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Exploring what factors influence African American adolescent females to act violently towards each other

Davina S. Callahan

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Davina Callahan
Exploring What Factors Influence
African American Adolescents
Females to Act Violently Towards
Each Other

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the influential factors of African American adolescent and college-aged (13-20) females who engage in violent and aggressive behavior. The experience of these participants was elicited through self-developed, semi-structured interviews composed of questions that explored several possible contributing factors. Interviews were conducted with 12 females who self-identified as African American. The study explored themes of family dynamics, community violence exposure, identification with negative stereotypes and challenges with education and victimization. Major findings were that family dynamics and peer relationships were identified as major influential factors of the participant's engagement in violent behavior. While there was a variation in emphasis and specificity in each participant's discourse, majority of the participants shared similar responses. The limitations and implications of this study suggest that there's a need for further study on this specific population and topic. This study represents each participant individually; giving the participants an opportunity to share their story. There still remains a need for further exploration.

**EXPLORING WHAT FACTORS INFLUENCE AFRICAN AMERICAN
ADOLESCENTS FEMALES TO ACT VIOLENTLY TOWARDS EACH OTHER**

A project based upon an independent investigation, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work.

Davina Callahan

Smith College School of Social Work
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine what factors influence African American adolescents and college-aged (13-20) females to relate to each other violently. Adolescent females identify with each other in a variety of areas including fashion, hair, body images, school work, physical appearance, and oppression, and later in life, even childbirth; however, each area is conceptualized and valued differently by every female. Although females are able to identify with each other in a variety of ways, nonetheless, females also focus on their differences. Perhaps due to these mutual areas of identification or differences they may relate to each other in detrimental ways. When women compete, degrade, and attack one another, they may resort to violence, which is the focus of this research project. Although violent acts are influenced by many factors, this study is to explore the leading factors that influence one's behavior.

This study is qualitative, cross-sectional, and should evaluate how family dynamics, community exposure, identification with negative stereotypes and challenges with education and victimization relates to violence displayed by African American adolescent females. This study focuses a small portion on trauma and exposure of the participants of this study, as trauma may relate to displacement of childhood trauma, being a victim, or the trauma of being the victimizer. For the purpose of this research, violence is defined as "...an exertion of physical force so as to injure or abuse, which can be intense, turbulent, furious and often destructive action or force" (Merriam-Webster online dictionary, 2013). I hope that the results of this project can help to create, cause, and model change in the readers of this paper and possibly influence the social

work field to address and assess African American adolescent females differently, prior to categorizing them as violent or describing them as “angry black females.” I also hope that the results of this project allow the participants to have a voice, to tell their stories by describing what influenced their behavior. By doing so, the objective is to then possibly decrease adolescent females’ aggressive behavior and involvement in crime. Also, an objective is to influence the readers to move away from the “angry black woman” term.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Even with changes in rates of violence over the past few decades, violence remains widespread. In examining the rate changes “for a ten year period, beginning in the mid 1980’s there was a dramatic increase in violence in the U.S” (Jenkins, 2002, p.30), but over the past ten years the frequency of violence has begun to decrease (Buka, Stichick, Birdthistle, & Earls, 2001; Jenkins, 2002; Pugh-Lilly, Neville & Poulin, 2001); however, data still shows that violence is present, in the past, primarily among the younger generation. For example, between 1985 and 1990, murder, manslaughter and aggravated assault crimes rose by 60% for the younger generation, specifically children under the age of 18, many who were identified as African American children (Ellickson & McGuigan, 2000; Pugh-Lilly et al, 2001). In recent years, 2007 it is noted that physical assault was the leading cause of non-fatal violence prevalent amongst the African American community, specifically with adolescents (Hurd, Zimmerman & Reischl, 2011). There’s many stereotypes used to describe the African American community. Of them stereotypes, the term “angry black woman” dominates society’s view of African American females. African American females adhere to these stereotypes by displaying violent behavior, becoming physically violent or embracing the strength model of the term; then perpetuating the stereotype, either in a negative or positive way. For the purpose of this research study, a physical assault or physical incident is defined as fighting, beating and physically assaulting, which includes hitting, beating repeatedly with an object or stabbing someone and/or purposely hitting someone with the intent to harm. Physical assaults may be classified as aggravated or simple

(FBI, 2012). Furthermore, this study is to examine literature relevant to understanding violence between adolescent and college-aged African American females.

Although violence is experienced all over the world and by people of all races and ethnicities, oppressed and marginalized youth experiences a disproportionate amount of violence and are often more affected by these experiences (Schiavone, 2009). These experiences are likely to involve females. For example, in the year of 2011, there were a number of physical violent incidents that occurred between African American females at colleges and universities; Bowie State University in Bowie, MD and Frostburg State University in Frostburg, MD. The result of both incidents was the death of one of the females involved in the violent act (Zapotosky, 2012; Wise & Samuel, 2011).

In writing about these incidents and others Thomas-Lester (2011) offered the following acts of violence between females:

A female Frostburg State University student intervenes in an altercation at an off-campus party and gets slashed by a woman hosting the celebration, authorities say. Two Bowie State University suitemates spar over music, and one woman cuts the other's throat.

Female roommates at Howard University argue in the kitchen, and one throws a pot of hot water at the other (p. 1)

The incidents previously discussed demonstrate the violence that occurs between African American adolescent and college-age females. The incident at Bowie State involved two African American females under the age of 20, and the 18 year old female passed away after being stabbed with scissors (Zapotosky, 2012). So then again, my question is; what factors influences females to act violently towards each other? Is acting out a sense of defense, survival or pure anger? What factors contributes to any African American female engaging in an altercation

about the use of an iPod, instead of talking about the disagreement; was it the influence of peer and family dynamics, community violence, identification with the label “angry black woman,” lack of positive female role models or challenges in education and victimization to victimizer?

Paucity of Research

Current published studies on violence include those on domestic violence, partner violence and possibly family violence, but have not clearly addressed “women on women” violence, other than sexual violence committed by women - usually as domestic partners (Jenkins, 2002). However, this study is being completed to possibly elucidate the paucity of research of women on women violence in the African American community. According to Ahead (1994) “...it appears that female violence is poorly described, perhaps because of researchers’ reluctance to acknowledge aggression and violence in women” (p. 235). Across the United States, a week rarely goes by without a sensationalized news story about teen violence; it’s not unusual for such stories to focus on violence committed by girls, but the missing component is still “women on women” violence (Pugh-Lilly et al, 2001). Although researchers have found that female committed violence is not higher than male violence (Baxendale, 2012; Gover, Jennings, & Tewksbury 2009; Ellickson & McGuigan, 2000; Pugh-Lilly et al, 2001), the categorization of violence is frequently gender driven. Violence is a topic that usually and primarily involves and focuses on men as the perpetrators, but women are violent also, not only towards partners but also in non-partner relationships with other women (Gover et al, 2009). In non-partner relationships, women on women violence may be a result of gang involvement, peer trouble, or simply displacement of anger or aggression. Researchers like Gover (2009) and Molidor (1996) observed that although a long history of gang research and violence among youth is available, it has not been until the last decade that female gang members and violence amongst

women has been seriously addressed. In the literature that does exist on this specific topic, there's a vital component that's missing; the participants and doers voice in describing the meaning and functioning of their aggressive behavior, which is an important concept this study possibly will allow the participants to have (Pugh-Lilly et al, 2001).

