AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS' SELF-IDENTITY CRISIS

by

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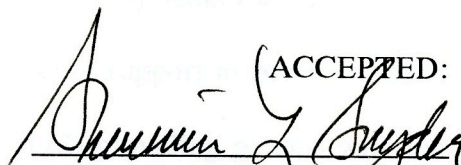
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to identify, through a review of the literature, the causes of an unclear self-identity among African American adolescents and to discuss their significance in assisting these youth to develop a positive and clear self-identity. The premise of this study is that positive self-identity for African American adolescents is not easily attained in American culture. The primary causes of unclear self-identity for African American adolescents are the fragmentation of the family in the African American community, the failure of the educational system to successfully educate African American adolescents in how to achieve upward social mobility, and the failure of the media to provide positive role models for African American adolescents to emulate. Suggestions on how to overcome these causes of unclear self-identity are made to help African American adolescents to form a clear and positive self-identity. These suggestions include (1) keeping African American adolescents academically oriented and in school to offset the disadvantages of socioeconomic factors affecting the African American community; (2) emphasizing the importance of mental and physical health and the hazards of addictions and violence; (3) establishing and maintaining constructive social networks and support systems for adolescents as part of the community and school system; (4) providing support to parents to help them instill a cultural identity in their children; and (5) providing parents with the knowledge they need to rear their children through community based educational programs.

DEDICATION

To my mother, Ruth Virginia (Archie) Miles, and my sister, Virginia Ruth Archie and her daughter Joshetta Moore, who never doubted me, who kept their faith in me and supported me in my quest for a higher and better education.

To my father, J. B. Archie, his wife Juanita and my brothers and their families, J. B. Archie, Jr., his wife Norma, Charlie Joe Archie and his wife Ann, who, though far away, supported me with their prayers.

To my three wonderful caring young adults, and my son-in-law, Maurice L. Hart, Lawrence E. Hart, and Maureen Y. (Hart) Calloway and her husband, Way Calloway, who challenged me to be the best that I could be by giving me their love and support.

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And to a very special person for his support, Dave Doherty. It's not the length of time that I've known him, but the quality of time that he gave me in completing this project.

Thanks,

I love you all.

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CHAPTER 1
THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Many African American adolescents suffer from a lack of a clear and positive self-identity. Because of this, they encounter problems including, but not limited to, drug and alcohol abuse, a high rate of teen pregnancy, and peer pressure to commit acts of violence. The problems encountered in youth may lead to more single parent households, a high arrest rate for personal crimes, disorderly conduct, sexual misbehavior, theft and homicide, peer pressure to participate in gangs, and economic hardship (Wilson, 1978).

The process of developing a positive self-identity is laced with insecurities for many African American adolescents. An issue has long been raised that African American adolescents have a more difficult time in establishing and maintaining their positive self-identity because positive self-identity for African American adolescents is not easily attained in American culture (Myers, et al., 1991). This paper addresses how African American adolescents' life situation and experiences affect feelings about themselves, how they define themselves, and how they behave toward themselves and others.

The pervasive number of "isms" (racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism) have had an adverse impact on those who are defined as inferior by the perceptions of the dominant majority of the population (Myers, et al., 1991). For adolescents of any

culture, self-identity is more difficult to attain when they are not fully rooted in their culture, whether African American or Anglo American.

According to the State of America's Children (Slaughter-Defoe, 1991), there are 12.6 million children living below the poverty line. According to previous reports, Wilson (1978) claims the greatest increase of the poor in metropolitan areas occurred in the inner city. The rise in female headed families from 23% in 1959 to 52% in 1989 is a major factor contributing to the increase in child poverty (Slaughter-Defoe, 1991). One third of the homeless in the United States are families with children (Slaughter-Defoe, 1991). Poverty stricken children residing in the inner city in a household headed by one parent, usually their mother, or worse, living homeless and rootless, grow to adolescence without the mental, emotional and physical health to overcome the negative aspects of their lives and establish a positive self-identity (Wilson, 1978). While these statistics do not apply exclusively to African Americans, poverty, life in the inner city, homelessness, and female headed families are typical of many African American adolescents.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper was to identify, through a review of the literature, the causes of an unclear self-identity among African American adolescents and to discuss their significance in assisting these youth to develop a positive and clear self-identity.

