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"Black is, Black ain't" : a theoretical exploration of the impact of systemic racism on African American adolescent identity development

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"BLACK IS, BLACK AIN'T": A THEORETICAL EXPLORATION OF THE IMPACT

OF SYSTEMIC RACISM ON AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENT IDENTITY

DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This theoretical thesis explores the impact of systemic racism on the African American adolescent's ability to secure a cohesive and positive identity. Working from a symbolic interactionist frame influenced by critical race theory and social identity theory, this thesis explores the unique challenges African Americans face in this critical identity development process and seeks to explore explanations for the role of racism as an institutionalized system that hinders healthy development. This thesis aims to examine how the messages received by African Americans in all systems--ranging from schools to health services--privilege the dominant perspective and ideology and negatively impact racial identity development for these adolescents. Critical race theory and social identity theory are applied to this author's case of JC to demonstrate how racism is currently impacting his identity development as a young black man in the United States. Ultimately, this thesis hopes to offer an individual story as a window into the role of the individual in the identity negotiation process for a member of an historically oppressed racial group. A final goal is to encourage social workers to create innovative interventions, modalities, and treatments for working with this population on their identity development journey.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Identity development--and the threat of an identity crisis--occurs for all adolescents, posing both a dangerous and exciting challenge to the people around them. Due to a centuries-long history of racial issues in the United States, adolescent identity development is further complicated by how much racism has become embedded in all systems in society. Racism in the United States has permeated every aspect of the culture from law and the justice system to zoning, school districts, and communities. The groups that have been disproportionately disadvantaged by racism include non-white groups. The disadvantages of racism extend to class as well, causing some non-white groups to experience both racism and poverty disproportionately to whites in the United States.

These factors contribute to a critical understanding of identity--both the identity we define for ourselves and the one that is assigned to us by society--and can determine a person's ability to succeed or view themselves as part of a group that is able to succeed (Quinn & Spencer, 2001). For adolescents, the decisions they make about who they are and where they belong will stick with them throughout their lifespan. Social psychologists define identity as both a process and product--something that we all experience *and* something that we all *have* (Quinn & Spencer, 2001). Developing a sense of and answers to the questions "Who am I?" and "Where do I belong?" is a situational process that is informed by our social interactions (Erikson, 1980).

Affording more complexity to an already complex and dynamic process, our understanding of social issues and social problems tends to be defined differently by members of other identity groups, cultures, or communities, which for a person with multiple group memberships might feel troubling (Quinn & Spencer, 2001). We often find ourselves in flux and in a state somewhere between confusion and decision-making about identity.

The phenomenon that will be studied in this thesis is adolescent identity development with a focus on African American racial identity development. The central focus for this discussion of identity development is the impact of racism on the ability of African American adolescents to achieve a cohesive and positive sense of self. The already challenging and sometimes harrowing adolescent identity process can be particularly challenging for African Americans as they struggle to navigate this phase of their growth in the context of racism.

The need to explore this phenomenon is critically intertwined with the person-in-environment perspective. Person-in-environment differentiates the social work field from related disciplines and posits that individuals and their behavior must be understood through considering all aspects of the individual's environment (Kondrat, 2015). From the Person-in-environment perspective, the NASW Code of Ethics suggests that social workers should approach challenges by changing the individual in relation to the social environment, changing the social environment in relation to the individual, and/or changing both the individual and environment in relation to their interaction (Mizrahi & Davis, 2008). Addressing the impact of racism on identity development requires a focus on all three methods in order to illuminate and eliminate systemic racism and improve the capacity for more adolescents to successfully pass through their adolescent identity development stage. The person-in-environment perspective

illuminates the reciprocal relationship between the individual and the environment and the ways that together they affect an individual's behavior. Adolescent identity development requires understanding the dynamic in individuals' relationship to the environment as well as social issues that affect the dynamic in the environment's relationship to the individual and to whole social groups.

Historically, social workers have been concerned with the social issues of the times. In 2015, it seems that most social issues are deeply intertwined with America's historically divided and oftentimes tumultuous racial issues. Whereas some of the earliest social workers dealt with women's rights and poverty as the most pressing issues (Healy, 2008), it seems that racism has been illuminated once again as one of the most pressing social issues. The current "Black Lives Matter" protests and social media campaigns have literally put the condition of African Americans living in America in the spotlight. Putting some of the nation's widespread identity issues under a microscope to advocate for systemic change makes it more possible for marginalized, oppressed, and/or minority groups to achieve healthy identity development.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a prime framework for evaluating and examining which factors continue to promote and perpetuate standards intended for the dominant (white) group that put non-white groups at a significant disadvantage. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is engrained in the very fabric and system of American society (UCLA Critical Race Studies, 2009). A complement to CRT would be social identity theory, which was originally developed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979 to understand the psychological basis of intergroup discrimination. Social identity encompasses the individual's sense of self derived from perceived membership in social groups (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002). Social identity threat, a concept that

stems from social identity theory, suggests that when an individual perceives that a social group

with which they are associated is viewed negatively, the experience of this threat to a positive

identity association affects the individual's behavior and development. Different social contexts

might trigger an individual to think, feel and act differently based on her personal, family or

national "level of self" (Turner et al, 1987).

Issues of negative relationship to racial social identity ultimately affect how or if African

American adolescents perform negative group stereotypes assigned to them based on the

dominant perspective's standards. If individuals think of their racial social identity negatively,

they will be unable to create a cohesive and positive identity, which might hinder their

psychological health throughout the lifespan. The examination of adolescents' collective and

individual senses of empowerment and well-being, as well as disempowerment and disadvantage

in the American social context, might bring researchers closer to understanding the role of the

individual in the identity formation process. In particular, it might help us to understand the types

of interventions, treatments, and modalities African American adolescents might benefit from in

order to secure healthy identity development. It is critical to think about the phenomenon of

adolescent identity development for African Americans, critical race theory, social identity

theory, and the impact of systemic racism as best understood by focusing on

person-in-environment with individuals and groups. Social workers are among those charged

with implementing radical change in the systems and institutions that seem to foster crises due to

racism (the nation's achievement gap in education, for example), and that in some cases stunt the

psychological well-being of whole groups of people. Examining the situation of African

American adolescents through the lenses of race and racism within the United States, shows that there are differences in racial identity development between non-whites and whites.