Casual and Correlated Factors

Researchers have posited that violence, in general, may be caused by many factors of an individual's environment and setting of development. To preclude from the possible idea that one specific and consistent factor contributed to each and every African American female acting out violently towards each other, this study takes into consideration a number of possible contributing factors. The following sections illustrate research from each area. This study will examine factors such as stereotypical identification with negative stereotypes about African Americans (Pugh-Lilly et al, 2001; Kretsedemas, 2010; Walley-Jean, 2009; Collins, 2000) and family dynamics including parental inconsistency and the lack of positive role models (Baxendale, 2012; Dishion, Veronneau & Myers, 2010; Kubecka, 2008; Pugh-lilly et al, 2001; Berzoff, 2008; Jenkins, 2002; Buka et al, 2001; Grant et al, 2005). This study also takes into consideration of the possible influence of exposure to community violence including poverty, peer relationships and gang membership exposure (Pugh-Lilly et al, 2001; Schiavone, 2009; Gover et al, 2009; Jenkins, 2002; Brown & Gourdine, 2007); and challenges of victimization (Dishion et al, 2010; Ellickson and McGuigan, 2000; Molidor, 1996; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Berzoff, 2008; Ahead, 1994). Although it's evident that many factors contribute to aggression and anger individually, this study is to examine if and when anger and aggression becomes something else, which is violence for the purpose of this study. Besides the exploration of factors

influencing violent behavior, this study attempts to differentiate from other literature by using the voices of the participants.

Negative and Angry Stereotypes and Education

Among the many stereotypes and stereotypical figures that have been projected on African American women, the term “angry black woman” is common (Walley-Jean, 2009). This particular characterization originated from a character named Sapphire in the Amos and Andy cartoon strip in the early part of the last century (Kretsedemas, 2010). One writer, Wally-Jean (2009), described the “angry black woman” as being “images that have primarily been controlled by three main stereotypes—the mammy, the jezebel, and the sapphire” (p.68). These prevalent stereotypes of African American women may impact the way young women view themselves, identify with their culture, their behavior, and more importantly their perception of life and the world in which they live (Walley-Jean, 2009, Collins, 2000). Although the term “angry black woman” has been used to describe women strengths it has also been used to belittle women. The label “angry black woman” is a prevalent negative and restrictive belief about African American females (Pugh-Lilly et al, 2001).

The term “angry black woman” is not all bad and it is not the reason for aggression, but the term possibly has an influence on the population of this project. The negative impact of this stereotype on African American women and females is not confined solely to the dominant and other cultures perception of African American women because...“awareness and internalization of the stereotype can also affect how African American women perceive themselves and, most importantly, how they experience and express anger” (Walley-Jean, 2009, p. 73). It is possible that some young African American women adhere to these stereotypes out of anger and resistance to such societal stereotyping (Walley-Jean, 2009). It’s similar to listening to a specific

record over and over, one's chance of knowing the song word from word increases; as females and young women continues to hear themselves being categorized as angry black women or continues to watch women display behavior of such they may begin to cling to such description. Such adherence to these stereotypes potentially results in identification with the aggressors and continues the cycle of women being categorized as "angry black women."

When examining violence and adherence to stereotypes, educational deficits can be considered as a potential correlated factor. Many members of the dominant population describe African Americans as being uneducated and/or mis-educated (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Whether people lack formal education or even lack common sense, one's capacity for learning influence their perception and involvement in violence (Molidor, 1996). Examining the African American female adolescent population, there is a possibility that the level of education, mis-education of the history of African American women, stereotypes of African American women and the absent of education and modeling of appropriate gender behavior and representation possibly has an impact on how African American adolescent and college-aged females respond to violence. Individuals with higher educational levels are not excluded from engaging in violent acts (Steele & Aronson, 1995). However, individuals with lower levels of education are prevalent amongst the population that is described as violent by media, in research and for profiling. In an educational setting, violence takes place often, where children are using violence as a sense of survival, trying to prove themselves to try to fit in, or displacing and projecting their feelings and thoughts onto others, possibly, in a violent, physical manner (Dishion et al, 2010; Ellickson & McGuigan, 2000). In acting out violently African American females are possibly, once again, adhering to the negative stereotypes of the "angry black woman" and uneducated African American.

Family Dynamics

Inconsistent parenting and the influence of role models. Adolescents who grew up in homes and environments characterized by conflict may develop certain attitudes towards control and submissiveness, which then makes it difficult for them to break the cycle of violence (Kubeka, 2008; Jenkins, 2002); and to not become violent themselves due to seeing so much of it in their homes and environment. Whether the child was witnessing conflict among the parents, siblings, and/or extended family members, the witnessing of such acts may impact the child's perception and reaction to violence. Researchers Baxendale (2012), Buka et al, (2001), Grant et al, (2005) and Dishion et al, (2010) illustrated that examples of family influence on aggressive behaviors may arise from inconsistent parenting and techniques of discipline. Jenkins (2002) observed that "punitive measures may be effective with some children, but for other children, physical punishment is associated with increased levels of aggression and delinquency" (p. 37). Jenkins (2002) also noted that parental figures or caregivers' responses to violence have a profound effect on how successfully children cope with violence. For example, Kubecka (2008), analyzed abused mother's perceptions of how their battering experiences impacted their parenting skills, and the researchers concluded that the women experienced difficulty attending to their children's needs due to the strain that battering brought to their functioning. Being able to provide efficiently and adequately for someone else's needs as a parent before being able to care for one's own needs could be seen as a defense mechanism, but can also result in inconsistent parenting, which then impacts the child. Inconsistent parenting is a result of adolescent's psychological problems, which could possibly be seen as aggression and result to violence (Grant et al, 2005).

Another aspect of family contribution that has been examined in this study to determine the factors that may cause African American females to act out violently towards each other is the role played by parents or caregivers. It is possible that individuals have been encouraged from parental figures to “fight back,” “defend yourself,” and to not be a “punk” (Pugh-lilly, Neville & Poulin, 2001). In fact, parental figures have multiple roles in their children lives; parent, friend, ally, provider or protector. As a young female, having a parent, mother, or mother-figure is beneficial in the developmental process. When a parental figure does not serve as a positive role model, it is common for a child to seek out other positive role models, extended family members, school teachers, and/or peers. Observing adult role models or caregivers engaging in violent behaviors may lead adolescents to adopt such attitudes and behaviors as it relates to violence (Hurd, Zimmerman & Reischl, 2011; Molidor, 1996). It’s during the stage of adolescent where the process of identity exploration starts, adolescents often look up to adults in their environment to determine appropriate and acceptable attitudes and behaviors, as well as to identify models of who they want to be like (Hurd, Zimmerman & Reischl, 2011). However, many African American adolescent females have few, if any, positive female role models in their lives (Jenkins, 2002, Hurd et al, 2011). Parental figures have a role to protect their children, but to also teach, nurture and model positive behavior for their children, such as how to respond to violence and to not engage in violent acts. Berzoff (2008) and Jenkins (2002) examined that in some cultures there is a need to defend oneself and...“in the Western cultures, there is often a fight-flight response”, which may cause the reactions and defense mechanisms to involve violent behavior (p. 422). Therefore, some may see and view violence as a survival technique or as a defense mechanism.

Community Violence

Exposure, peer relationships and gang involvement. Exposure to community violence among African American women has been linked to increased levels of aggression across the life span (Jenkins, 2002). Also, the environment one grew up in influences their reactions and perception on violence. Collins (2000) analyzed the lack of opportunities experienced by the African American community by focusing on living in less privilege communities in which African American people were confined to. For example, consider an African American adolescent female who lives in a violent community and who decides to join a gang. Imagine that in her environment being a part of a gang compensates for missing family relationships, helps protect her from fears she has from living in a community that has exposed her to violence, and because in her environment being involved in a gang is the norm for young women such as herself. It is definite that the impact on children and youth who have been exposed to community violence remains a complex issue (Buka, Stichick, Birdthistle, & Earls, 2001). Individuals growing up in neighborhoods what is seen to be hostile and violent possibly develop violent and aggressive behavior as coping strategies, or as adaptations for survival in what may be viewed as an uncertain world (Brown & Gourdine, 2007). Additionally, increasing numbers of adolescent girls are using aggressive and violent behaviors to protect themselves from the dangerous environments in which they live (Jenkins, 2002; Brown & Gourdine, 2007; Pugh-Lilly, Neville, & Poulin, 2001).