Research Question

The question to be answered is: What are the major causes of an unclear and negative self-identity among African American adolescents?

Significance of the Study

This paper provides information which may be used to help African American adolescents regain self-identity within African American and Anglo American cultures and to assist parents and educators in understanding African American adolescents' feelings of loss of control when their self-identity is lacking. The findings may also be useful to counselors, social workers, educators and parents who work with African American adolescents.

Operational Definition of Terms

African American: An American descended from African or Negroid peoples (Myers, 1988).

African American Culture: The combined American and African heritage, lore, customs, beliefs and mores that an African American community holds in common (Myers, 1988).

Locus of Control: Defines a person's perception of control, influenced either by inner strengths or outer influences such as "isms" or fate (Cain, 1994).

Self-Identity: Feelings about oneself, how one defines oneself, and behavior towards oneself and others (Cain, 1994).

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

The remainder of the study will be organized into three additional chapters. Chapter Two reviews selected literature about self-identity and discusses the importance of a strong self-identity in African American adolescents. Chapter Three reviews selected literature concerning how African American adolescents' self-identity is affected by the family, schools, and the media. Chapter Four offers conclusions and presents suggestions for exploring the interactive relationship of ethnicity and competence to eliminate causes that work against a positive African American image so that a clear and positive self-identity is possible for African American adolescents.

CHAPTER 2

THE IMPORTANCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY

Introduction

The purpose of this paper was to identify, through a review of the literature, the causes of an unclear self-identity among African American adolescents and to discuss their significance in assisting these youth to develop a positive and clear self-identity. This chapter first explores the development of an African American identity by strengthening cultural and ethnic ties among African American communities and people. Second, the literature concerning self-identity as it evolves from socialization agencies such as family, intersex and intrasex peer groups, and the church within the African American culture is reviewed.

Development of African American Identity

Development of an identifiable culture by African Americans increased during the 1960s and 1970s. The emergence of an African American identity parallels the search for self-identity conducted by African American adolescents.

Interest in racial identification is based on relevance to the way one perceives and responds to the environment. The physical fact of racial differences, primarily skin color, raises awareness of race for African Americans (Thompson, 1992). Thompson (1992) also presents a hypothesis that African Americans are socialized

into the predominant culture, which results in diminished identification as an African American.

Cross (1978) reviews the Thomas and Cross models of psychological nigrescence which attempted to depict the various stages African Americans traversed in seeking an authentic identity during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Cross defines Negromachy as a form of mental illness with symptoms of confusion of self-worth and dependency upon white society for self-identification. The African American suffering from negromachy exhibits compliance, subservience, repressed rage, and an oversensitivity to racial issues and the "white is right" attitude maintains, protects and enhances lifestyles that lead to denial of self and in some cases, denial of reality. Negromachy is overcome by seeking a racial identity that in turn becomes a conduit for discovering ones unity with mankind and self-determining ones racial identity in a process of becoming Black, termed "Nigrescence" (Cross, 1978).

The Thomas and Cross models of psychological nigrescence analyzed the phenomenon of identity metamorphosis within the context of a social movement and not the evolution of identity from childhood through adult life. However, the social movements of the sixties and seventies resulted in new adult role models who, as parents, raise their children in terms of traditional socialization schemes to impart self-identity (Cross, 1978).

Oppression is perceived as "self-alienating and yielding a fragmented sense of self, based upon devaluation by self and others" and therefore, identity development is a process of integrating and expanding one's sense of self (Myers, et al, 1991, p. 54).

Myers, et al (1991) believe that positive self-identity is not easily attained in a culture full of racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, etc., and these "isms" have an adverse impact on those who are defined as inferior by the dominant way of perceiving and self-worth is based primarily on external validation (Myers, et al., 1991). In such a suboptimal system:

> The basic sense of worth that all human beings strive for cannot be achieved through material accoutrements, and the most that can happen is that people get some and want more, get more, and want more and more, and so on (Myers, et al., 1991, p. 70).

A solid sense of self must come from intrinsic feelings of worth and value so that self within the optimal conceptual system is seen as multidimensional, encompassing the ancestors, those yet unborn, nature, and community in a process of identity development where people come to know themselves (Myers, et al., 1991). With self-knowledge, individuals can integrate all apparent aspects of being, such as age, color, ethnicity, and size into a holistic sense of self (Myers, et al., 1991). Identity development is a continuous process of interaction between individuals and the sociocultural environment they encounter (Myers, et al., 1991).