Identity Processes

There is no research available to accurately account for the rate of adolescents who move into the identity crisis stage instead of mostly successfully passing through to the next stage (Erikson, 1980), regardless of race, because it is has been difficult to determine the difference between causation and correlation in moving through identity stages. Most identity studies focus on determining important elements of identity or whether or not there are actual cultural differences in identity development. Erikson's (1980) and Marcia's (1966, 1980) very important and highly regarded identity development works do not specify particulars about how the process is carried out and how and what makes an individual move from one identity stage to the next. Studies concerning identity generally highlight qualitative studies where people are asked which parts of their identity are most salient and the goal has been to learn how some aspects of their identity have become more salient than others. Further, aside from newer research on racial identity development, there is little research available that accounts for the roles race and racism might have in adolescent identity development in various environments. One hope is that this project might be an impetus for social workers taking on this grand task of learning more about what factors might influence healthy identity development for racial minorities.

The field of social work has always been concerned with improving people's individual lives. The NASW's preamble states that "the primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people". The preamble adds that particular attention is paid "to the needs and empowerment of people who are

vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (NASW Core Values and Principles). The daily life

and work of a social worker proves that a person's ability to answer the questions "Who am I?"

and "Where do I belong?" might be the difference between being more vulnerable, oppressed,

hopeless, and/or unstable and feeling empowered, hopeful and resilient. Research has proven that

racism and discrimination have a significant effect on health and mental health status (Krieger,

1990; Krieger, Rowley, Herman, Avery, & Phillips, 1993; Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson,

1997). Research, especially since Erikson (1980), has suggested that an adolescent's ability to

transition successfully into adulthood and the other stages of overall "success" and well-being is

intertwined in our ability to feel a sense of self and belonging. Breakwell (1983, 1986) asserts

that places have symbols that have meaning and significance to us and are therefore important

sources of identity. Therefore, social contexts and environments help to inform our identities.

Adolescents experience many personal memories and social meanings or shared histories

(Hauge, 2007) outside of their homes at micro and macro levels. Bringing together the essential

human task of identity development during adolescence and the social environment as an integral

space/place for this process, my research question is: How does systemic racism impact African

American adolescents' ability to form a cohesive and positive identity?

One of the tenets of social work includes the promotion of social justice and social

change with and on behalf of clients. Seeking to promote the responsiveness of communities and

social institutions to individuals' needs and social problems brings institutions and social

workers together in the common pursuit of social justice and social change for marginalized and

oppressed populations such as African American adolescents. This study has three goals: 1) to

cultivate a deeper understanding of the differences between identity development for non-white

and white adolescents, 2) to highlight the role of social institutions responsible for attending to both the individual and group needs of racial and ethnic minority students, and 3) to charge social workers with the task of improving these social environments and institutions for racially oppressed populations in particular and oppressed populations in general.

This thesis will attempt to explore this topic by applying social identity theory and CRT to the phenomenon. Chapter two will offer an explanation of symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework that might provide helpful analysis for understanding the interaction of the individual and society in African American identity development, and it will explore social identity theory with a focus on the concept of social identity threat. A brief explanation of CRT will follow, and the chapter will then outline how these theories will be applied to case material. This chapter will also explain the importance of exploring how racism impacts African American adolescent identity development from a social justice perspective and why this matters in an individual's social environments. Chapter three explains the phenomenon and introduces the case of JC, the case to which CRT and social identity theory will be applied in the discussion in chapter six. Chapters four and five offer explanations of the two theories used to explore the phenomenon. Chapter six will discuss and apply CRT and social identity theory to adolescent identity development and will analyze the case study from a symbolic interactionist perspective. Alongside the concepts of internalized racism and internalized oppression, the implications of these theories for racial identity development will be explored to highlight the differences in the process for non-white and white adolescents.

CHAPTER II

A Symbolic Interactionism Theoretical Frame

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how systemic racism in the United States challenges African American adolescent identity development. My attempts to search for the most appropriate theoretical framework to make space for nuance, multiple truths and subjectivities, the relationship between individuals across racial social groups, and which also acknowledged social constructs were a difficult undertaking. Adolescent identity development and racism are difficult to measure, so the subjective and interpretive realities of individuals offers the most data for exploring the challenges systemic racism poses for achieving developmental milestones. Identity and race are social constructs. Identity does not happen without information and meaning from the individual's social context. Race is not biological, but instead has been constructed through social meaning and hierarchy as a basis for differential treatment across groups. It was clear early on in the research process that I needed a framework that would allow me to focus on the phenomenon and the social contexts and interactions of both identity and race, without forcing any of those aspects into any fixed interpretation.

This thesis actively calls for an exploration of the roles of individuals and their social contexts in the healthy identity development of African American adolescents in the face of systemic racism. It was important to me to find an approach that might account for the individual's role in the identity development process in a way that few researchers have

considered. The most appropriate framework, I imagined, would help analyze and interpret the information produced by applying CRT and social identity theory to identity development and racism. I first found constructivism (Piaget, 1967), which then led to social constructivism (Mead, 1934; Gergen, 1985). Through social constructivism, I found symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1925) which features an approach to social science research that analyzes social behavior in terms of how people interact with each other through symbols and meaning-making; in this view, social structures are best understood in terms of individual interactions with other individuals and with society. Symbolic interactionism encourages an exploration of the role of the individual and the subjective and shared meanings that inform human behavior. One of the most attractive aspects of symbolic interactionism is its approach to detail as opposed to the larger scope. With adolescent identity development and racism, it seems easy to get lost in the "big picture" and I hope that this approach to analysis will compel attention to details in black lives and social interactions that the "big picture" might leave unexplored.