When examining community violence, it's common that gang involvement is considered. Researchers have also noted that for adolescent females, gang membership tends to lead to aggressive acts (Gover, Jennings, & Tewksbury 2009). Many females may feel that being aggressive is a survival technique, feeling that "fighting back" is the only approach that would provide individuals with some sense of psychological and physical safe within their

environment (Pugh-Lilly et al, 2001). Among the African American women in the sample of Jenkins's (2002) study, "30% had witnessed some form of violence, which included murder, stabbing or a shooting" (p. 31). Also, Schiavone (2009) observed multiple studies that included adolescents and college-aged youth as participants which indicated "that 93-100% witnessed violence" during some stage of development (p. 99). A child who witnesses violence constantly possibly began to normalize the behaviors and engage in similar acts, which then results in their aggressive behavior being categorized as a logical response to a social dilemma (Pugh-Lilly et al, 2001; Jenkins, 2002). Schiavone (2009) noted that adolescents living in communities where violence took place more often and was frequently seen were youth who were placed at high risks for negative effects and being violent. In fact, reactions to witnessing violence, having close friends and family members victimized, or simply living in a violent milieu can include a mass of traumatic, stressful and maladaptive reactions, including aggressive and violent reactions (Jenkins, 2002). From a cognitive-behavioral perspective, a learned behavior can be unlearned, but many researchers argue that lessons learned from childhood are then reinforced through adulthood; violent parents or witnessing of violence in the community may influence children's relationships with their peers and relationship with others where violence is used as the legitimate means to solve interpersonal conflicts (Kubecka, 2008).

Victimization to Victimizer and Theories Related to the Causation of Violence

As researchers have reported, the most common reaction to violence and being a victim of violence by the victim is self-directed violence (Gover et al, 2009); but not many researchers have suggested that violence to others may also be a problem. However, Ashead (1994) observed that violence among the female population results in danger and aggression not only being internalized, but also being projected and displaced onto others. However, it may be important to distinguish between the victim, the victimizer and the bystander, and understand

whether one level of trauma led to a higher level of trauma or caused the individual to then become the victimizer due to identification with the aggressor (Berzoff, 2008). Collins (2000) focused on an interesting point that contributes to this literature as she discussed how the victimization many years ago has even influenced individuals to become victimizers. Collins (2000) considered that aside from the conditions of semi-slavery, African American women have been exposed to various forms of violence, such as abuse and physical and psychological violence, which can possibly be projected through acting out violently towards other African American females.

Authors of trauma theory primarily focus on sexual abuse and war-related trauma; however, the experience of violence is clearly traumatic. Kubecka (2008) explained trauma theory as a theory that seeks to explain the impact of traumatic experience, as the central focus of the theory is the influence of violence on children from a socio-psychological perspective. The traumatic experience of violence on African American female adolescents is often connected to trauma experienced in the family and environment. From a psychodynamic perspective, traumatized individuals often internalize their experiences and conflicts surrounding this relationship template; “they project the outward feelings that are associated with the traumatic experience” (Berzoff, 2008, p. 425), which can include violence. When assessing violence among African American adolescent’s females, instead of viewing symptoms as the result of the individual not being “normal” or being mentally ill, symptoms should be viewed across the board as a result of healing. Berzoff (2008) considered a person who has been betrayed, threatened, abandoned, neglected or traumatized as one who may experience difficulties with expressing ideas and feelings throughout their life. Difficulty with expressing and communicating ideas and feelings may influence the use of defense mechanisms such as denial,

internalization, projection and displacement, which are possibly common responses amongst African American female participants of this project. Responses to traumatic events are influenced by...“both the enormity and reality of traumatic events” (Berzoff, 2008).

Conclusion

Based on this literature review, the wish to explore the experiences of African American women who have been violent as adolescents, and, if so, which factors contributed to their violent behavior. This study is designed to explore the possible influence of identification with negative stereotypes of African Americans; family dynamics; violent community exposure; and challenges in education and victimization of the participants. The researcher also takes into consideration of the possibility of additional influential factors emerging from this study. If participants are able to identify the factors as influencing their violent behavior, the aim is to determine which factors were most influential in their current, now adult, understanding of their violent behavior. The literature review of this study concludes that there is an increase in female violence, both as the perpetrators and victims, but there remains a paucity of the literature focusing on this topic. Also, not only is there a lack of research on violence between African American adolescents' females, but in the research the participants voices are missing. Acting out violently is viewed as deleterious, but in some cultures, families, and even communities it permits for survival and self-preservation.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This study explores the possible factors that may contribute to the display and engagement of violent behavior of African American females during their adolescent stages. Qualitative methods were selected for this study to explore and gain understanding of why African American females result to the use of violent behavior. Further support for the use of qualitative study results to the extensive research done on this topic that revealed the paucity of studies on this topic. The primary question of this research study was: “What is the primary factor you believe contributed to you acting out violently?” Additional queries included the following questions: “Were your parents/caregivers aggressive and violent when you were a child?” “If yes, then how were the ways they were aggressive and violent similar or different to the ways you were aggressive?” “What messages did you receive from your parent(s), caregiver(s), or society about acting out violently towards other females? Ex: “fight back,” “defend yourself,” and to not be a “punk””. “Have you ever witnessed physical violence being committed; if so explain who the violence was being committed against and where the incident took place?” “When you were growing up, did you have anyone that you considered your role model that was not your parent or caregiver that contributed to you acting violently with other females? If so, please describe your relationship and the possible contribution to you acting out violently.” “Have you ever been affiliated with a gang or “crew?” If so, how has this specific affiliation contributed to you acting out violently with other females who identifies as African American, if it did at all?” “Have you ever been considered or identified as a victim of any form

of violence? If so, explain.” “Have you ever felt conflicted about being violent towards other African American females?” “How does the term “angry black woman” influence your past/current behavior? Have this term impacted you or influenced your behavior in any way? If so, please describe in detail.” “Is there anything I haven’t asked you that you believe I should know that may have contributed to you acting out violently?”

Sample

My study population was comprised of all adult women. The screening process asked if participants:

- identify as an African American woman (not West Indian, Haitian, and/or Jamaican American, or any other racial and ethnic identity);
- currently be over the age of 18;
- speak and read English and
- Involved in two or more physically violent incidents between the ages of 13 and 20 years old with another female whom the participant also identifies as African American (the incidents did not include sexual aggression or verbal abuse). The incidents could have been between a group of females, individually, through gang affiliation or could have been directed towards strangers or peers, but should **NOT** have been directed towards siblings and/or family members.

Respondents who answered yes to all the questions were informed that they were eligible to participate in the study. The study required that the incident involved another female individual whom the participant also identified as an African American female to reduce the chance of the violence being related to racial differences and to bring the focus to intra-racial violence. The study did examine the possible influence of family dynamics on the participants, but the study

was not designed to collect data on sibling and/or family violence. This study also excluded West Indian, Haitian, and/or Jamaican Americans, and other racial and ethnic identities and specifically and only included U.S born African American adolescents and college-age females. The desired sample size for this project was 15 participants maximum and 12 participants minimum; however, this study included a total of 12 participants. No attempts were made for verification of participants' screening responses unless potential participants asked me specific questions related to the participation. Some participants who combined the identification of Black and African American together, eventually screened out. However, there was no way to determine if there was a difference in how the participants self-identified and actuality because I did not question participants if they were born in the United States or if they parents, grandparents or great-grandparents identified as anything besides African American.

Factors that influence African American adolescent and college-aged (13-20) females to act violently towards each other were explored through explanatory methods. A cross-sectional design was used due to the lack of time to conduct a longitudinal study; however, there is still a possibility that this research may be re-conducted in the future by using different participants. A final sample of 12 participants agreed to an interview, answered yes to all of the screening questions and returned a signed copy of the informed consent.