Myers, et al. (1991) proposed a model of identity development, labeled Optimal Theory Applied to Identity Development. The theory states that one's purpose in being is to gain self-knowledge, and consequently identity development is a central feature of being. There are seven developmental phases presented by Myers, et al. (1991, pp. 59-60) without partitioning individuals by race, sexual preference, and gender:

Phase 0 - Absence of Conscious Awareness: It is. In infancy, individuals lack awareness of being.

Phase 1 - Individuation: The world is the way it is. Individuals lack awareness of any view of self other than the one to which they are initially introduced.

Phase 2 - Dissonance: I'm beginning to wonder who I am. Individuals explore those aspects of self that may be devalued by others, triggering conflict between what individuals believe they are and a false image of self that would be inferior. Consciously or unconsciously, individuals may internalize sociocultural values that hold the negative view of the self.

Phase 3 - Immersion: I focus my energy on people like me. Individuals fully embrace others like themselves who are devalued. Individuals immerse themselves in the culture of the devalued group, where they feel excitement, joy, pride, and a sense of belonging.

Phase 4 - Internalization: I feel good about who I know I am. Individuals have incorporated feelings of worth, resulting in an increased sense of security. Individuals become more tolerant and accepting of others who do not threaten their sense of self.

Phase 5 - Integration: With my deeper understanding of myself I am changing my assumptions about the world. A sense of self develops into a stronger inner security so that relationships and perceptions of others have a degree of inner peace.

Phase 6 - Transformation: It is I. The self has redefined itself toward a sense of personhood that includes the ancestors, those yet unborn, nature, and community. Individuals have shifted their world view based on realizing the interrelatedness and interdependence of all things.

Myers, et al. (1991) concludes that "adherence to a suboptimal conceptual system enables oppression to exist" (p. 61). Identity is a process of integrating and expanding a sense of self to move from a segmented worldview to a more holistic one, thus rediscovering the spiritual essence inside the self of their true identity. This expansion of self and increased awareness "allows people to transcend the bondage of oppression" (Myers, et al., 1991, p. 70).

African American Adolescents' Self-Identity

African American adolescents have the conflict of wanting to feel a part of society while being made to feel apart from it (Cross, 1978). Self-identity evolves from socialization. Socialization may be defined as ". . . the preparation of children to take on the adult roles and responsibilities of society" (Franklin, 1994, p. 105). Socialization deals essentially with raising children to become functioning members of society by teaching conventions, beliefs, values and behavior (Franklin, 1994).

African American adolescents' socialization determines their behavior in that African American females' access to economic resources appears the primary factor in their life courses while African American males seem more vulnerable to peer group influences regardless of socioeconomic status (Franklin, 1994). Messages to

African American children and adolescents about each other, choice of mates, marriage, divorce and parenting come from society in general to some extent, but attitudes and perceptions about their roles are formed primarily within the family unit (Dickson, 1993).

For many African American children, this family unit means they are born into poverty, ignorance, and racism, which may be translated into social deficits (Franklin, 1994). These deficits directly affect the African American adolescents' developing private selves from their cognitions about themselves, their affectivity and behaviors toward themselves (Franklin, 1994). Also affected is African American adolescents' development of public selves, which are based on other people's definitions, cognitions, affectivity and behaviors so that African American adolescents' public selves refer to how others recognize them (Franklin, 1994).

African American adolescents construct public and private selves from messages given by socialization agencies such as family, intersex and intrasex peer groups, and the church within the African American culture (Franklin, 1994).

Socialization agencies external to the African American culture, such as educational institutions, economic situations, and mass media reflect, as Kershaw (1992) observes, the cumulative effects of historical oppression in a racist and sexist society, leading to feelings of hostility, cynical mistrust and anger common to victims of racist oppression (Myers, Stokes & Speight, 1989). "The fact that they are African American provides a central focus for the social roles they play" (Franklin, 1994, p. 106).

African American women encounter sexism and racism both inside and outside the African American community (Franklin, 1994). According to Franklin:

> The socialization experiences of African American female youth are shaped by the number of parents in the home, the availability of economic resources, the availability of other adult socializing agents, and intersex and intrasex peer group dependence (1994, p. 108).

