispanic youth are significantly higher on Anger-Futility scores in comparison with several other ethnic groups but *not* in comparison with African Americans. Do the lower scores of African American youth suggest different ways of coping with beliefs concerning equality and fairness? The question is particularly poignant given that African American youth also reported significantly lower levels of Hope than did the Multiracial sample.

When considered along with the findings on youth well-being reported in another article that I coauthored (Spencer, Fegley, & Dupree, 2006), the gender findings are troubling. This recent report suggests that girls are saddled with significant levels of self-reported stress and pressure. The current findings confirm the theme because, across the board, girls report feeling greater anger and futility than boys. When gender is crossed with race/ethnicity, the effect appears highly significant for African American, European American, and Hispanic girls, who report higher levels of anger and futility than boys. Not finding the pattern for Multiracial and Asian youth suggests, perhaps, a different cultural dynamic and set of context experiences or—simply speaking—the use of and access to other supports. Qualitative studies of Asian American and Multiracial youth, particularly girls, as they transition between their social contexts might provide opportunities to unpack these groups' greater resistance.

As indicated, the sample used for the present study represented two achievement levels: A/B students (high achievers) and C/D students (marginal achievers). It was the Inequality subscale score that showed significant differences between the two groups: Marginally achieving or C/D students perceived significantly higher levels of inequality for the subscale score. When investigated by ethnicity within achievement levels, it was necessary to dummy code the sample for Black and Other (all other ethnicity groups). The finding was that marginally performing African

American youth obtained significantly higher scores than the Other group on beliefs of Inequality, Equality/Fairness, and Economic Apartheid! Their significantly higher scores for both Inequality and Equality/Fairness suggest the need for more nuanced analyses and studies. For example, are the responses referring to the same contextual experiences? Might themes of *inequality* be linked to the nation more generally and beliefs about *equality* be associated more narrowly with the school context experienced in one's underresourced community? The fact that the item Economic Apartheid was significant only for Blacks when compared against all other groups may corroborate concerns about resource distribution. That is, it might be important to refine the question by getting at the "referent Other" because the refinement may enhance the interpretation of results.

The political attitudes subscale scores by poverty level were important and revealing, given the context character of this very low-resource sample. Not surprisingly, youth who were highest on poverty (given the general impoverishment of the sample) reported a lower Equality/Fairness score. Again, it was not surprising that the most impoverished youth also scored significantly higher on Hope. The finding suggests that beliefs about hope might function as a coping resource for young people. Thus, as a way of testing the hypothesis, it might also be important to look at youths' political beliefs along with reported spirituality or involvement in faith-reinforcing and supporting activities. However, the poverty-by-race/ethnicity findings are harder to interpret. The fact that highly impoverished African American and Multiracial youth report significantly higher beliefs of equality and fairness than those less impoverished was unexpected. Similarly, the most highly impoverished African American youth report significantly lower Economic Apartheid beliefs than those slightly less impoverished (i.e., given the generally impoverished sample)! Does this mean that, given their context and circumstances, these *extremely impoverished* young people somehow do not see the unfairness of wide economic disparities and instead perhaps blame themselves or their community? Or perhaps the marginalization of their circumstances gives them less objectivity about the source? The result is interesting and stands in opposition to the one obtained for the highly impoverished Multiracial youth, who reported significantly higher Economic Apartheid beliefs than did the slightly less but still highly impoverished Multiracial youth. Might the fact of being Multiracial, along with a very highly impoverished economic status, generate greater sensitivity to disparate conditions (i.e., significant Economic Apartheid beliefs)? Or might the fact of Multiracial ethnicity include protective factors including assumptions of a higher deserved social status? That is, when compared with equally impoverished African American youth, might the mixed-ethnicity status of the Multiracial youth afford them assumptions of "economic entitlements" not necessarily inferred by similarly impoverished African American youth? Obtaining a better sense of how both groups make meaning about their highly impoverished status might provide ideas for more specific and relevant social policies and supportive (coping) strategies.

The findings by family structure were not surprising. There was a trend for youth from nonintact families to report more anger and futility. However, beliefs about equality were stronger

and significantly higher for youth living with two parents. When considered by race/ethnicity, the major theme was that for Asian American and European American youth, living with two parents was linked with beliefs of equality. Asian American youth in two-parent families also reported lower levels of anger and futility. The fact that living in a two-parent household is not predictive of political attitudes among African American youth is interesting given the pattern of results among other ethnic groups. Might it be that two-parent family structure is significant enough a protective factor for some groups but not for others? That is, does the greater number of risks and structural, long-term barriers linked with the "color line" for Blacks suggest the need for supports greater than family structure can provide? Economic high risk may not mean the same thing across ethnically diverse youth. The "mark of oppression" may have been inferred to mean the internalization of self-hatred. However, these data suggest that color-linked experiences for Blacks may imply many more social risks than the mainly economic barriers confronted by other ethnic minority groups. Poverty as experienced by Blacks may be associated with many more daily social challenges than are experienced by impoverished non-Black ethnicities; as a result, impoverishment for Blacks may mean something very different from impoverishment as experienced by non-Black youths and their families. Thus policy-based solutions that treat poverty level as the determining criterion may do more harm than good, given that the support allocated across ethnic groups of impoverished families may not be experienced or felt as equally supportive! If inadequate, the support provided by means of public policy may not be experienced as helpful to the recipients. The inadequate policy then constitutes another missed opportunity and, given the *actual need*, introduces unintentional systems injury. The consequent and inevitable "problematizing" of outcomes by suggesting inadequacies in the individuals rather than failure of the program or policy becomes the source of unintentional injury.