Recruitment. Although I initially desired to recruit participants from the District of Columbia area and the North Carolina area only, I was also able to recruit participants from the New York area. Women of all races, ethnicities and ages can be categorized and described as violent, but this research focused specifically on African American adolescent/college age females because of the paucity of research on the topic. Also, instead of recruiting for diversity I had parameters on race of the participants because the chosen topic was prevalent amongst the

selected population. Through the sampling of snowball, a recruitment letter to colleagues, Smith College School of Social Work students and the community was distributed (Appendix A and Appendix B), through email and flyers. The recruitment letter sent out to my Smith College School of Social Work colleagues was to allow my colleagues to direct individuals who they believed were eligible to participate in my study. If participants were interested in participating in the study they were asked to contact me via email or via telephone and I would then respond via email and/or telephone explaining the next steps. My initial response or contact to each possible participant included the reviewing of the study, the fact that the study will be audio taped, and inclusion criteria which included the screening process. If they still wish and agree to participate in the study, I would then review the informed consent and send them the informed consent to review and sign prior to the interview. This research project has been approved by Smith School of Social Work HSR committee.

Risks and benefits of participation. The risk of this study is the impact the research can have on the participants, emotionally and/or mentally. For some participants, it may be their first time addressing that they have used violence as a primary defense mechanism. Also, for other participants, addressing the factors that influenced one to act out violently, may lead to an individual reliving a traumatic experience or self-blaming. If at any time I believe that participation in this study results in someone's re-engagement with violent acts and or reliving of the harm the participant may have experienced or have done, I will refer the participants to the resources that are attached to the Informed Consent. All identifying information will be held in confidentiality, but if a participant is in need of a referral, it will not be possible to keep confidential that the referred person is participating in the study.

The personal benefit the participants may gain from being involved in this project is the gratification of contributing to current and future literature attempting to understand and explore violence among African American adolescent females and the ability to share their experience with other participants. For the participants' benefit, it may be helpful that they have an opportunity to reflect on some of their behavior, and if they find that reflecting on such stirs up emotions, could potentially lead to a referral and the opportunity to follow up with a therapist for further exploration of this time in their lives. A greater sense of self may be established as the participants contribute to this research; in the development of knowledge that may be helpful to others and individuals increased understanding of what factors contribute to African American adolescents acting out violently towards each other.

Data Collection

Data was obtained through the use of structured and unstructured interviews conducted via telephone and/or in person. Each interview was recorded with the use a HD-Kodak recorder. The recordings were then downloaded from the audio tape recorder to a computer. Thorough and complete transcription of the entire recorded interview (with date of birth and age) was used to organize data. I transcribed all interviews and re-reviewed each interview for accuracy. Participants' name, date of birth, age, geographical area during adolescent and history of criminal background charges was collected at the beginning of each interview before the recording was turned on and was written down by the researcher on a separate piece of paper that could eventually be matched to the corresponding interview recording through a unique code. All identifying information was then removed to ensure confidentiality. All signed consent forms were stored away in a safe place. I developed the interview questions in response to my personal relationship and engagement with this population and the literature of this population,

as well as in consultation with my research methods professor and the suggestions of the HSR committee. The questions were broken down into categories to explore the possible contribution of: I. Family Dynamics; II. Community Exposure; III. Identification with negative stereotypes; IV. Challenges with education and victimization. However, many of the questions fit into more than one category.

Data Analysis

I was able to complete my interviews with a combination of phone interviews and one-on-one in person interviews. Each interview was conducted through the use of audio recording and I completed the transcription and coding of the audio. With the idea to ensure good quality acoustic, avoid noise and crowded places I conducted the interviews whenever it was convenient for my participants. Each participant was provided with complete privacy and was given the opportunity to speak freely. Each interview lasted no more than 30 minutes individually.

Interviews were completed in March, 2013 until April, 2013

There is a possibility that the questions and words used in this study could have been misinterpreted because of the quality of my questions and my use of psychodynamic jargon. However, I have tried to be as clear as possible in my questioning and I made sure to define words that may be misinterpreted, such as the word “violent” or “acting out violently.” Although there were particular questions I planned to ask each participant, the interview was developed and conducted in a structured and unstructured manner. If I wasn’t clear or didn’t fully understand participants responses I would ask for clarity and elaboration. Through the use of open coding I was mindful of contextual sensitivity. Open coding was quite laborious but it appeared to be the best way to get all the data analyzed and to receive well rounded information from my research. This form of constant comparative analysis was used to search for similarities

and differences throughout the data. After typing up a few transcripts, I began to find trends and themes in the data that I was able to put into categories. From these categories, I was able to arrive at a list of codes. I organized them into a spreadsheet with details for each code so I can then begin to write my findings. I transcribed each interview which allowed me to fully analyze the data. All interviews were read multiple times as codes were being generated, modified and/or discarded.

Because this is an explanatory study, the chance of omitting parts of this study was minimal. Perhaps a form of omission consisted of me not transcribing statements or segments of conversation from my interviews that seemed off of topic. In that, I'm aware that I could be omitting some dialogue that could be analyzed and have some meaning to my research. My use of various Microsoft Word documents, instead of using manual filing folders, decrease bias in the analysis.

Study Limitations and Barriers

As an African American woman who was once involved in duplicitous and chaotic behaviors, violent towards other females, and was described as an "angry black woman," my personal biases and relationship to this topic can have a combination of positive and negative effects on the research. Being able to identify with the participants could have been beneficial as the participants may felt less judgment and more supportive when sharing such details around the issue I was exploring for this project. However, my visible passion and undeniable human compassion can be both an advantage and disadvantage of this project.

Besides the impact this project may have had on me as the practitioner and researcher, this project also may have had both a negative and positive impact on the participants. In terms of biases, I bring my own experiences as an African American woman who was once described

by the anger I constantly displayed and projected onto other African American females. Use of self can be seen as a strength because of my personal connection and my ability to identify with my participants, which can possibly result in me being overtly empathetic or involved. My interest into this population may indicate my personal involvement, but it may also impact the way the participants respond to me and influence the bias in this study. As the NASW code of ethics states, do no harm supportive services was made available for participants and caution was used in formulating the interview questions, process of interviewing and the design of the completion of this project.

Validity. Participants were asked to recall experiences from their adolescent stages, some it wasn't long ago, and others it has been over five years, so it is possible that they might have provided different anecdotes or examples at a different time of their life. Participants may have not had time to reflect on their behavior and grasp and understanding of their behavior. Though not intended, the wording of the interview questions may have had a great influence on the way the respondents responded. When participants were asked: "Have you ever been considered or identified as a victim of any form of violence? If so, explain" some may have only reported physical violence and excluded verbal or sexual violence although the question ask of "any form of violence." This demonstrates how interview questions might have create bias or shaped participants' answers.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

This study was designed to examine the factors that influence African American adolescent females to act violently with other females. Many participants were not able to provide a direct answer when asked about the primary factor they believed contributed to their engagement in violent behavior during their adolescent stages. Participants stated that either more than one factor contributed to their behavior or seemed unsure of how to answer the specific question. However, major findings were that family dynamics and peer relationships were identified as major influential factors of the participant's behavior. This chapter will begin with a presentation of sample demographic characteristics. Also, in this chapter the findings of the data analysis will be presented. In this study each question was designed to explore various possible contributing factors. From the design of this study, the analysis and coding of data revealed the following themes: I. Family dynamics; II. Community exposure; III. Identification with negative stereotypes; IV. Challenges with education and victimization.

Demographics

This research study consisted of a total of 12 participants. The participants were all females and identified as African American. Although the study asked questions about the participants' stage of adolescence (13-20) the participants' ages ranged. At the time of the interviews, the oldest participant was 34 years of age and the youngest was 20; nine participants were in their 20s. The participants were asked a total of 10 questions and depending on certain responses they were asked to elaborate more on their responses. Twelve women (n=12)

completed interviews. Participants were geographically diverse, reporting the following states of residence as Washington, D.C, North Carolina and New York. Education and current socioeconomic status was not reviewed in this study. Participants were questioned of their geographical area during their adolescence stages; nine participants reported urban area; one participant reported suburban; and two participants reported a mixture of urban and suburban.

Primary Influencing Factors

In exploring the possibility of many factors influencing the participants' behavior, this research asked each participant "what is the primary factor you believe contributed to you acting out violently?" Some participants gave direct answers and others were not sure how to answer the question. Some participants shared similar answers about why they committed to their violent behaviors, but their descriptions appeared to be different. There were three participants who stated that their peers influenced their violent and aggressive behavior, whether they stated as "going along with my peers," "being a follower" or "following after my peers;" the responses were similar. For this study the influence of peers were categorized as a factor of participants' exposure to community violence. Other participants responses included: "...my environment," "...my mother and my relationship with my mother," and "...home issues and also not being a leader, so following after others played a role in me acting out violently."