African American mothers train their daughters in surviving and succeeding through nurturing, pushing, cajoling, and trusting a man so that the daughter and her children will benefit from her chosen mate's success; however, daughters are exposed to women who have either been the sole provider or contributed to the survival of the family through independence and self-sufficiency (Dickson, 1993). These daughters learn that the balance of power in marriage belongs to the spouse who brings the most resources to the marriage (Plass, 1993). Historically, African American female/male relationships have been more egalitarian than their White counterparts; however, African American males accept the patriarchal value of male dominance even though unable to exercise it (Franklin, 1994).

As a rule, African American females learn that importance of hard work, and receive strong messages about motherhood, femininity, personal uniqueness and distinctiveness as well as sexuality, body movement and appearance, which can be contradictory. Primarily, however, African American girls are taught to be self-sufficient and able to take care of themselves through education and independence (Franklin, 1994).

Much of the socialization of African American sons appears to occur outside the home within their peer group with race as a focal point (Franklin, 1994). Opportunity is limited for boys to develop a sense of masculinity in society through economic success; therefore alternative avenues, such as "hustling" and manipulating women are used and males present themselves as emotionless, fearless and aloof to preserve pride, dignity and respect as well as to express bitterness, anger and distrust toward society (Dickson, 1993). Many African American males under age 18 reside in female-headed households without the benefit of adult male role models and other supportive resources (Franklin, 1994). Even African American youth in intact nuclear families, the economic stability and quality of life are less predictable than in White families (Franklin, 1994).

Violence is an issue for males in family relationships, due to low status in low paying jobs or inability to find jobs (Plass, 1993). African American males show a high arrest rate for personal crimes, disorderly conduct, sexual misbehavior, theft and homicide. African American males who do not engage in these activities are stigmatized by those who do, leading to a perception of African American males as dysfunctional (Franklin, 1994).

African American males are more concerned with peer relationships and social abilities than females. This involvement in peer groups appears to diminish the ill effects of meager economic resources because the peer group's definition of manhood encourages positive self-concepts and illegal economic resources are generally more easily obtained by African American males than by females (Franklin, 1994). In

intersex peer groups, manhood is linked with power to control others. Recognition of social competence for African American males is connected with sexual exploits, use of defense mechanisms for survival and posing as "cool" with a variety of attitudes and actions used as facades and shields (Franklin, 1994).

The message from the dominant society is that a man should be aggressive and dominant in his relationships and a woman should be feminine, submissive and subservient (Dickson, 1993). The result of this message, coupled with African American economic and social realities, are that women who assume both masculine and feminine roles as well as men who internalize selectively, may be aggressive in relationships but passive in other aspects of life, such as at work (Dickson, 1993).

Negative stereotypes have developed about African American males from messages women receive directly and indirectly from their mothers that men are abusive, no good and unreliable, although recently, the message includes "Black males are endangered" (Dickson, 1993, p. 481). Stereotypes about African American women held by African American males include the idea that females have more opportunities and that African American women are in part responsible for the males' low status (Dickson, 1993). These stereotypes reinforce conflict between African American males and females due to contradictory messages about appropriate gender role behavior. Franklin points out that:

> As long as African American males learn directly and vicariously that the road to manhood is blocked because of their race, and that their sex implies that they are powerful social beings who should dominate others, the socialization crisis will continue (1994, p. 109).

As a result of unclear self-identity, African American youth are pressured by their peers to engage in drug and alcohol abuse, premature and unsafe sexual activity resulting in a high rate of teen pregnancy and disease, and acts of violence as proof of masculinity. These problems encountered in young African Americans with serious negative self-identities in turn lead to adults who run single parent households, have a high arrest rate for personal crimes, disorderly conduct, sexual misbehavior, theft and homicide, peer pressure to participate in gangs, and economic hardship. Racial and ethnic minority status contribute to negative experiences of injustice, societal inconsistency, and denial of personal efficacy (Spencer, Swanson & Cunningham, 1991).

DEVELOPING SELF-IDENTITY

Introduction

All youth confront the issue of establishing a unique self-identity. Family, schools and the media all play an important role in how American adolescents form their self-identity.

Acquiring a sense of self-certainty versus a sense of self-consciousness is more difficult when one is visibly and culturally different from the majority culture (Spencer, Swanson & Cunningham, 1991). Family, schools and the media contribute to causing unclear self-identity in African American adolescents. Unclear self-identity leads African American to engage in drug and alcohol abuse, premature and unsafe sexual activity resulting in a high rate of teen pregnancy and disease, and acts of violence.

