



THE KEITT INSTITUTE

Colors of the Heart

Investigating how teen girls of color develop their emotional understanding

A groundbreaking study that delves into the emotions of teenage girls of color like never before!

Dr. Jennifer Keitt



About the Report

Colors of the Heart is directly influenced by Dr. Jennifer Keitt's dissertation research. She found that there is not enough research delving into the emotional development and life experiences of teen girls of color. This leaves us wondering if they all experience emotions in the same way, express them similarly, or even use the same language to talk about their feelings.

That's where this phenomenological study comes in. We wanted to dig deep and understand how teenage girls from diverse cultural backgrounds navigate their emotional worlds. We explored five critical factors: gender, culture, how their parents teach them about emotions, their ability to regulate emotions, and how they differentiate between different feelings.

85% of the images in this report are of participants in the Keitt Institute's #StrongGirls® program, a leadership development program for high school students designed to empower, educate, equip, and encourage the next generation of female leaders.

INTRODUCTION

Insights for Empowerment and Understanding

Being a teenage girl of color in today's world can be difficult. And each teen's emotional experience is different. But there's little research into how they develop their emotional understanding.

At the Keitt Institute, we wanted to dig deep and understand how teenage girls of color (TGOCs™) from Black, Asian, Latina, Caribbean, and mixed American cultural backgrounds navigate their emotional worlds. We explored five factors: gender, culture, how their parents teach them about emotions, their ability to regulate emotions, and how they differentiate between different feelings.

By shedding light on the unique emotional development and perspectives of teenage girls of color, we can help everyone better understand how significant emotions are in their lives. Whether you're an educator looking to support your students, a parent wanting to connect with your child, or a teenage girl searching for insights into your own emotional journey, this study aims to provide valuable insights and open meaningful conversations.

PART 1

A New Model for Understanding Emotional Development

Key Influences on Emotional Understanding

Teen Girls of Color (TGOCS™) navigate five key areas that shape their emotional understanding. By acknowledging and exploring these five key influences, we can gain a deeper understanding of how TGOCS™ navigate the intricate terrain of emotions. These five areas are gender perceptions, parental emotion-related socialization behaviors (ERSBs), cultural context, emotion regulation strategies, and emotional differentiation.



Factor 1

Gender Perceptions

TGOCS™ are girls, and societal gender perceptions, stereotypes, and parental attitudes play a crucial role in molding their emotional experiences. Societal and parental attitudes can significantly impact how they perceive and express their emotions.¹



Factor 2

Parental Emotion-Related Socialization Behaviors (ERSBs)

TGOCS™' parents have their own thoughts and philosophies about emotions. These parental ERSBs greatly influence how these teen girls interpret and express their emotions.²



Factor 3

Cultural Context

TGOCS™ are born into specific cultural contexts. They inherit not only their family's values but also the rich tapestry of cultural and ethnic traditions, which molds their emotional development.³



Factor 4

Emotion Regulation Strategies

TGOCS™ employ various strategies to manage and cope when faced with a whirlwind of emotions. These emotion regulation strategies are vital tools in navigating the emotional landscape.⁴



Factor 5

Emotional Differentiation

Regardless of their ability to discern between the diverse emotions they experience, emotions are an omnipresent facet of TGOCS™' lives.⁵

PART 2

The Study's Major Themes

Theme 1

Emotions are Unique. ***Personal Interpretations Abound***

Our findings suggest that there's no one-size-fits-all approach to how TGOCS™ want to feel. For these young women, emotions are deeply individual experiences. Each participant's emotional journey is influenced by their subjective interpretation, even when grappling with challenging emotions. A teen girl may express feeling awkward about her identity or cycle between anger and sadness, ultimately landing on anger. For TGOCS™, emotions are like unique episodes in their daily lives, and how they interpret these emotions is grounded in their individual analysis. There's no universal template for how they feel, even when facing similar life events. The emotions of TGOCS™ are profoundly personal, and each girl traverses her own emotional landscape.



Theme 2

Emotions are Unavoidable. *They Infiltrate All Aspects of Life*

Not only are TGOCS™' emotions highly personalized, but they also have an undeniable presence at home, school, at work, with friends, or alone – in every facet of their lives. One participant shared that her feelings surfaced most intensely when she was alone, while another disclosed her practice of suppressing emotions during the school day only to confront them in her mind at night. For these young women, emotions are inextricably intertwined with their thoughts, capable of influencing their behavior. TGOCS™ don't exist separately from their feelings; instead, their emotions are omnipresent and impossible to evade, prevent, or ignore.