A participant stated:

I am very nonchalant to certain things, so when I do get into something with someone it's because I had already rubbed them the wrong way by being so outspoken and ruthless with what I say sometimes...I just feel as though you either disrespected me or I disrespected you in a way and this is why we are fighting, I do not really feel like it's one

particular thing that influenced us to fight, it's just the big respect thing because I can't tolerate anyone disrespecting me.

Besides the three participants who shared similar responses, other participants' responses varied to this particular question. As evident from the example above participants did not feel as though it was one particular factor that contributed to their violent and aggressive behavior. Participants who responded as "I do not really know what contributed to me acting violently" or "I'm not sure how to answer that question" responses were possibly influenced by the reality of participants not being sure why they displayed such behavior or possibly because of the wording of the question and participants desire to answer the question the "right way." Some participants chose to elaborate on their responses later in the study. In this study it was helpful to ask the remaining questions in the interview and then to return to the first question, which then gave participants a better understanding of what was being asked of them.

Family Dynamics and Community Exposure

Participants were asked about their parents' possible violent and aggressive behavior. Participants were then asked to compare their own behavior to their parent's behavior. Nine participants described their parents/caregiver as being aggressive and violent; the remaining three participants did not describe either parent as being aggressive or violent. Out of the nine participants who described their parents as being aggressive, seven of the same participants specifically described their mothers as being physically violent; one other participant referred to her caregiver as her godfather and described him as being physically and verbally violent and aggressive; the remaining participant only described her mother as being verbally violent.

A participant stated:

I was raised in a single parent home by my mom, she was abusive with her words so I would say she was verbally abusive, she would let me and anyone else know how she felt wherever she went, grocery store or wherever, it never really became physical but she was always prepared if it did go down.

Out of the 12 participants eight specifically identified their parents/caregivers as being verbally violent and aggressive; some participants reported the verbal violence in addition to the physical violence. The study did not directly question who or what the participants' parents/caregivers directed their aggressive behavior towards, but participants reported their parent as being violent towards them, in relationships and with others. Some participants reported their violent and aggressive behavior as being similar to their parent's behavior and some considered their behavior as different, depending on the circumstances. For example, one participant considered her own behavior towards strangers or in street fighting as more severe than her mother's behavior. However, this same participant described her mother as being verbally and physically aggressive towards her as a child, but described her aggressiveness towards her children as being much different than her own parent's behavior. The majority of the participants reported their behavior as being more ruthless than their parents/caregivers.

Messages received about acting out violently. Participants were questioned about the messages they received from parents and/or society about fighting and acting out violently towards other African American females. This question also was designed to examine family dynamics and community exposure. All 12 of the participants reported that they received messages from both their parents and society as it relates to violence. Some participants started off by saying "my mother never really encouraged me to fight," but after further questioning they

would then reveal that they had received some form of encouragement to act out violently from their parent. For example, one participant stated:

“Well I don’t think I received messages from my parents telling me to act violently towards others, well at least I can’t recall anything, but my biological mother she would always tell me that if someone hit you, hit them back, do not let no one take advantage of you, she’ll say things like that, but my godparents never really instilled anything like that, but I do remember a time when I fought someone and I came home and I was really upset about it and I was cursing and then my godfather got really upset with me and he kind of yanked me up, but it wasn’t like a positive reinforcement because of what I have done. It was more like okay you just got into this altercation you don’t have the right to curse in front of me like this, but they never really told me it’s not okay to hit people back, but my mother always told me if someone hit you then you hit them back”

In the example above, the participant shared that she was being raised by her godparents, but was still in contact with her biological mother. As the participant stated she did not recall receiving any messages from her godparents encouraging her to fight, but she also said that she did not receive any messages from her godparents telling her not to fight. But the participant mother did instill such messages in her by telling her to defend herself and not to be taken advantage of.

Another participant stated:

As far as parents my mother taught me how to defend myself and by having an older brother also helped me with fighting when he would wrestled with me and stuff, and as far as society it showed me to go with the rest, if something was a trend, like being a part of a girls’ click was a trend, then that was what I did.

One other participant stated:

My mother always told me whenever someone bothers me to tell the teacher, but I never listened and I don't know why I never listened, but she told me that if they keep bothering me then to hit back, but I never had time to tell the teacher when I was younger I never paid much attention to society, but I didn't want to look like a punk, but as I have grown older I learned not to really care what others think, when I get into it with someone it's because they disrespected me on an occasion and it has nothing to do with what people think or how people feel I should react to a situation

Some participants reported very differently on the specific messages they received, but each participant received messages that related to the encouragement of engaging in violent behavior. Some participants described the messages as to "fight back," "defend oneself" and "to not be a punk." Whether it was the actual saying of "go fight" or "if someone hit you, then you hit them back," participants all received messages of such. Others elaborated and described how their parents, specifically mothers, would lock them out of the house until they finished fighting. Some reported that just by watching their parent display violent behavior they also learned from such by mimicking that same behavior.

Witnessing violence. To further examine the possible influence of family dynamics and community exposure participants were asked about their witnessing of violence. The follow up question asked participants about the location and of the individuals who were involved in the incident(s). Many participants reported they had witnessed violence on several occasions and in several locations. All 12 participants reported witnessing violence in their community. Some participants referred to their community as their neighborhood and others included the witnessing of violence in a school setting as a part of their community. Out of the 12 participants five also reported the witnessing of family violence; including parental violence,

sibling violence and domestic violence within their families. Participants who grew up in homes where they witnessed violence and conflict adopted the behavior they observed. For example a participant observed:

I witnessed violence in my household, but also in my community and the neighborhood I lived in when I was growing up, but by witnessing my mother staying in violent relationships I thought that having a man beat on me was okay because I thought what I was witnessing was love.

Other participants stated that they witnessed violence outside of their home. The witnessing of violence outside of the participants' homes included gang violence and one on one fights; fights between men and women.

Another participant stated:

I witnessed a lot of physical violence, something that I can recall is I when I was in Brooklyn or the Bronx, I can't remember and this girl was walking home from school and I was with my cousin, and this girl was walking, she was really pretty, she had pretty hair and it was up in a bun and I saw these girls walking behind her about to jump her, they started fighting and a couple of them went to reach for her hair and she had a lot of switch blades in her hair and they all wind up cutting themselves and that was the most craziest thing I have ever witnessed.

This particular example involved a group of women who were all engaging in violence in which some of the females might have been seriously injured by being cut with the switch blades in the female's hair. Similarly, other participants also witnessed gang violence, some with only female gangs and others reported witnessing violence in gangs that involved males and females.

Impact and influence of role models. Participants were then questioned about whether they had a role model when they were growing up who contributed to them acting violently with other females. This specific question was designed to examine family dynamics and also the challenges of education as it relates to role modeling. When parents fail as role models it's possible that a child will seek out other adults or individuals to serve as a role model, seeking out possibly both positive or negative role models. Therefore, participants were asked to exclude their parent and/or caregiver as their role model. If participants did say they had a role model who contributed to their violent and aggressive behavior they were then asked to describe their relationship with their role model and the possible contribution to them acting out violently. Many of the participants said they did not have role models who were not their parents or caregivers who contributed to them acting violently with other females. There were three participants who referred to their older siblings and cousins as being role models and influential on their engagement in violent behaviors.

A participant stated:

Yes my oldest sister, she was my role model, I always wanted to do whatever my sister was doing and she use to always fight so I kind of piggy back off of what she did

Another participant said:

I didn't have a role model that encouraged me to fight, but I did have a role model who encouraged me not to fight, my favorite aunty, she died about three years ago, she always told me not to fight, that it wasn't pretty and to work on ways to avoid the situations.