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of symbolic interactionism and its fundamental roots. Next, I will turn to the roles of CRT and social identity theory in this analysis that relies on symbolic meaning and social interaction. I will then outline how this analysis will inform the thesis. Finally, I will discuss the strengths and limitations of this study by focusing on my personal and professional identities, interests, motivations, and experiences.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism has a very long intellectual history that begins with German sociologist and economist, Max Weber and American philosopher George Mead (McClelland, 2000). Weber and Mead both emphasized the subjective meaning of human behavior and social

processes. Herbert Blumer studied with Mead at the University of Chicago and coined the term "symbolic interaction" (Blumer, 1969) and formulated the theory as it is known today. Interactionists see humans as active participants who construct their social world, instead of passive participants who conform to socialization. They "argue that close contact and immersion in the everyday lives of the participants is necessary for understanding the meaning of actions, the definition of the situation itself, and the process by which [individuals] construct the situation through their interaction" (McClelland, 2000). Interactionists see meaning as subjective and as a product of social interaction. For the purposes of this thesis, the most important tenet of symbolic interactionism holds that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them. According to Blumer (1969) we develop our identities only through interactions with others. While this study will not undertake a step-by-step method of analysis, it will utilize the perspective's belief that individuals actively engage in meaning-making (and are not solely acted upon) to interpret and analyze the case material, and to illuminate the social interaction and relationship between systemic racism and African American adolescent identity development. This framework opens up the interpretation of human behavior, particularly as far as identity development is concerned, which might make space for multiple narratives and interpretations of the role of the individual in the identity process.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory was first introduced in the late 1970s, but has started to garner more attention in the past decade due to the explosion of research on stereotype threat made popular in educational and social psychology fields by Claude Steele (1997). Social identity theory was born in Europe, but has started to be used to discuss the deeply rooted and embedded

racial inequality in the United States. Social identity theory holds that we define ourselves in terms of our group membership and naturally seek to have our group valued positively compared to other groups. Permeability (the belief that we can still progress despite group membership) and security (the belief that the situation is inevitable or legitimate and should be adapted to) are the two factors, according to this theory, that determine how groups might react to group membership in devalued social groups, such as the African American racial social group (Haslam & Reicher, 2008).   Social identity threat, a concept that stems from social identity theory, suggests that when an individual perceives that a social group with which they are associated is viewed negatively, the experience of this threat to a positive identity association affects the individual's behavior and development.

Critical Race Theory

The second theory that will be explored in this thesis is critical race theory. Critical race theory is mostly a product of post-Civil Rights movement thinking and in response to the issues brought upon the racially oppressed African Americans who were integrated into predominantly white schools. Critical race theory offers many suggestions on the identity work necessary for racial and ethnic minority adolescents in their various social environments. The ultimate aim of CRT investigations and suggestions is to eliminate oppression on local and global levels in the United States and beyond. Critical race theory suggests explicit institutional explorations of racial identity as a means to identify and create critical changes in that high-impact realm that might reverberate in the larger environment. CRT is based on the idea that racism is the everyday lived experience of people of color, often in more implicit than explicit ways.

These ideas from CRT --and others that will be explained later--will be used with social identity theory to explain how racism impacts African American adolescent identity development. Specifically, CRT and social identity theory will be applied to the case of a young African American man who will be called JC who struggles to build a cohesive and positive sense of himself as an adolescent black male.

Strengths and Limitations

The symbolic interactionism approach asserts that the individual is active in her or his ability to make meaning . The individual is an actor as opposed to being acted upon. This perspective seems to be a productive way to test a major question that results from the gaps in literature on identity development. The role of the individual in his or her own identity development is largely unresearched. Research that tests any aspect of identity development might contribute to a better understanding about the roles of individuals and society in the task. Symbolic interactionism also provides an empowered perspective full of agency that African American adolescents in a society as embedded with racism as the one in which we exist might not ever offer.

Social identity theory and CRT are both social theories. While the social identity threat aspect of social identity theory illuminates behaviors that can result from having a negative relationship to your group, this study will not focus on any outcome which will limit the generalizability of any interpretations or conclusions. The strength of applying two social theories to African American adolescents is that they lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges of identity development for the population. The social factors

and how they can impact intrapsychic functions and development are taken into account with this double social theory focus.

By nature of attempting to research a topic that focuses on both identity and racism, trying to pull together all of the parts required to offer a significant and complete project would be at least a book-worthy project as opposed to one that fits well within the limited scope of a master's thesis. I made a conscious decision to not pull in a specific social environment here, despite my temptation to focus on the educational environment because it felt more important, in light of the current gaps in research, to add an individual experience to the literature and register more detailed individual data instead of data on structures and systems.

Self-esteem is important in social identity theory. Though self-esteem seems an important way to make the argument for the need for African American adolescents to achieve positive and cohesive identity development, the research on self-esteem has been inconsistent and incomplete. It has been difficult for researchers of self-esteem to distinguish causation and correlation between self-esteem and positive identity development and low self-esteem and a negative relationship to one's identity.