Theme 3

Emotions are Unpredictable. *The Shifting Sands of Feeling*

For TGOCs™s, emotions were unpredictable, often emerging in response to situations. Circumstances like test scores, school, imposter syndrome, workplace dynamics, mood swings, transitioning to a new school, or familial issues showed their emotional responses were inconsistent. As one teenager articulated, feelings of dread, excitement, and dread again all mingled as she filled out her college applications. Another participant described her emotions as shifting from day to day, situation to situation, and test to test. For TGOCs™, emotions appear and disappear unpredictably, dancing to the rhythm of the circumstances they navigate.



PART 3

Key Findings From the Colors Of The Heart Study

FINDING 1

Teens experience a wide variety of emotions during the day

For TGOCS™, circumstances play a pivotal role in shaping their feelings. These circumstances can be broadly categorized into four distinct areas:

- **Change and Transition**

Adjusting to shifts such as changing high schools, transitioning to college life, or taking on new leadership roles could evoke a spectrum of emotions.

- **School Work**

Academic demands, assignments, and classroom experiences played a significant role in shaping TGOCS™' emotions.

- **People, Including Friends**

TGOCS™ expressed positive emotions related to their interactions with peers and friends. These encounters often filled them with energy, happiness, entertainment, and enjoyment.

- **Expectations of Self and Others**

The expectations placed upon them, both by themselves and by others, played a significant role in how TGOCS™ felt. These expectations could trigger feelings of being overwhelmed, curious, or even lonely.

Our findings underscore that the emotional journey of TGOCS™ is a deeply personal and ever-evolving experience. Their emotions are influenced by a complex interplay of circumstances, both within and outside the classroom, making each day a unique emotional tapestry.





**“My feelings change
day-to-day, thing-to-
thing, test-to-test.”**

White & African-American Study Participant, 19 year old

FINDING 2

Parents use three strategies to help teens process their emotions

We found that there is diversity in parental emotion-related socialization behaviors (ERSBs) within TGOCTM households. Our study found that both mothers and fathers have a significant influence on teaching their adolescents about emotions. Participants shared what they learned from their parents, revealing a variety of approaches to emotional education, including permission to feel, strategies for handling emotions, and avoidance of emotions.

- **Permission to Feel**

In the case of mixed-race TGOCTM, their parents adopted a nurturing stance that encouraged them to embrace their emotions fully.

- **Strategies to Handle Feelings**

Haitian parents, on the other hand, focused on teaching their teens strategies for handling their emotions, which included not displaying emotions in public settings. Interestingly, African-American parents also played an active role in providing their teens with a plan of action for managing their feelings.

- **Avoidance of Emotions**

Parents hailing from Cuban, Mexican, and Asian backgrounds often imparted lessons to their daughters centered on avoiding emotions altogether.

Our findings highlight the diversity in parental ERSBs within TGOCTM households. These practices are deeply rooted in cultural, familial, and individual beliefs, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging and respecting these varied approaches when supporting the emotional development of TGOCTM.





“I feel like the topic of emotions was kind of taboo.”

Cuban-American Study Participant, 19 years old

FINDING 3

Thinking, feeling, and doing are connected

Participants distinguished their most experienced emotions, revealing a thought-provoking pattern. TGOCS™ showed a pattern of cognitive and emotional processing that led to action or behavior. This process involved a cycle of thinking, feeling, and doing that was frequently used, whether intentionally or not, to distinguish and understand their emotions. Their thoughts sparked certain emotions, which would then impact their actions or even their physical sensations.

- **The Thinking-Feeling-Doing Process**

One participant shared her approach to identifying emotions by considering thoughts, feelings, and actions as a whole. She revealed how her moods and desires intertwined and influenced whether she preferred being alone or with others on a particular day. This exemplified how her thinking patterns played a pivotal role in shaping her emotional experiences.

- **Perception Shapes Emotion**

Another TGOCS™ expounded on the profound connection between her perception of life's circumstances and her resulting emotions. She conveyed how her feelings of happiness and joy were closely tied to her assessment of life's trajectory. In her perspective, achievements, thriving friendships, and overall well-being acted as catalysts for these positive emotions.

- **Reflective Awareness**

Other teens adopted a reflective approach, often contemplating their emotions in retrospect. They exhibited a keen awareness of how thoughts influenced their feelings.

Our findings showcase that cognitive and affective processes play a significant role in the emotional self-discovery journey of TGOCS™. These insights provide a deeper understanding of their complex emotional experiences.