The findings for skin color were both modest and less clear, albeit interesting. Only beliefs concerning equality and inequality differed as a function of youths' skin color preferences. Specifically—an unexpected finding—youths who preferred a skin color different from their own (dissonance) reported higher levels of both equality and inequality. The findings on skin color preference by ethnicity were, in general, modest. No significant findings were evident for Hispanic, Asian American, or European American youth. The Multiracial dissonant youth obtained significantly lower scores on Hope than the group with consonant skin color preference. Thus feeling positive about and accepting one's skin color was associated with hopefulness. For African Americans, the pattern was different and more difficult to interpret. African American youth who were dissonant about skin color reported significantly higher scores on Equality/Fairness political attitudes as well as Inequality beliefs when compared with their consonant colleagues. Perhaps the Inequality finding suggests that because of beliefs concerning inequality, youths may believe that it is *socially easier to have a different skin color*.

When considered overall, the findings indicate that political attitudes differ for ethnically diverse, economically impoverished youth, and the patterns are apparent both within and between groups. The findings imply interesting effects of sample

demographics when organized as a function of race/ethnicity, level of poverty, family structure, gender, achievement level, and skin color preference. Once more, the findings support the view that context matters (Spencer, 2006c, 2008). Youth have both similar and different experiences as a function of demographics as they transition across time and place. The implications of the findings are especially noteworthy for female youths, who appear to experience significantly more stress and less general well-being than is generally acknowledged.

In summary, as a first step it is important to move beyond simplistic, decontextual, and nondevelopmental analyses and assumptions about what youths need for becoming competent adults. Prior research assumptions continue to haunt the use of social science findings. One set of critical conclusions might be that context matters, that human meaning making is unavoidable given human perceptual processes, and that youths' coping strategies and beliefs matter. In addition, policy innovations that look at single effects (e.g., family structure, race/ethnicity, or economic status) are too simplistic to be useful. The criterion of poverty is inadequate because there is poverty, and, then again, there is extreme poverty! Understanding the extra challenges confronted by a given group suggests different levels of supports needed. Anything less can further stigmatize without affording the benefits intended. Moreover, the impact differs by ethnicity and, undoubtedly, by the level of stigma associated with group membership.

The preceding review of the context of social science synthesis involving the *Brown* decision, along with the data analysis completed, provides important lessons learned. First, the failure to include normal human development themes continues to be a critical oversight. That is, ignoring youths' humanity matters and persists as a problem. Second, as suggested in other sources and consistent with the short-sighted analysis provided by Clark and colleagues, the term *child study* continues to be used to refer to White children in the United States. The Clarks' team ignored the human development perspective, and this oversight continues to characterize most child development studies (see Spencer, 2006a; Spencer, Brookins, & Allen, 1985). Third, consideration of context for Whites refers to family influences and supports; however, for devalued groups, too frequently, context refers to macro- and exoecological conditions (e.g., inadequate or absent "supportive" policies). Fourth, the pattern of *not recognizing*—even in light of the Columbine massacre and parallel events—that too much of a good thing (i.e., unacknowledged privilege or other favorable circumstances) may be problematic is disturbing. Fifth, the penchant to ignore the humanity and normal human processing of devalued groups is counterproductive on all levels. Sixth, resiliency is an earned attribute that can function as a protective factor if acknowledged (i.e., recognizing that particular groups are subject to inordinately high risks with which many individuals manage to successfully cope). Understanding the sources of coping and meaning making for America's nonhomogeneous groupings should afford relevant policy initiatives to enhance their diverse experiences. Seventh, the role of maturation and perception-based experience matters, although it is generally ignored. If political attitudes are the outcomes of youths' early racial attitudes, preferences, and beliefs about groups, then it is important to understand their source given youths' development-

dependent perceptions. And finally, simple acknowledgment, in and of itself, that *America is not a color-blind society* can remove a key and enduring social challenge.

The insights noted or lessons needed for internalization by policy-determining adults should provide legislators, educators, researchers, families, and advocates with greater options in designing supports for the nation's most important resource: *all* of its youth.

NOTE

¹In this article, all mentions of the Clarks' research refer to the general findings or positions of these three doll studies (1939, 1940, 1947), which have been carefully reviewed by Cross (1991).

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