A strength and limitation of this project is that it is personal to me. I am an African American, female high school teacher who works at a predominantly white independent boarding school. I was a student in the Cleveland Municipal School District from K-12 and had a hard and fast understanding of the messages my predominantly white teachers and their approaches sent me and how that affected both my performance and my ingroup association with fellow African Americans, though I did not know the theoretical term social identity threat then. Even as I work on this project, I am a student at a predominantly white graduate school

institution. It is difficult to remove yourself from the gaze of a topic you are still living, and that might show here in the helter-skelter excitement about various parts of this research, namely CRT as one of the most personally and socially clarifying theories I have learned about to date.

I do not work very hard to clarify the distinction between identity theory and social identity theories in this project, as that is beyond the scope of this thesis. The focus on adolescent identity is meant to note what is going on for adolescents personally as they engage with meaning-making in society and is meant to compel social workers to feel invested in ensuring, as best they can, positive identity development for all populations, and, particularly African American adolescents. What I would do more, if I had the time and space, is work hard to completely highlight the danger of not attending to adolescents' self-esteem and identity development by way of discussing the achievement gap, prison pipeline, and war on drugs. In this current iteration of the project, it felt much too large and worthy of its own thesis.

I do have the time and space to understand the reality of the unique and distinct challenges African American adolescents face in their identity development process and the responsibility of society to intentionally and thoughtfully engage in working to understand positive identity development, and I hope that becomes clear through this research.

Conclusion

The theories chosen to explore African American identity development provide complementary explanations of how racism impacts this phenomenon. The symbolic interactionist approach to understanding the application of the two theories affords an analysis of the role of the individual in meaning-making and therefore the role of the individual in identity

development. The following chapter will explore in detail the phenomenon to which these

theories and this perspective will be applied.

CHAPTER III

Adolescent Identity Development

In this chapter, I offer a brief overview of the history of adolescent identity theory. I will then highlight adolescent identity crisis (the result of a person not successfully passing through a stage) as a way to set up my thinking about what might happen to racial and ethnic minority adolescents in social environments that do not address racial identity or that do not reflect minority racial identities positively. I define identity and adolescence as a way to start to put the research population within these specific contexts. I will then introduce the concepts of racial identity, stereotypes and media messages, microaggressions, and internalized racial oppression before moving on to discuss African American identity development and racial identity development more generally. Finally, I will introduce the case of JC and his identity development journey, so far, which will later serve as an example of how social identity theory and critical race theory can be used to explain the challenges of healthy and positive identity development for African American adolescents.

History of Adolescent Identity Theories

Erikson (1975) argued that self-definition did not become a full-fledged Western concern in the United States until the late nineteenth century. People who had immigrated to the United States were attempting to make sense of themselves in a nation that was very much removed from their former homes (Kroger, 2004). As opposed to the social rank and kinship networks of

medieval times, which was straightforward and predetermined, the nature of self-definition has become increasingly problematic and has evolved and intensified throughout this more recent history (Kroger, 2004). The process was especially difficult for adolescents in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, during which time, as Erikson (1964) suggests, self-definition and identity formation became normative tasks. Self-definition and identity formation's status as relatively recent phenomena coupled with the plethora of identity options in the United States and the "absence of community, tradition, and shared meaning [in our larger culture] has created the conditions for an 'empty self'; a sense of 'I' which experiences chronic emotional hunger for adolescents and adults alike" (Kroger, 2004, p. 2 & Cushman, 1990). Kroger notes that according the Cushman, this 'empty self' attempts to be filled up by consumer products.

Erikson is arguably the leading scholar on identity and identity development. His work stressed how crucial the historical context of humanity and individual lives is for understanding identity. Erikson's approach was psychosocial and considered individual biology, psychology, and social recognition and response all within an historical context (Kroger, 2004). More recent theorists have grappled with historical, structural stage, sociocultural and narrative models as alternatives to Erikson's psychosocial definition of identity. Kroger asserts that "[t]hese approaches, respectively, emphasize the overarching role of historical epoch in giving rise to identity questions, developmentally different ways in which individuals construct meaning and identity, social and cultural forces that create and shape identity, and the narrative of one's own life story as the creation and foundation of identity" (Kroger, 2004, p. 206).

Adams and Marshall (1996) discuss the concept of person-in-context as it relates to our relational embeddedness as humans. Dialogue, knowledge transmission, and discussion are

social experiences of which processes of differentiation and integration are essential (Adams &
Marshall, 1996). Adams and Marshall consider macro- and micro-levels of impact on identity.
Their research proposes identity as a social-psychological construct that uses imitation and
identification processes to reflect social influences. They also propose that the
social-psychological construct reflects active self-construction as the individual determines what
is important to the self and to others (Adams & Marshall, 1996). The social psychology approach
to identity depicts the contextual nature of person-in-context by way of the study of family,
schools, and community and their accompanying structural sets of expectations (Adams &
Marshall, 1996). The contextual study incorporates the school as an integral space for the
development of adolescent identity and as a place that can facilitate a successful adolescent
transition to young adulthood. (Ianni, 1989).

     Erikson and other developmental theorists describe adolescent identity development as an
intense sort of intrapsychic and interpersonal juggling act (Kroger, 2004). Instead of causing
identity work to rest solely in the social psychology discipline, Erikson's psychodynamic
background acknowledges identity as a psychosocial process and illuminates the community's
role in helping to shape adolescent egoes (Kroger, 2004). Erikson argues that during the
adolescent phase of identity development, others become more important as independent agents
helping to understand and recognize the 'real' individual (Erikson, 1968). Erikson appreciated
the role of context in the identity formation process, with identity development also being a
reciprocal process of recognizing and being recognized by those who count in our worlds
(Kroger, 2004).