The Primary Causes of Unclear Self-Identity

The primary causes of unclear self-identity for African American adolescents are the fragmentation of the African American family, the failure of the educational system to successfully educate African American adolescents in how to achieve upward social mobility, and the failure of the media to provide positive role models for African American adolescents to emulate.

The African American Family

According to Dickson (1993), even African American social scientists contend that African American families have been falling apart over the past thirty years. Franklin (1994) suggests that the crisis in African American families is due to the large number of poor, female-headed households and the growing number of African American youth reared in single parent, female-headed homes. One estimate is that 94% of single parent African American families are headed by a female (Franklin, 1994).

Reasons for this situation are given as structural conditions, such as increased employment opportunities for men and lack of child care for working mothers (Dickson, 1993). For those who are employed, there is a great chance of underemployment or sporadic employment and lower earnings. Two-parent African American families, with one earner and one homemaker are hardest hit by recent economic downturns (Dickson, 1993).

Two other forces contribute to the malaise in African American family life. One is the evidence of "pathology" in families identified as having increased divorce rates, female headed families, and out-of-wedlock births (Dickson, 1993). Secondly, Anglo families also displayed the same signs of this pathology, resulting in a "postmodern family" comprised of women, their children, and related and unrelated "kin" (Dickson, 1993).

These forces reflect the difficulty that men and women have in establishing and maintaining stable relationships during the 1990s. Marriage and remarriage rates are

lower, divorce and separation rates are higher. Of particular interest is the separation of childbearing and marriage within the African American community (Dickson, 1993). During the 1980s, there was an increase in the number of African American female head of household families with children under 18, from 25% in 1965 to 56% in 1990 (Dickson, 1993). The reason for this growth is attributed to an increase in births to unmarried women where 57% of African American births in 1990 were to unmarried women (Dickson, 1993).

Cultural value shifts have been a factor that contributes to family problems. A greater emphasis on individualism, self-realization and fulfillment, makes it more difficult to trust or make commitments to others, yet there are higher expectations for families which include sexual fulfillment, intimacy and companionship (Dickson, 1993). Movies, television shows, and music contribute to high expectations for a life of happiness that is difficult if not impossible for African Americans to achieve in American society. Combined high expectations for personal and family happiness makes it more difficult for marriages to survive, especially in the African American community (Dickson, 1993).

Demographic shifts contribute to other problems in family life. African American females have always outnumbered males. The problem is worsened because, while African American males constitute only 6% of the U.S. population, they represent 50% of all incarcerated males; more than 35% of African American males in U.S. cities are drug or alcohol abusers; more than 18% drop out of high school; more than 50% under the age of 21 are unemployed; 46% between the ages

of 16 and 62 are not in the labor force; approximately 32% have incomes below the poverty level and the homicide rate is six times higher than for Anglo males (Dickson, 1993).

Another contributing factor is that the number of women exceeding the number of men begins at an earlier age for African American men than it does for whites, resulting in a shortage of potential marriage partners for African American women beginning in the early twenties (Plass, 1993). Plass (1993) also reports that a higher percentage of African American men than white men are homosexual, imprisoned, or enlisted in the armed forces and that the most successful and well-educated African American men are more likely to be involved in interracial marriages than are African American women, limiting marriage partner options even more for African American women.

Further, beginning in the 1980s, the gap between poor African Americans and affluent African Americans has widened (Franklin, 1994). In 1990, 55% of African American children lived with one parent and 48.8% under the age of 18 lived below the poverty line and benefits from programs such as AFDC have decreased (Dickson, 1993). A rise in crack abuse among African American mothers has deprived children of their sole parent, threatened the lives of infants, and caused children to be removed from their homes and placed in foster care (Dickson, 1993).

In general, African American children are more likely to be born into poverty, lack early prenatal care, have a single mother or unemployed parent, be unemployed as teenagers, and not go to college (Dickson, 1993). These data indicate not only how

difficult it may be for African American women to establish and maintain a relationship with an African American man, but also points to problems in socializing offspring.