Your thoughts influence your emotions and actions

The thinking-feeling-doing connection:
A Keitt Institute Teaching

FINDING 4

A family's cultural heritage influences emotional expression

There is a mosaic of emotional display rules within TGOCS™ families. Families tend to express their emotions in culturally specific ways, guided by their valuations of expressiveness⁶. In essence, family units appear to transmit their cultural beliefs about emotions not just within their nuclear households but across their broader network of relatives as well. Our study explored how cultural norms impact emotional development in TGOCS™ households and their extended families. The results provide intriguing insights into the intersection of culture, ethnicity, and personal identity in emotional expression.

- **Same Emotional Expression as Extended Family**
For most of our participants, their immediate families mirrored the emotional expression patterns of their extended relatives.
- **Different Emotional Expression Than Extended Family**
In contrast, other TGOCS™ shared experiences where their immediate families departed from the emotional expressions of their extended relatives.
- **Unique Complexities in Cultural Identity**
Some TGOCS™ had unique cultural experiences due to the adoption and blending of diverse cultural influences.

These insights emphasize the importance of acknowledging and respecting the diverse emotional expression patterns rooted in cultural and familial beliefs, offering valuable guidance for professionals supporting TGOCS™ in their emotional journeys.





**“When it gets to the
breaking point, then
emotions are
expressed.”**

African-American Study Participant, 20 years old

FINDING 5

Teens use internal and external emotion regulation strategies

TGOCS™ use a rich tapestry of strategies to manage their emotions. We found that TGOCS™ employ internal and external regulation techniques, with some participants utilizing a combination of both. In total, our participants articulated a whopping 16 emotion regulation strategies!

- **Internal Emotion Regulation Strategies**

Internal methods involve the art of managing emotions from within, primarily utilizing cognitive processes such as introspection, self-questioning, engaging in self-talk, avoidance, reappraisal, problem-solving, or turning to prayer for solace.

- **External Emotion Regulation Strategies**

External strategies, as the name suggests, manifest as outward behaviors and actions taken to regulate emotions, such as journaling, practicing breathing exercises, seeking therapy or counseling, and even taking well-timed naps.

- **Combining Internal and External Approaches**

Some TGOCS™ employ a combination of both internal and external strategies for emotional regulation.

Our findings closely align with the existing body of literature on emotion regulation⁷, underscoring the multifaceted nature of how TGOCS™ navigate their emotions. This study unveils the diverse toolbox of emotional regulation strategies wielded by TGOCS™, and these insights provide professionals with a nuanced understanding of how these remarkable individuals navigate their emotions, offering valuable guidance for those seeking to support their emotional well-being and resilience.





**“I sit down at night and
think about my day.”**

Mexican & Filipino-American Study Participant, 17 years old

FINDING 6

Emotions impact academic performance

Negative emotions influence TGOCS™' productivity and behavior. Surprisingly, the majority of teenagers focused on the negative impact their emotions have on their academic pursuits, specifically mentioning stress, anxiety, sadness, and feeling overwhelmed as significant factors. The influence of these emotions manifested in two key ways: productivity and behavior.

- **Productivity**

For many of the TGOCS™, negative emotions posed a substantial challenge to their productivity. When one teen found herself in the grip of stress, it hindered her motivation and led to procrastination, often resulting in missed deadlines for assignments. Similarly, another TGOCS™ confessed that feelings of sadness and stress slowed her down, impacting her ability to complete assignments on time, subsequently affecting her grades.

- **Behavior**

TGOCS™ grappled with emotions that could have impacted their academic pursuits, but their responses to these emotional challenges varied. Some shared a determination not to let their feelings hinder their academic abilities, while other TGOCS™ emphasized their commitment to pushing through emotional obstacles.

These findings underscore the importance of recognizing the emotional dimensions of academic life and suggest potential avenues for providing emotional support to enhance their educational experiences.






“I get a really good grade on this, and then I feel like, I'm not doing this today and I'd flunk that.”

Cuban-American Study Participant, 19 years old

PART 4

In Her Words


Voices of Teen Girls of Color on Emotions



20 years old

African-American Participant

"I feel like we should continue to use therapy, and not look at it as a negative thing. I have problems trying to articulate how I feel, so if we take advantage of going to therapy and learn how to communicate and understand our feelings then we would be better off."