Adolescent identity crisis. Erikson's life's work was identity development. He placed identity development within ego psychoanalytic theory and saw how crucial this task was to adolescence (Marcia, 1980). Erikson (1968) suggests that the crisis of identity adolescents experience at Stage Five of development has everything to do with identity versus role confusion. He writes that "adolescent development comprises a new set of identification processes, both with significant persons and with ideological forces, which give importance to individual life by relating it to a living community and to ongoing history, and by counterpointing the newly won individual identity with some communal solidarity" (Erikson, 1968, p. 20). At Stage Five, adolescents are constantly questioning who they are and how they relate to others. In order to answer this question, adolescents need to have successfully integrated the crises in Stages One through Four (trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus doubt, initiative versus guilt, and industry versus inferiority). The adolescent's primary concern is how others perceive him and this stage coincides with changes in education settings for many students as they transition from middle or junior high school to secondary school. If the adolescent is unable to settle on a social or school identity, it is disturbing and negatively affects the crisis. Ingroup and Outgroup associations that adolescents experience as crucial aspects of their ability to be recognized bring cultural systems into play. It is a time during which it is necessary for adolescents to "make a series of ever-narrowing selections of personal, occupational, sexual, and ideological commitments" (Erikson, 1968, p. 11). This stage of development is complemented by "the cognitive gifts developing during the first half of the second decade [which] add a powerful tool to the tasks of youth" (Erikson, 1968, p. 11).

Defining identity and adolescence. James Marcia (1980) discusses the difficulty of defining both adolescence and identity and the difficulty of studying identity in adolescence. He asserts that there is not a hard line that suggests a definite end to adolescence, and that if it did end with the formation of an identity, some people would never make it out of adolescence, but that the beginning of adolescence is quite specific and begins with the changes of puberty (Marcia, 1980). He defines identity as an existential position comprised of an "inner organization of needs, abilities, and self-perceptions, as well as to sociopolitical stance" (Marcia, 1980, p. 159). Marcia opposes identity as a "sense," an "attitude," or something that can be "had" and instead thinks of identity as a self-structure--an organization of drives, beliefs, abilities, and individual history (Marcia, 1980).

Using the self-structure model, Marcia proposes that the less developed the structure is, the more we have to rely on external sources to evaluate us. Because the structure is dynamic and not static, society and our experiences within it continually add and discard elements of our identity. Marcia argues that adolescence is a time that is more crucial than others for change in structural form as it is the "first time in identity development that physical development, cognitive skills, and social expectations coincide to enable young persons to sort through and synthesize their childhood identifications in order to construct a viable pathway toward their adulthood" (Marcia, 1980, p. 160). Teenagers are essentially sizing themselves up against their peers to find out how they measure up and to understand how and where they fit in in our society. This task transcends individual histories and moves into the realm of systemic histories, which offers the opportunity to re-engage in this research with ethnic minorities and cultural contexts in mind.

If adolescents fail to attain personal identity during this stage of life, they might not have feelings of competence and will not perceive themselves positively. This affects the transition into adulthood and could send them spiraling down into the depth of identity confusion and crisis. Marcia argues that individuals "'do' better and feel better about themselves and others when that 'have' [identity]" (Marcia, 1980, p. 181) and have a basic sense of trust, industry, and use adaptive-positive defenses. Throughout this developmental process, it is important for adolescents to see positive reflections of themselves in their environment, so that they have a group identity of which they can become a part.

The idea that adolescents need to see positive reflections of their group identity seems to be most easily conceptualized in social environment, as that is where adolescents spend the majority of their time as they differentiate from their parents. Whereas early in the 20th Century it was possible to cultivate your identity more through your family or work, adolescents have requirements by law to be in school and away from their families, namely in the social environment of the school. This circumstance makes it more imperative to think about identity development in the environment on both individual and social levels. The role of the individual in seeking and securing a positive identity seems more onerous for African American adolescents than for white adolescents due to the plethora of negative messages they are bound to encounter in any given social system due to systemic racism.

Adolescents take seriously cues from the social environment to inform who they are and where they belong (Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995). Developmentally, during adolescence, as we work hard to increase our autonomy we distance ourselves from our parents and guardians. This circumstance affords more value to social environments and society in general for

informing the adolescent identity formation process. The messages that social environments send to individuals about the social identities they prescribe can be ascribed with negative messages. Racism is one of those negative messages that can complicate the positive and cohesive identity development for individuals belonging to racial minority groups. Steele (2012) asserts that to understand the development of positive identities for African American, some of the key concepts that need to be considered are racial identity, stereotypes and media images of African Americans, microaggressions, and internalized racial oppression. These are large concepts in their own rights, but will be briefly introduced to describe the unique challenges to identity development that African Americans might face.

Racial identity. The questions that are the foundation of identity work, "Who am I?" and "Where do I belong?", can be answered by many people by their racial identity. Identity development is an essential process. Researchers have frequently described racial identity development as an essential human need (Steele, 2012). In addition to providing a sense of belonging, how an individual relates to her or his racial identity can cultivate psychological well-being, influence academic achievement, and help to create stalwart defenses to the stresses and strains of discrimination (Arellano & Pedilla, 1996; Umafia-Taylor, Diversi, & Fine, 2002). Many of the racial identity models are abstract and do not describe the process of this development in very much depth (Cross, 1971, 1978; Sellers, et al., 1998). The models focus on the adult experience of racial identity development, but not much on racial identity of African American adolescents. Steele (2012) makes a call to action for researchers working to learn more about how African American adolescents form an identity in general and a racial identity in particular. The dark and stark history of racial oppression and marginalization of African

Americans in the United States makes an already challenging identity development process a difficult feat for African American adolescents. Lifting the negative edge of these circumstances would require learning more about the African American identity development process and an understanding of how this demographic perceives blackness, and the impact messages from others about what it means to be African American in the U.S. has on them individually and collectively.