The Educational System

More attention is paid to educational failure than educational success for African American adolescents (Slaughter-Defoe, 1991). Most members of minorities have looked upon formal education as one of the best means of becoming assimilated into American society and a good way of achieving upward social mobility but this has not necessarily been the case for a substantial number of African Americans (Kershaw, 1992). An increase in the amount of formal education African Americans receive has not resulted in an increase in income or social mobility when compared with Anglo Americans (Kershaw, 1992).

Slaughter-Defoe (1991) attributes this to African American youth being compelled to attend educationally substandard public schools. Kershaw (1992) believes there was a deliberate attempt to miseducate Black Americans and that Black schools were not seen as acceptable for higher education, but rather students coming from these schools would be better off in blue collar or clerical jobs rather than college-prep courses. This is then coupled with family lifestyles changes such as diminished influence of extended family, structural changes such as high rates of unemployment and underemployment resulting in reduced family stability. These are the same factors which contribute to the African American adolescents' problems with

self-identity. Teachers with negative perceptions about non-college prep students lead African American students to reduced commitment, motivation and self-esteem as well as lowered performance and misconduct (Kershaw, 1992).

Another opinion is that lack of achievement and a lack of a competence orientation are due to the reluctance of African American youth to "act white" by demonstrating an achievement orientation (Spencer, Swanson & Cunningham, 1991). Surprisingly, it appeared that African American girls had more problems adjusting to predominantly White environments than do African American boys and that African American boys felt less positive about their suburban communities and about African Americans in general (Spencer, Swanson & Cunningham, 1991).

Acceptance of an ethnic identity is difficult when the youth experience injustice, social inconsistency and denial of personal efficacy linked to their minority racial status (Spencer, Swanson & Cunningham, 1991). However, increased educational attainment and the value characteristics of the cohort group reduced some of the difficulty in developing self-identity (Spencer, Swanson & Cunningham, 1991).

Teacher characteristics and minority teacher shortages contribute to the barriers African American adolescents face in their search for self-identity (Spencer, Swanson & Cunningham, 1991). Spencer, Swanson & Cunningham (1991) recommend that all teachers and principals acquire the skills necessary to educate an increasingly multiethnic school population. Slaughter-Defoe (1991) advocates "supportive families and a secure, stable family life as conditions necessary for school achievement" (1991, p. 358).

The Media

African American adolescents struggle over appropriate behavior and values as they try to adhere to two contrasting sets of standards. The mass media present images of a middle class Anglo American culture that is often unattainable by minority group members (Myers, et al., 1991). Those who achieve competence and acceptance in the dominant culture may find that this involves a loss of their original culture. In this sense, acculturation involves a loss that threatens personal identity (Myers, et al, 1991).

Johnson (1991) suggests that news stories may influence African American adolescents to get involved in drugs, crime and violence at the cost to intellectual development and emotional stability. News coverage in African American communities often shows bias and patterns of misinformation on the part of print and broadcast media which should be reporting news impartially (Johnson, 1991). The media applies different standards to news coverage of Anglo Americans and African Americans, resulting in African American youth internalizing negative perceptions due to lack of experience in detecting the inherent bias (Johnson, 1991). For example, at South Mountain High School in Phoenix, Arizona in January, 1995, confrontations among groups of students were reported in the media as an all-out gang war when in fact, only a small number of non-gang member students were throwing rocks at each other.

The internalization of these perceptions results in exposure to highly stressful experiences exacerbated by poverty and ethnicity (Myers, Stokes & Speight, 1989).

Johnson (1991) advocates that educators and parents help youth to be critical news consumers and discusses the truth behind five myths about race and the news.

The first myth is that "news is essentially objective, no matter who reports it" (Johnson, 1991, p. 328). The fact is that news reflects the values of people who produce it and when stereotypes are confirmed, the news value of the story is heightened (Johnson, 1991). Johnson (1991) discovered that 85% of news coverage of African American communities by white owned news media reinforced negative stereotypes of African Americans as prone to violence and crime and unable to maintain cohesive families; yet failed to report positive stories, while news from African American owned outlets emphasized positive as well as negative aspects of life in the African American community. Johnson (1991) reports that white reporters seek out white experts for comments on issues of concern to the African American community, and fail to recognize racism as an underlying factor in news events. This news coverage "perpetuates racism by reinforcing common negative assumptions about African Americans, failing to show positive African American role models, and neglecting to discuss racism as an important social force" which leads to distorted news coverage. (Johnson, 1991, p. 330). The news media justifies distorting news from the African American community by claiming the stories are insignificant, without recognizing that the African American community has different values and concerns from those of the media covering the stories; thus "news reports confirm personal or institutional assumptions about racial groups and subjective decisions in the newsroom overtake objective reasoning" (Johnson, 1991, p. 331).