Besides the three participants who referred to their family members as being influential on their violent behavior, the remaining nine participants stated that they did not have a negative role model or a role model who influenced their violent behavior. So I eventually began to question

participants if they even had positive role models, but not excluding their parent and/or caregiver. With the participants in this study many did not refer to their parents or anyone else in their lives as a role model of any kind. Some participants said they only had positive role models and no negative role models. Participants who did state they had positive role models referred to their aunts, mentors, and school social workers as being positive role models. However, many also stated that their parents displayed and engaged in violent behavior, physically and verbally, and many participants adhered to the behavior they witnessed, so if not specifically or knowingly their parents and family members serve as role models in some form of capacity.

Gang affiliation. Participants were then questioned if they were ever affiliated with a gang or crew during their adolescent stages. This specific question was designed to examine community exposure. However, the researcher considered fully the possibility of family dynamics and victimization influencing participants' responses to this question. There were seven participants who said yes they were affiliated with a gang or crew during their adolescent stages. There were four participants who said no they were not affiliated with a gang or crew during their adolescent stages. However, of the same four participants who said they were not affiliated with a gang or crew, three of them said there were gangs in the area they grew up in during their adolescence stages. Out of the 12 participants there was one participant who provided the response of a yes and no to this question which will be elaborated on further in the study. One participant stated:

Yes I was involved with a gang, and being involved with a bunch of girls like that it's really much like you have to hold yourself to a certain standard; they're expecting you to do certain things because you're in a group so if someone fight you have to fight, even if you don't want to because that's what it is, it's like a pack.

Another participant stated:

Yes I have been affiliated with a crew, during my high school years, I would say mostly my tenth grade year until the end of my eleventh grade year, which contributed to me acting violent with other females because I was following after my peers doing what I thought was okay, I guess getting that reputation and becoming a popular student, being a follower and not thinking on my own and also having that power over others, where people would see that group of gang and others would be in fear.

Challenges with Education and Victimization

The remainder of the study was designed to examine other possible factors that contributed to violence. Participants were asked if they have ever been considered or identified as a victim of any form of violence, which was a question designed to explore the influence of victimization to victimizer. Two participants did not identify as victims of any form of violence. The remaining ten participants all considered and identified themselves as victims of some form of violence.

A participant stated:

Yes, I was a victim of many forms of violence, domestic violence, physical violence from my mom and I was a victim of sexual violence, but when I told my mom about it instead of doing something to the person she gave me a beaten and said that I was lying

Some participant's description of being a victim of violence included parental and domestic violence. Knowingly, aside from physical violence, African American women have been victims of various forms of violence, sexually and psychological. Although many contributed their victimization to physical violence, 4 participants disclosed a history of sexual violence. In this study two participants also said they were victims of gun violence; however one of the two

participants said she was caught in cross fire and was not directly hit by a bullet, but she described her experience as being very traumatic. Other participants described their victimization as being jumped by rival gangs or just a group of females. A participant stated: “I have gotten jumped twice in my life so I guess I would consider myself a victim then, but those are the only times I would consider myself a victim.”

Reflection on behavior. To further evaluate the possible influence of victimization on becoming a victimizer, participants were asked about their emotional state and possible conflict about engaging in violent behavior with other females. Many of the participants said that during their adolescence they did not feel conflicted about being violent towards other females; however, during the time of the study many of them same participants said they did feel conflicted about their behavior. To be specific, five participants said they did not feel conflicted then, but said that they felt conflicted now by their behavior; five other participants said they did not feel conflicted about their behavior at all because their behavior was a result of them defending themselves. The remaining two participants’ response to the question included one who said that she felt bad once during her adolescent stages when she and her friends hospitalized someone and the other participant said she felt bad after every engagement in violent behavior.

The participant stated:

I felt bad after every situation, because it was like I was just angry, angry with someone in my household, like my mom or my sister, so then when I was out I would take it out on someone else, if someone said something wrong or looked at me wrong, I would just hit them.

This study was not designed to evaluate the participants' current situations, though this specific question did ask if the participants felt conflicted by their behavior, if not then, then what about now. Very interestingly almost every participant stated that they did not feel bad then but have experienced some conflicted feelings now.

Identification with Negative Stereotypes

The term "angry black woman" is not an unfamiliar term amongst the population of this study. Some participants may have been familiar with the term because either they or someone they may know may have been identified or considered an "angry black woman." This study discusses the impact and possible adherence to the stereotype of being an "angry black woman" and African Americans being uneducated and/or mis-educated as it relates to the issues in this study; however this study did not specifically question participants of their education level or educational achievements. This question itself examines the absence of education and modeling of appropriate gender behavior and culture representation which brings the focus back to the importance of having a role model. This question also explores a factor impacting victimization, because adherence to this specific stereotype is a result of identification with the aggressor or in this study "the aggressive and angry black woman." Asking participants how has the term "angry black woman" impacted or influenced their current or past behavior provided participants with an opportunity to discuss the possible adherence.

In this study five participants stated that the term did not influence or impact their violent behavior in any way. Although some participants acknowledge that the term can be considered a "bad term" or a term used to belittle women, specifically women in the African American culture. The term can be also used in a reversed manner; the term "angry black woman" can also be used in a positive way. The term angry black woman has been used to describe woman

strengths and used to describe women in high power positions. For example, one participant stated:

I can say that it influenced my behavior in a positive way, and I think that is because not every black woman is angry, I don't consider myself an angry black woman at all, there's nothing angry about me, most people see it as a negative factor, but in my life I considered it a positive factor, there's nothing angry about me, so I kind of turn it around and use the term as a positive enforcement of myself.

Another participant stated:

The term doesn't make me feel any type of way, I feel that as black people we are angry, especially black women, we are dealing with more stress than any other gender or minority group, black women are dealing with a lot so I feel that at times we have a right to be angry, but it hasn't influenced me on why I fight, because like I said I'm fighting because someone disrespected me not because I'm angry or someone said the wrong thing at the wrong moment and I'm just attacking someone because that's not the case, I don't feel like I'm really angry all the times I fight depending on who I'm fighting because I might be fighting because they put their hand on me first or because this is what we have to do from the fact that you disrespected me

One participant discussed directly how being mis-educated or misguided about her history is why she adhered to the "angry black woman" stereotype. Participants acknowledged the negative fraction of the term, but also embraced the other fraction about the truthfulness of the stereotype.

Summary

The final question of this study asked participants if they wanted to add anything to their previous responses or if there was anything I had not asked that may have contributed to their violent behavior. Many participants chose not to add anything, but there were five participants who wanted to either add something to their previous responses or just wanted to add something to the study. The question not only allowed participants to add something to the study, but it also gave the participants the opportunity to reflect on their responses and what was being asked of them in the study. The participants were provided with a chance to share their reflections and thoughts with the researcher. Of the five participants who chose to add something to the study their additional responses included the need to elaborate on previous responses, discussed additional contributing factors that were not mentioned at first, and the desire to send out messages to encourage the next generation to not engage in violent behavior.

A participant stated:

One thing that I didn't mention that may have contributed to me acting violently is that I grew up in a household that was not with my own family and feelings of loss contributed to me probably acting out by not being able to express my thoughts and feelings with my family, they didn't really listen to me so when I went to school I had people who look up to me, listened to me and things like that, and again about carrying out that whole image that was probably a contribution to me acting out violently as well and also I had a guardian who was male and female and I just didn't have that biological father in my life, which I think may have contributed to me acting violently.

Another participant added

I feel like depending on how you were raised and where you're from influence why you fight, I did grow up in a suburban area, but my family grew up in the hood, and I spent most of my days in the hood with my family.

Again, each participant response varied for each question, but each participant was influenced by one or more of the explored factors in this study-family dynamics, community violence exposure, identification with negative stereotypes, and victimization. Participants illustrated a profound influence of family dynamics and community exposure.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the significant factors influencing violence in the African American adolescent culture. This study aimed to address a significant gap in the literature by focusing exclusively on African American females-if and how they were influenced and their thoughts on their own behavior. This study excludes interracial violence, domestic and partner violence and specifically brings focus to violence that occurs between two females; in some cases more than two females. The participants in this study have all experienced and encountered a variety of stressors and unexpected situations in their lives and have then used violence as a defense mechanism. The use of violence as a defense mechanism has affected and impacted many of the participants in different capacities. The participants describe the continuance of the cycle of violence; adhering to the behavior in one's household, community, or elsewhere.