Stereotypes and media images. Stereotypes are as deeply embedded in the United States culture as racism itself. Black caricatures such as the Buck, Uncle Tom, Sambo, Mandingo, Sapphire, Jezebel, Mammy, and Coon have all been negatively applied to blacks in America since as early as the 19th Century. To understand how identity formation works for African Americans, researchers would be remiss to not consider all of the messages and media images that are prevalent in our society about African Americans. McKown & Weinstein (2003) suggest that racial minority adolescents are aware of societal stereotypes as early as middle school.

Claude Steele (1997) proposed a social psychology focus on the concept of stereotype threat. He argued that awareness of a negative group stereotype can negatively affect the performance of group members. As an example of negative performance, in the educational realm, statistics support the widespread failure of the U.S. education system to help African Americans succeed. Research proves that stereotypes are at least partly behind this failure (Jenkins, 2006). The different cultural contexts in which African Americans exist determine and influence how an individual perceives her or himself. These cultural contexts include their community, schools, home, religious affiliation, peer group, etc. "The processing of phenomena and experiences not only influences how one feels valued or valuable (i.e., self-esteem), but it

also influences how one gives meaning and significance to different aspects of oneself (i.e.,

abilities, physical attribute, behaviors, and activities)" (Steele, 2012, p. 12). Stereotypes can

become self-fulfilling prophecies (Snyder, 1977) depending on whether or not individuals

internalize them and conform. Taking on negative stereotypes as part of identity formation can

make forming a cohesive and positive identity less likely or more difficult to achieve.

Microaggressions. Microaggressions are statements or behaviors which convey negative

messages to people of color. Sue et al. (2007) categorize various types of microaggressions that

might occur in a person of color or a minority group's everyday life. Microaggressions are seen

as unintended discrimination. The term was first coined by Psychiatrist and Professor Charles

Pierce in 1970 to describe discrimination and insults he had witnessed inflicted by non-black

Americans on African Americans. The term has gained much popularity in research of various

oppressed and marginalized populations in recent years, particularly in the field of psychology,

education, and counseling (Nadal, 2011). The microaggression categories that are most pertinent

to this study include racial microinsults and racial microinvalidations. The racial microinsults are

verbal and nonverbal behaviors that send denigrating messages to people of color. The racial

microinvalidations can be unconscious verbal statements in which the perpetrator may have good

intentions, yet which still convey negative messages to people of color. Research and literature

indicate that people of color and other minority or marginalized groups experience

"microaggressions in their everyday lives and that these microaggressions have negative impacts

on their lives, particularly their mental health" (Steele, 2012, p.5).

Internalized racial oppression. According to Karen Pyke (2010), internalized racial

oppression is "defined as the individual inculcation of the racist stereotypes, values, images, and

ideologies perpetuated by the White dominant society about one's racial group, leading to feelings of self-doubt, disgust, and disrespect for one's race and/or oneself" (Pyke, 2010, p. 553). Internalized racial oppression was first studied through the now-famous doll studies of African American children whose preference for white over black dolls was interpreted as self-hatred (Pyke, 2010; Clark and Clark 1939;1952). Since then, research has attempted to quantitatively measure self-esteem, self-identity, self-image, psychological adjustment, and attitudes about one's racial group as a means for trying to capture tangible and measurable manifestations of internalized racism (Pyke, 2010; Bloom, 1972). Internalized racial oppression can be a destructive force as African American adolescents try to make sense of their racial group identity and the messages and symbols those outside of the group offer to inform their identity and self-concept within these groups.

Racial identity development. As I noted earlier in this chapter, racial identity is the significance and meaning of race to an individual's self-concept (Rowley, Burchinal, Roberts, & Zeisel, 2008). The notion that racial identity influences human development is widely accepted within psychological literature (Worrell & Gardner-Kitt, 2006; Carter, Pieterse, & Smith, 2008; Steele, 2012). One of the primary differences between racial identity and cultural or ethnic identity has to do with permanency. The three major components of racial identity are racial centrality (how an individual defines herself or himself in terms of race), private regard (sense of pride in group membership and evaluation of the group's merits), and public regard (beliefs and perceptions about how people outside the group view the group) (Steele, 2012). Racial identity is central to the lives of individuals who belong to historically marginalized and oppressed groups.

Literature on racial identity development reveals that researchers seem to agree that it is important for African Americans, though there is disagreement about *how* it is important (Steele, 2012). Racial identity has been noted as having a direct and indirect link to psychological well-being for African Americans in literature as early as the 1980s (Azibo, 1983). While positive racial identity has been linked to increased self-esteem, achievement, and psychological functioning (Thomas & Speight, 1999), negative racial identity in African Americans has been theoretically linked to low self-esteem, issues with psychological adjustment, low self-esteem, low school achievement, and other detrimental factors.

William Cross's racial identity development model offered the seminal contribution to the field and involved five stages. The stages are pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment (Cross, 2001). Other theories have since been put forth to describe and explain the process by which individuals develop beliefs about the significance and meaning of racial group membership (Seaton, Scottham, & Sellers, 2006), but the limited scope of this project leaves space for only this developmental model. The pre-encounter stage may incorporate strong anti-Black and pro-White feelings. The encounter stage tends to involve a personal or social event that shifts the person's worldview or paradigm, which opens them up to new ideas or interpretations of their identity while also creating confusion, alarm, and depression, then guilt, anger, and anxiety (Cross, 2001). The immersion stage is Afrocentric and might include intense feelings of anger. By the time an individual is in the fourth and fifth stages, they have internalized their racial identity with their self-concept and have resolved the conflict between the old and new worldviews (Steele, 2012). Most notably, the fifth stage is characterized by political activity to end oppression for all people (Steele, 2012).