17 years old

Mexican & Filipino-American Participant

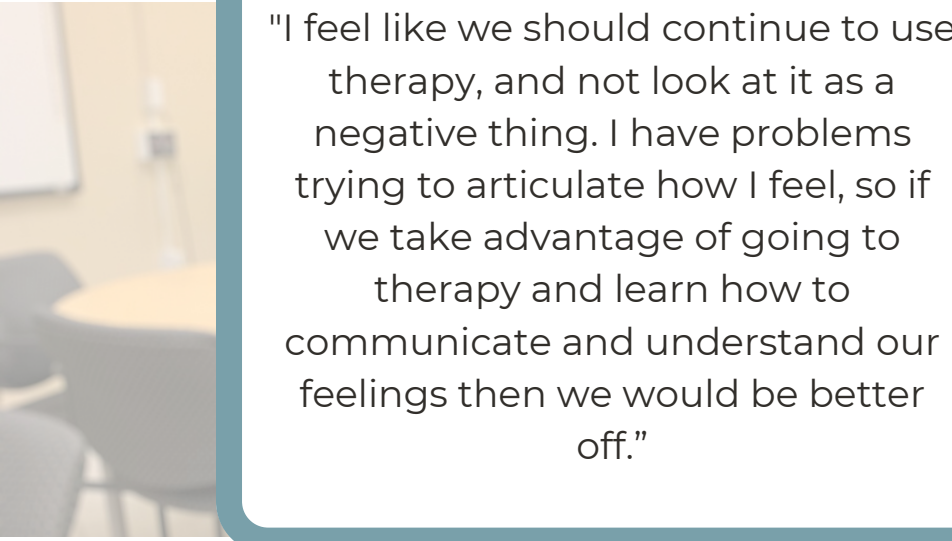
"Ethnic people or just people of color aren't the same as, you know, not POC [people of color] . . . we just don't experience the same things. Especially when we grew up with immigrant parents. I see the difference between me and my peers...I feel like I can relate more to people of color because we experience a lot of the same things. I don't like therapy, not because of the idea of it but rather there's not enough therapists that are like the same as me. There's not a lot of Hispanic or Asian or Black therapists that could understand what I'm going through."



18 years old

Haitian-American Participant

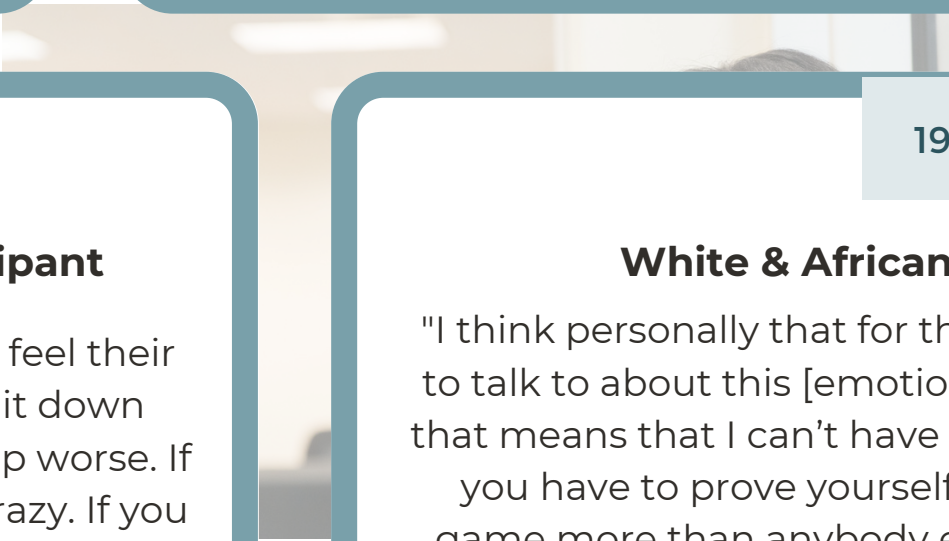
"I think there's like a tension between being a woman and being perceived as more delicate, and then being perceived as more reactive as a Black or Latino person. That makes it a lot harder to judge how you are perceiving your own emotions and how other people are perceiving them. I think there is that double struggle of trying to push them down and there's also the cultural factor, the fact that a lot of cultures don't really encourage a lot of emotionality in general."



19 years old

Cuban-American Participant

"I would tell young girls to just feel their emotions in full. Don't water it down because it's just going to end up worse. If you look crazy, then you look crazy. If you sound crazy, then you sound crazy. Those are your emotions, that's how you feel. At the end of the day, it's you that's going to be impacted, so think about you first."



19 years old

White & African-American Participant

"I think personally that for the few girls that I know well enough to talk to about this [emotions] to them, it's like, I have a goal so that means that I can't have emotions . . . so as a woman of color, you have to prove yourself and I have to be at the top of my game more than anybody else because if I'm not then I'm just another statistic. I think emotions kind of get pushed to the side when a girl of color has a goal or a dream because they may think that emotions can get in the way of not being good at what they want to do, when in fact it could be the exact opposite."