The findings of this study were in support of what was discussed in the literature. However, family dynamics and community exposure certainly influenced the participants of this study, dominating the other factors that emerged from this study. As each participant was able to state that they had witnessed violence in their family, household and/or community. Children who witnesses' violence constantly began to normalize the behaviors and engage in similar acts, which then results in their aggressive behavior being categorized as a logical response to social dilemmas. Also, individuals' growing up in neighborhoods what is seen to be hostile and violent then develops violent and aggressive behavior as coping strategies and survival strategies. Many

African American adolescent females have few, if any, positive role models in their lives as stated in the literature review and supported by the findings in this study. Participants did not clearly define if victimization influenced their behavior entirely; however the participants of this study did identify as victims themselves at some point in their lives. The influence of the term “angry black woman” varied for each participant, some not being influenced or impacted by the term at all and others being impacted either positively, negatively or both.

Primary prevention is trying to stop violence between African American adolescent females and African American women in general. Although all around the world there are programs that are designed to address violence and gang violence, the problem still exists. Figuring out how to address the problem effectively poses many challenges. Part of this study was influenced by personal relation and career interest; wanting to know the factors that influence African American adolescents’ engagement in violent behavior. Knowing that one behavior is driven by something or someone is important, but being willing to explore the possible factors is critical and beneficial in the work with adolescents. Primary prevention of the cycle of violence began with the willingness to explore.

Key Findings

In exploring some possible influential factors such as family dynamics, community exposure, influence of stereotypes and education, and victimization; some participants discussed the impact of father absence and the contribution of such to their violent behavior. Participants discussed the contribution of peer relationship as a great influence on one’s behavior. The question is then where did the participants of this study peers learn such behavior or what factors has influence the participants peers to display such behavior. Could it have been the family dynamic, community exposure, adherence to stereotypes, or displacement of victimization

feelings? Again, the cycle of violence is to be interrupted for whatever factor has influenced one to display such behavior. Also, in this study the association of punitive measures from parents and aggression and delinquency in African American adolescent females is evident in this study and from the stories of the participants.

While examining the influence of family dynamics the key findings include the report of some of my participants sharing similar and different experiences as it relates to violence and their violent behavior, but many of them reflected it back on their relationship with their mother. When participants were being questioned about the possible influence of family dynamics it was common for participants to report on their mother behavior. Mothers were similarly physically aggressive. Many participants also described their mothers' as being verbally aggressive. The indications of the great influence many participants' mothers had on them may have been because majority of my participants were being raised in single-mother homes. However, this study was not designed to specifically examine whether participants were raised by their mother, father or both parent; however, this study did examine family dynamics by exploring if participants parents directly influenced their engagement in violent behavior.

Questions from this study. From this study many questions surfaced; questions from what the researcher should had explored more in the study and questions that pertain to early prevention of violence in the African American culture. Because many participants reported they did not have a role model of any sort; though some did report having a positive role model at some point in their life I questioned if participants have had consistent and available role models throughout their lives if it would have made a difference on the participant's decision to engage in violent behavior. In exploring if participants had role models of any sort, negative or positive, I ponder if participants should have been asked if they have been involved in any

mentee-mentor program, expanding my search if participants had some positive role model that they just failed to give credit to as a role model.

Also, many of the participants reported being raised in a single parent home; so I questioned the absence of father's or a father figure influence and impact on African American adolescent females acting violently. I questioned if I should have directly asked participants if they had a relationship with their father or possibly just a father figure. Then the follow up question would ask participants to describe their relationship with their father and the possible influence or impact on the relationship or lack of relationship on their engagement in violence.

Limitations

This study includes a variety of limitations. As an inexperienced researcher, conducting my first qualitative study and study of any type posed many challenges. This study has been conducted and written solely by the researcher, again a student and first time researcher with the contribution of the participants and use of literature as it relates to this study; my biases still are present. This study was designed to avoid "why questions" to minimize a judgmental approach in the interview questions. Although the questions were not worded as "why this or why that" the wording of the questions could have made participants feel as if they were being asked why did they act in such manner instead of actually being asked what influenced them to act in such way. Again, not only have my bias influenced and limited this study, but also the participant's biases may have limited this study.

Another limitation of this study is the sample and selectivity of this sample. Although the sample group did meet the requirements of Smith College School of Social Work it is still considered a small sample. The sample is large enough for publication reasons, but not large enough to considered it validity and reliability as development of a grounded theory. To further

explain how the sample of this study could be a limitation is the fact that this sample can be viewed as a homogenous group, with the exception of two or so participants, as many group members reported living in urban environments and single parent homes. The selectivity of this sample was done through snowball sampling, which created additional limitation for this study.

Implications for Future Research

The population of this research study is a population that would always be in need of social workers on a micro, macro, and mezzo level. Therefore this study opens up new grounds for research and practice and policy. In the future the sample size should be much larger to produce better results and validity. In a larger sample there still may not be a simple answer, but there's still an opportunity for the base of knowledge to be broaden.

During the completion of the project many of the participants may not have had many years to reflect on their actions and were possibly still in the process of exploring the factors that may have contributed to them acting violently towards other African American females. For future research purposes exploring if participants have had at least five years or more to reflect on their behavior may be critical for future studies. Participants were not questioned if they were currently engaging or displaying violent behavior towards other African American women because this study only focused on the participants' adolescent stages. For the purpose of practice and policy it may have been effective to compare and contrast where participants were then and where they were during the time of the study as it relates to their engagement in violence. Participants were also not asked if they had any children and if they were attempting to interrupt the cycle of violence, which is a critical area of exploration for the practice and policy of social work.

Summary

African American adolescent females engagement in violent and aggressive behavior can be a response to escape, defend, or survive. For some participants aggression was viewed as a necessary survival skill and the need to defend oneself. Some participants were attempting to escape from abusive homes and/or environments by acting out violently. For others they admitted violence was used as a way to release their anger. Some even used violence as a part of their association with their peers. Participants who discussed peer relationships as a contributing factor to their violent behavior were all affiliated with a gang/crew during some point in their life. Many participants felt conflicted about their engagement in violent behaviors while others did not. Participants in this study who reported not feeling conflicted about their engagement in violent behavior may have felt less responsible or remorseful for their actions because they felt they were defending themselves. More research is needed to further explore the influential factors of violence amongst African American adolescent and college-aged females. The findings in this study may be used to build a framework for understanding aggressive and violent behavior displayed by African American adolescent females, but there is still a need for further research.

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Appendix A

Recruitment letter to Colleagues, Smith Students and Community for Snowball Sampling

Hello Colleagues, Smith Students and Community

My name is Davina Callahan and I am working on my Master of Social Work thesis, which involves conducting an explanatory research study on what factors influence African American adolescents and college-age females (13-20) to act violent towards each other. I am sending you this email and advertising my study to ask for your help by simply **posting this recruitment flyer** or **forwarding this email or my contact information** listed below to direct individuals to my study. If you meet eligibility criteria, I also invite you to participate in the study.

Potential participants will be presented with an informed consent during the onset of meeting for the interview. Participants will be asked for their signatures indicating their agreement to participate. Individuals are eligible to participate in my study if they identify as African American, currently over the age of 18, speaks English and have been involved in two or more physical violent incidents during their adolescent or college age stages (13-20) with another female whom they also identify as African American.

Participating in the study is very easy. Filling out a screening assessment to determine eligibility and engaging in a one-on-one interview are the only requirements, which should take between thirty and forty-five minutes to complete.

By participating in this research study, participants could help to eliminate the concept of many African American women being categorized as “angry black women” and identify factors that may influence African American adolescent females to act violent with each other. Also, participants can help broaden our conversation about the roots causes and factors of violence among black woman towards one another, which then shapes programs and services to empower this population.