There has been an outpouring of recent literature on African American identity in the 21st Century (Cokely, 2005). Cross's aforementioned seminal model of racial identity development is highly regarded but does not specifically address the racial identity development process during adolescence (Steele, 2012). Racial identities do serve to help us understand our connections with those around us and because racial identities are learned early in life they function as a framework for interpreting experiences (Steele, 2012). As with adolescent identity literature, more research that concerns and fully explores the actual ways in which African Americans construct their racial identity is needed (Cokely, 2002). Adolescents need to be added to an adult-heavy population in the current body of literature. With attention to the actual construction of racial identity in adolescents might come the development of interventions that have the capacity to produce positive impact and movement in the racial identity development process (Steele, 2012).

The Case of JC

The following case study entitled *Anxiety and Internalized Oppression: A Case Study*, will be used throughout this paper to provide an example of a young man in the process of constructing his racial identity (2015). Only relevant information from the case study will be presented.

The case study involves the individual treatment of a 12-year-old male who identifies as African American. His mother is African American and his father is Haitian. The treatment goals were identified as reducing anxiety and worrying thoughts, increasing hours of sleep per night, and working on social skills. JC is one of four children. He has two older sisters who are in their twenties and his younger brother is eight years old. The older siblings have the same biological

father and JC and his brother have the same biological father. JC's mother and father have been

separated for three years, but just finalized their divorce in January of this year (four months into

my work with JC). JC has not disclosed his sexual orientation, but when he discusses his future

family, he often discusses having a wife and children, suggesting heterosexuality. JC's family

has a Christian background and they all attend church about twice a month. JC has an IEP at

school, which has recently changed, but he has had one for the past 3 years. JC's mother does not

work, but he receives SSI and child-support from his father. The family's socioeconomic status

is low/below the poverty level and the family has government assistance.

JC was referred to the clinic by his mother who, while attending parenting classes as part

of the divorce process, started to understand the effects of her relationship with his father on him.

His mother is 6 years into recovery from heroin abuse and is a survivor of both physical and

verbal domestic violence perpetrated by JC's father. JC and his siblings witnessed much of this

violence in the home. JC's mother reported that she believes much of the DV was rooted in her

then-husband's frustration around her substance abuse, though she believes her sons knew

nothing about her using. JC's mother noted increased sleeplessness and anxiety once he and his

brother started having visits with their father, his new girlfriend, and their version of a blended

family. His mother noted that his anxiety increased after weekend visits with his father and saw

how it effected his sleeping habits and schoolwork.

JC's anxiety symptoms have increased exponentially over the past year. He tends to be

withdrawn around strangers and family alike and is often found hiding in the bathroom to avoid

people or any type of confrontation. His racing thoughts, which would eventually turn into

catastrophic thoughts each night, resulted in his averaging only about 4-5 hours of sleep per

night. He experiences night terrors and often has panic attacks both at home and at school. At

school the panic attacks seem to be triggered by conflict amongst other students (not involving

him) or by new material in his courses. JC's mother's major concern was his anxiety around

visits with his father and his fear that his father would hurt him physically. His family members

reported worrying that he was not social enough and/or was not at the appropriate developmental

stage for social skills. He self-reported that his biggest concern was his nightmares and

sleeplessness and that he "spend[s] a lot of time worrying about the future and how technology is

going to take over humanity." JC's mother also noted his extreme pickiness around the types of

foods he eats. She noted that he needs to see where every single food came from and, in the case

of sandwiches or similar, in order to eat it he has to see the person make the sandwich.

JC's mother reports that he first started showing anxiety symptoms five years ago when

they first moved to the town in which they currently live. On the day they moved into their

apartment, there was a huge thunderstorm on the horizon. His mother was about to head to the

grocery with one of his older sisters, but JC would not let them leave because he thought that

something horrible was going to happen to them in the storm. His mother reports that since that

day, he has not really wanted her to leave his side, which also makes transitions to his father's

house even more difficult. JC's mother describes him as very sensitive and noted that when he is

upset, it is hard to calm him down. His anxiety symptoms have been chronic in nature, and

mostly come in the form of worrying thoughts. JC is not a kid who will go out and play with

many other kids, but he does often identify one friend in school who he considers to be his best

friend. He has never seen a regular therapist, but, through DCF involvement, has spoken with

clinicians starting at a very young age. JC's school adjustment counselor noted a biweekly

pattern of his anxiety attacks in school and noted that they happen most when he is in the TAB (take a break) portion of the day. The biweekly pattern coincides with visits to his father's house.

JC's family is primarily working class and most family members live and work below the poverty line. His father is the major exception to this rule in the family system as his job in the factory affords him an upper lower class socioeconomic status. He grew up in a predominantly Haitian and African American community near a large city and his parents were born and raised in the same city. His mother's family is large, though only his mother and her sister live in the more rural town where they have been for the past five years. JC's maternal grandmother and grandfather suffered with substance abuse, and his mother started to abuse substances when her parents died within a year of each other. For JC's mother, her parents were her biggest family supports and having their deaths in such close proximity, time-wise, resulted in a lengthy and difficult bereavement period for her, which ultimately affected her children, particularly JC. His aunt and her family also live in the town and the two families have almost-daily contact with each other. His aunt works at a housing authority, and his mother reports that she had similar employment prior to when she started using heavily. JC's mother did not finish high school, but did earn her GED. One sister has also earned a GED and the second sister is working towards taking the exam. JC's father's educational background was never discussed.

If you ask anyone in JC's family to describe him, the first word that they will say is sensitive. He is known for being easily alarmed, easily worried, and a "scaredy-cat" according to his younger brother. Most of JC's schooling has happened in his current town. He reports having always liked the idea of school and especially the special courses such as art. But he struggles with testing on new materials and forgets everything he knows once a test is in front of him. He

describes it as "spacing out" and says that when the test is over he remembers everything. In those testing moments, JC tends to hyperventilate and have a panic attack which sends him to the school nurse's office or the school adjustment counselor's office. In school JC also struggles with larger transitions throughout the day.