A second myth is that "The presence of Black reporters on the staffs of White-owned news outlets shows a commitment to racial fairness" (Johnson, 1991, p. 331). Johnson states: "Although Black news professionals are more *visible* than in years past, Blacks are still severely underrepresented among reporters" in that while African Americans account for about 12% of the U.S. population, they accounted for only 3% of all network news correspondents in 1979 (Johnson, 1991, p. 331).

Johnson dismisses a third myth, that "news teaches children harsh but important lessons about the world" by stating that "the news frequently teaches distortions" (1991, p. 332). Johnson (1991) gives as an example the presentation of the drug problem as an African American urban phenomenon when in fact African Americans comprise about 15% of the drug-using population although they make up 41% of those arrested on drug charges. Johnson (1991) suggests that most news outlets believe a version of events that confirms prevailing White stereotypes about Black people.

Johnson's fourth myth is that the youth of today are "sophisticated enough to distinguish media images from reality" (1991, p. 333). Johnson (1991) contends that most youngsters are ill-equipped to understand how and why news reporting is flawed without adult guidance, yet educators and parents do not always help students understand racial or class biases on news reporting.

The fifth and final myth is that "very young children are oblivious to race, so there is little need to fear that biased media images will affect them" (Johnson, 1991, p. 334). In fact, Johnson (1991) cites a study that indicates African American

children as young as three become aware of racial differences. These African American children distinguished dolls by skin color and preferred "White dolls over Black dolls" (Johnson, 1991, p. 334). Johnson (1991) noted that racism is not instinctual but is learned. By the age of five, African American children in day care centers integrated the residents of a pretend neighborhood while white children segregated the same neighborhood's residents (Johnson, 1991).

According to Johnson (1991) television media images may significantly impact the self-esteem of African American youth who begin to distinguish skin color and other racial differences by age three and, by junior high school, learn how different people behave, talk, look and dress, including learned cues regarding job roles, sex roles, and behavior patterns. When African American adolescents hear negative racial messages from parents, neighbors and friends, they internalize these messages without being able to hold to their inner convictions, compounded by supposedly objective authority figures broadcasting these same negative messages. A growing awareness on the part of African American youth of intense and universal denigration frustrates formation of a positive racial identity, planting seeds of self-doubt when it comes to their own self-identity (Johnson, 1991).

African American adolescents may choose not to compete in professional, educational and intellectual fields when no positive role models exist to follow. Johnson suggests that:

> The presence in the media of positive role models and a more balanced and realistic view of the contributions of African Americans to the world at large would seem intuitively beneficial for these youngsters. (1991, p. 336)

Johnson (1991) proposes that truer news images of the African American community might reduce the likelihood that urban African American youngsters will assume that a life of drugs or crime is a realistic option, while increasing the probability that the negative, stereotypical perceptions of White news consumers will be challenged and dismissed.

According to Johnson (1991), the key to healthy development of African American adolescents' self-identity rests in the hands of African American educators, parents, grandparents, or concerned neighbors who establish a community "brimming with pride, self-respect, and endearing love" while scrutinizing the portrayal of African Americans by a system that "broadcasts messages of doubt and suspicion (p. 340).

CHAPTER 4

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The purpose of this paper was to identify, through a review of the literature, the causes of an unclear self-identity among African American adolescents and to discuss their significance in assisting these youth to develop a positive and clear self-identity.

Positive self-identity for African American adolescents is not easily attained in American culture. The primary causes of unclear self-identity for African American adolescents are the fragmentation of the family in the African American community, the failure of the educational system to successfully educate African American adolescents in how to achieve upward social mobility, and the failure of the media to provide positive role models for African American adolescents to emulate.

Development of an identifiable culture by African Americans parallels the search for self-identity conducted by African American adolescents. While all youth must establish a unique self-identity, the task is more difficult when conducted by visibly and culturally different adolescents. Family, schools and the media all play an important role in how African American adolescents form their self-identity.