If you have any questions about my research or the nature of participation, please feel free to reply to this email (dcallaha@smith.edu) or contact me at a later date. If you reply to this email, please be cautioned not to select “Reply all.”

Appendix B

Hello Community

My name is Davina Callahan and I am working on my Master's of Social Work thesis, which involves conducting an explanatory research study on what factors influence African American adolescents and college-age females to act out violent towards each other.

I am advertising my study to assist with recruiting participants for my research study, which is a brief one-on-one interview. If you meet eligibility criteria would you like to participate in a research study? Or do you know anyone who meets the eligibility criteria that would like to participate? By participating in this research study, participants could help to eliminate the concept of many African American women being categorized as “angry black women” and identify factors that may influence African American adolescent females to act violent with each other.

Participating in the study is very easy. Contacting me by email is the first step. Then, I would contact you via telephone at a preferred contact number you provide. If you meet criteria for participating, I encourage you to take part in my study also. Participation in this study is confidential. If you do not meet criteria, I encourage you to please **pass this flyer on or my contact information listed below** to any acquaintances or colleagues you know of who may be eligible to participate. Passing along this flyer and my contact information to other potential participants would be very helpful!

If you are interested in this study and want to find out more, please contact me via email at (dcallaha@smith.edu) or contact me at a later date.

Appendix C



School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

February 14, 2013

Davina Callahan

Dear Davina,

Thank you for making all the requested changes to your Human Subjects Review application. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Marsha Kline Pruett /dkw".

Marsha Kline Pruett, M.S., Ph.D., M.S.L.
Acting Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Crystal Hayes, Research Advisor

Appendix D
Screening, Demographic, and Interview Questions

I) SCREENING QUESTIONS:

- 1. Do you identify racially/ethnically as African American?**
- 2. Do you identify and were you born as a woman?**
- 3. Are you able to speak and read English?**
- 4. Have you been involved in 2 or more physical violent incidents during your adolescent/college-aged stages (13-20) with another female who you identify as African American? If so, please describe at least two of the incidents into detail.**

II) DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

Please respond to/fill in the following demographic questions

1. Please write in your date of birth and age:
2. In which type of geographical area did you live in during your adolescent stages (13-20)?
Urban
Suburban
Rural
3. If possible, please list your history of criminal background during your adolescent ages (13-20)

III) INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the primary factor you believe contributed to you acting out violently?
2. Were your parents/caregivers aggressive and violent when you were a child? If yes, then how were the ways they were aggressive and violent similar or different to the ways you were aggressive?
3. What messages did you receive from your parent(s), caregiver(s), or society about acting out violently towards other females? Ex: “fight back,” “defend yourself,” and to not be a “punk”
4. Have you ever witnessed physical violence being committed; if so explain who the violence was being committed against and where the incident took place?
5. When you were growing up, did you have anyone that you considered your role model that was not your parent or caregiver that contributed to you acting violently with other females? If so, please describe your relationship and the possible contribution to you acting out violently.
6. Have you ever been affiliated with a gang or “crew?” If so, how has this specific affiliation contributed to you acting out violently with other females who identifies as African American, if it did at all.

7. Have you ever been considered or identified as a victim of any form of violence? If so explain.
8. Have you ever felt conflicted about being violent towards other African American females?
9. How does the term “angry black woman” influence your past/current behavior? Have this term impacted you or influenced your behavior in any way? If so, please describe in detail.
10. Is there anything I haven’t asked you that you believe I should know that may have contributed to you acting out violently?

Appendix E
Informed Consent Form

Dear participant,

I am Davina Callahan, a Masters in Clinical Social Work student at Smith College in Northampton, MA. As a part of my educational requirements; I am conducting a qualitative study. The purpose of this study is to examine the factors that influence the way African American adolescents and early college-aged (13-20) females sometimes relate to each other violently. The findings in this research will be used for my thesis, possible presentations and publications. All identifying information will be kept confidential. This study will be based on individual interviews that will be audio tape recorded. The interview should last no more than 45 minutes and each participant will be contacted for follow-up questions, concerns, and clarification.

To be included in this study you must:

- identify as an African American woman (not West Indian, Haitian, and/or Jamaican Americans, and other racial and ethnic identities);
- currently be over the age of 18;
- speak English and
- involved in two or more physically violent incidents between the ages of 13 and 20 with another female whom you also identifies as African American (the incidents do not include sexual aggression or verbal abuse). The incidents could have been between two people, individually, collectively, or gang related or could have been directed towards strangers or peers, but should not have been directed toward siblings and/or family members.

The risk of this study is the impact the research can have on you as a participant, emotionally and/or mentally. As a participant, this may be the first time you discussed violent actions during your adolescent and/or college-aged years. Participation in this study may cause uncomfortable memories to surface. A referral list is included where you can seek support for these possible uncomfortable thoughts/emotions.

For your benefit, it may be helpful to have an opportunity to reflect on some of your behavior and that time in your life. A greater sense of self may be established from your contribution to this research; in the development of knowledge that may be helpful to others and individuals increase of understanding as it relates to the topic of this project.

Precautions included to safeguard any identity aspects of your participation will require the removing of names, use of code numbers, and signed consent forms to ensure your willingness to participate in this study. I plan to transcribe tapes and analyze data myself, in which I will be cautious to reveal or specifically identify any participants. I will have access to the data, but as a MSW student, my research advisor will also have access to my data, but ONLY after the identifying information has been removed. In preparing for my presentations and publications, the findings and data of this study will be reported, but your identifying information will be disguised through my chosen approach to present. Data and findings of this study will be stored in a secured and protected place. Ethically and legally, data will be kept secured for three years as required by federal regulations and after that time, data will be destroyed or continue to be kept secured as long as I am in need of them. When no longer needed, data will be destroyed.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may refuse to answer any of my questions if you choose to do so. As a participant in this study you will not be rewarded for any tangible benefit and/or compensation, whether you continue throughout the completion of the project or

prematurely exit the project. As a participant, you may withdraw from the study at any time. In order to withdraw from this study, you will need to provide the researcher (Davina Callahan) with a written statement (either via email or by letter) of your decision to withdraw from the study. If you should withdraw from the study, all materials related to you and your identity will immediately be destroyed. The final date you would be able to withdraw from the study is April-12, 2013. If you have any concerns about your rights or any aspect of the study, I encourage you to give me a call or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413)-585-7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Participant signature

Date

Research signature

Date

For questions, further clarification of the research study, I can be contacted via email.

Davina Callahan

Email: dcallaha@smith.edu

At your decision, you should keep a copy of this form as a copy for your personal records. I would like to thank you for taking the time, energy, and courage to participate and share your story for this study.

Appendix E
Affordable Resources

Triangle Family Services
www.tfsnc.org
3937 Western Boulevard, Raleigh
(919) 821-0790

Raleigh Therapy Services, Inc.
www.raleights.com/
3803 B Computer Drive, Raleigh
(919) 870-9591

Family Counseling Raleigh, NC
innerpathfamilycounseling.com/
5840 Faringdon Place #1, Raleigh
(919) 301-0054

HRC Behavioral Health & Psychiatry, PA
www.hrc-pa.com/
4201 Lake Boone Trail #201, Raleigh
(919) 785-0384

Michelle Pope, LPC
New Hope Counseling Center
230 W. Millbrook Rd.
Raleigh, NC 27609
(919) 872-1190 Ext. 1

Tandy Levine, Clinical Social Work/Therapist, LCSW
1808 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 101
Washington, District of Columbia 20009
(202) 656-7913

Michelle Chachkes, LCSW located at The Center for Natural Health Solutions
8404 Six Forks Road
Suite 201
Raleigh, NC 27615
(919) 740-8437

Traci W. Pirri, MSW, LCSW
8510 Six Forks Road
Suite 101
Raleigh, NC 27615
(919) 368-5921

Ms. Shari Pfeffer
Clinical Social Work/Therapist, LICSW, LCSW-C , LCSW , MSW
2029 P Street, NW Suite 202
Washington, District of Columbia 20036
(240) 339-4931