16 years old

African-American Participant

"Ask for help—people will probably not reach out for you—so you need to reach out yourself, like advocate for yourself and get that help if you need it."

PART 5

Nurturing Emotional Development

Key ideas for future practice that stem from the needs, desires, and aspirations of the study participants

Action 1



Empower Parents and Educators

Design community or school-based family programs and instructional resources to equip parents and educators with a deeper understanding of emotions. By enhancing their emotional literacy, parents and educators can play a more effective role in socializing their children's emotions.

Here's how you can take action: Bring our #StrongGirls® leadership development training to your school or organization.

[Learn About #StrongGirls®](#)

Action 2



Emotional Learning in the Classroom

Incorporate the practice of scaffolding students' emotions as part of classroom instruction. Educators have a unique opportunity to help students build an emotional vocabulary and connect with high school students in a meaningful way, guiding them through the complexities of their emotions throughout the school day.

Here's how you can take action: Commit to having an emotionally safe classroom.

[Sign the Pledge](#)

Action 3



Diversify Therapeutic Support

Increase the availability of therapists from diverse cultural backgrounds who can engage in meaningful conversations with students. This ensures that TGOCS™ have access to professionals who understand their unique context when addressing their emotional well-being.

Here's how you can take action: Better inform your practice by taking an in-depth look at Dr. Jennifer Keitt's dissertation.

[Download the Dissertation](#)

Action 4

Support Teen-Led Advocacy

Establish teen-led advocacy organizations that empower TGOCs™ to develop self-agency. This way, they can learn to advocate for the resources and support they need to navigate their emotional journey effectively. Developing agency is vital, as individuals who demonstrate self-efficacy have better control over their actions and emotional states⁸.

Here's how you can take action: Become a #StrongGirls® or SheRises™ Ambassador.

Learn About
[#StrongGirls®](#)

Learn About
[SheRises™](#)

⁸Bandura (1989)

CONCLUSION

Moving Forward

It's paramount that we prioritize the emotional understanding and development of TGOCs™. Building upon the findings of this study, it's time to place their unique, unavoidable, and unpredictable emotions at the forefront of our efforts. Creating an "Emotions 101" course could offer people a better understanding of their feelings and how to regulate them⁹. TGOCs™ present an opportunity for educators, parents, caregivers, and allies to engage in innovative ways that support their emotional growth and resilience.

Addendum

Resources for Teens, Parents, Educators, & Allies

For High School & College Students

**Your Guide to Understanding
and Navigating Your Emotions**

[Access the Guide](#)

For Parents

**Your Guide to Nurturing Your
Teen Daughter's Emotional
Well-being**

[Access the Guide](#)

For Educators & Allies

**A Comprehensive Guide for
Educators, Advocates, and Allies:**
Navigating Teen Girls' Emotional Worlds

[Access the Guide](#)

End Notes

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ADDENDUM

What We Do At The Keitt Institute

Led by Mother-Daughter duo Dr. Jennifer Keitt and Morgan Holmes, the Keitt Institute helps leaders become unstoppable in life and unlock their next level of leadership. We understand that the most effective way to unlock new levels of leadership and become unstoppable is to master thoughts, emotions, and actions. We specialize in taking leaders through original, engaging, research-based experiences that help them understand how to get more done and be leaders their teams want to follow.

Learn more at: keittinstitute.org



Our Experts



Dr. Jennifer Keitt | CEO

As a 35+ year media veteran, Jennifer Keitt has inspired and encouraged audiences nationwide to live their very best lives. Jennifer is passionate about creating high-powered, engaging, research-driven experiences that help people master their emotions and flourish in life. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Broadcast Journalism, a Master of Arts in Practical Theology, and a Doctorate in Educational Psychology.



Morgan Holmes | COO

With over ten years of experience as an entrepreneur, Morgan has honed her love of breaking down complex problems into bite-sized solutions as Chief Operating Officer of the Keitt Institute. Her mission is to design programming that produces robust, whole, productive leaders. Morgan has a Master of Education in e-Learning & Instructional Design from Northeastern University and a Bachelor of Science in Biomedical Engineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology.

Experience for High School Girls



Discover more about #StrongGirls®

The Keitt Institute's experience⁸ for High School Girls

[Learn About #StrongGirls®](#)

Experience for College Girls



Discover more about SheRises™

The Keitt Institute's experience for College Girls

[Learn About SheRises™](#)