Conclusions

Because of the many changes that African American families are undergoing, one cannot help but wonder what values they hold to. Changes in traditional family structural arrangements and the high number of children living in non-traditional families appear to have caused African American parents and their offspring to adopt a set of values different from the values of American society as a whole.

The majority of African American families cling to the same values they held to in the past and society must recognize that no single family type represents all African Americans. Research has shown that extended families remain important networks for African American families, the members of these networks are often less able, due to increasing economic, social, and personal stresses, to respond to the adolescent family members.

African American children presently watch more television than any other group of young viewers, absorbing negative racial and gender images in the media that present a view of Blackness that is far from positive. Other signs that indicate a change in the African American adolescent values and reveal the impact of these negative perceptions is the high rate of teenage pregnancy, low level of academic achievement, and the increase in drug abuse among African American adolescents.

At a point of transition from youth to adulthood, the African American adolescent is heavily influenced by what came before in addition to the effects of current experiences which determines the expected quality of the adult outcomes that follow. This transition from youth to adulthood occurs in particular contexts. When

the effects of race and ethnicity are accounted for, important symbolic and structural variations become evident in both the quality of problems encountered and the objective outcomes experienced across settings, such as school and peer group. Generally, the nature of these experiences, such as teen pregnancy, youth incarceration, male aggression and school failure, has important implications for the critical identity processes that occur during the adolescent stage of human development.

African American people must not be fooled by the negative forces of racism, such as bad publicity, stereotyping, prejudice and bias in American society, to the extent of focusing only on the problems. Positive outcomes can be achieved by parents of African American adolescents in concert with a strong African American community identity to allow family values to overcome negative perceptions of themselves held by others in American society.

An African American community can provide positive reinforcement for valuing children so that the majority of African American adolescents will be properly socialized and become productive adults regardless of the type of family arrangement in which they are raised. African Americans continue to value family and extended family as well as other support networks of relatives and other kin.

Despite the adversities African American families face in the present, the majority of African American families maintain values that are consistent with positive child rearing. African American parents must remain aware of the problems

their adolescent children face and commit to the hard work necessary to help these adolescents overcome adversity.

Recommendations

The following suggestions form a basis for exploring interactive relationship of ethnicity and competence and eliminate causes that work against a positive African American image so that a clear and positive self-identity is possible for African American adolescents.

1.   Keep African American adolescents academically oriented and in school to offset the disadvantages of socioeconomic factors affecting the African American community. One method to accomplish this objective is to develop and use more culturally sensitive teaching techniques. Additionally, investigating teacher characteristics and background as well as increasing the number of minority teachers would overcome some of the barriers to education that African American children face. Incentives to teachers to create and maintain a positive academic environment could include additional pay and other rewards and recognition for diversity training, cultural training, and establishment of enrichment programs for students.

2.   Emphasize the importance of mental and physical health and the hazards of addictions and violence. Educators can present seminars and classes on the detrimental effects to the body and mind that are caused by drugs and alcohol abuse and stress. Stress reduction techniques should also be taught to minimize the effects of stress on African American adolescents.

3.   Establish and maintain constructive social networks and support systems for adolescents as part of the community and school system. Existing programs, such as Scouting, Boys and Girls Clubs, and community sports teams, should be expanded. Social services, such as Black Family Child Services, should be expanded to offer more parenting training, counseling, job training, picnics, retreats and field trips for parents and children. The Southwest Key Program's community-based treatment programs for troubled youth should be promoted as an alternative to institutionalization so the youth can remain with their families in their own communities. The benefits accruing to both children and adolescents would include additional role models and a wider choice of activities to replace undesirable activities. An important part of these programs should be to enable adolescents to understand bias in the media so they are better able to counteract negative media images.

4.   Provide support to parents to help them instill a cultural identity in their children. Community groups could sponsor art festivals, tutoring programs, job fairs, and other programs that emphasize in a positive fashion the heritage and culture of African Americans. A community which presents a positive image may help overcome media bias.

5.   Provide parents with the knowledge they need to rear their children in a healthy and loving environment. Black Family Child Services currently provides training and education for parents in parenting skills, sex education, chemical dependency and communication techniques. Promoting an expanded program with

advertising, political action and community meetings in the African American community, instead of conducting training and seminars only in the Black Family Child Services facilities, would enable more parents to attend and learn how to interact with their children. As parents improve their parenting skills through education, they will provide better role models for their children.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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