The family's move away from their father (and friends and other family) seems to have impacted JC's worrying thoughts and heightened state of alarm around his mother's absence (even for short amounts of time). JC is a young black male living in a predominantly white town and attending a predominantly white school. Though the town itself is predominantly white, his family's status as low income locates their housing in an area that has a mixture of black and hispanic peoples that is uncharacteristic of the larger demographic. They are the only black family in the thirty-something family apartment complex. JC's father is Haitian and arrived in the US from Haiti when he was a teenager. When JC's mother reported that his "father tries to show the boys tough love the way his father showed up" despite the fact that he did not have a good relationship with his father. She also reported that his father gets frustrated by JC's sensitivity. The clash of cultural identities from the Haitian side of his parentage and the African American side of his parentage present a serious concern for JC's sense of himself and how he measures up to/with them. JC often offers thoughts on the type of man he is planning to be for his family, and usually he is drawing a contrast against his father.

JC is most aware of his mother's cultural values and their social class when it comes to sleepovers or his friends' parties. He falls into a situation of not being able to sleepover just anyone's house, but also not really having the physical space to have people sleepover at his house. JC often discusses how large his closest friend's house is and complains about living in a

small apartment. Those kinds of complaints do not tend to come from him unsolicited, but instead come while he is playing the Sims game and deciding which type of large, beautiful house to buy for his family.

We worked together from September 2014 until April 2015, which means that I worked with him as national racial tension has skyrocketed (in terms of publicity) in the wake of the non-indictments of police officers in cases where black men have died. Watching the news and overhearing conversations between his mother and his sisters really seemed to spark a hard-hitting realization of the fact that his blackness might be seen as bad by people who do not know him. The cultural context of racial tensions as displayed via media outlets really impacted his self-image and increased his anxiety around physical conflict.

In one of our sessions, when I first arrived, JC was playing a SIMS game. Instead of asking him to stop I asked if he could show me how the game works and tell me a bit about his family on the game. In this sort of show-and-tell, JC revealed that he chose to have a white family and white children "because they are always happy and things are always good for them." This was around the time that the Michael Brown and Eric Garner cases both ended in non-indictment of the police officers by the grand jury and all of the resulting "Black Lives Matter" protests around the nation, and in some cases around the world. JC's suggestion of what feels real to him, which was that white families are more stable and happier than black families, was not the first time he had mentioned such sentiments, but was the first time I really heard him.

Conclusion

Adolescent identity development is a critical and challenging process in its own right. Racism is a serious and pervasive social issue in the U.S. and can affect the psychological

well-being of oppressed racial groups and individuals' ability to achieve a positive identity.

Racial identity awareness and development starts at a young age and individuals can be

hyper-sensitive to the negative messages the dominant group sends and the marginalized group

perceives about the groups with which they identify--whether implicitly or explicitly. The case of

JC is just one example of what the impact of racism can look like for a young black man living in

the U.S. I will return to JC in Chapter VI to examine his case theoretically. First, Chapter IV and

Chapter V provide descriptions of CRT and social identity theory.

CHAPTER IV

Critical Race Theory

This thesis examines the applications of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a tool for understanding how intertwined racism is in the daily lives of African Americans. To take it a step further, CRT is applied to adolescent identity development and social identity theory as a means to understanding how systemic racism in social environments and interactions impacts and influences identity development. Critical race theory is based upon the sociopolitical history of the United States, and has social work implications by way of its mission to study and change policies that influence unequal treatment in the U.S. based on race. CRT maintains "that racism is engrained in the fabric and system of the American society" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Applying CRT, along with social identity theory, to African American adolescent identity development helps to highlight how "everyday racism defines race, interprets it, and decrees how personal and institutional teachings impact behavior" (Klupchak, 2014). The acts that contain this everyday racism are known as microaggressions, as noted in Chapter II. The behavioral focus here is how individuals act out their identities. In this chapter I will discuss CRT and the significance and roots of the movement. I will then outline how this theory will inform the phenomenon.

When advances and the momentum of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s had stalled, a number of lawyers, social activists, and legal scholars kicked into gear the ideas that

would become the roots of CRT in the law and radical feminism disciplines (Klupchak, 2014). CRT was a product of ideas and concepts from philosophers, theorists, and also radical American figures such as Antonio Gramsci, Jacques Derrida, Sojourner Truth, Cesar Chavez, Martin Luther King, Jr., Frederick Douglass, and W.E.B. Du Bois. While this is by no means an exhaustive list, CRT did rely heavily on the work and lives of these people. Crucial to its development, too, were the Black Power and Chicano movements. CRT is not a limited theory. It has grown and changed over time as new ideas, theories, and oppressions are illuminated, which means that the theory's criticism of race, racism, and its pervasiveness have only strengthened over time.

CRT is flexible enough as a concept to function as a movement of its own. It was created as a vehicle for challenging the dominant perspective and institutional manifestations of power, privilege, and racism. CRT takes some of the focus off of the individual perpetrators of racism and suggests that "individual racists need not exist to note that institutional racism is pervasive in the dominant culture" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT examines existing power structures and identifies that they are based on white privilege and white supremacy, which perpetuates the marginalization of people of color (UCLA Critical Race Studies, 2009). The eventual goal and commitment of the CRT movement and its activists and scholars is working toward "eliminating racial oppression as a broad goal of ending all forms of oppression" (Solorzano, 1998). The focus on identity development and the social interactions involved that this study's phenomenon calls for must be evaluated for the ways in which it might preserve the conditions of systemic racism.

CRT works for examining identity formation. Most institutional spaces do not disrupt the systemic oppression and individual interactions between different social identities, and, instead, tend to reproduce the union in larger society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). For African American adolescent racial identity development, the combination of systemic oppression and different social identities might well reveal knowledge construction of this difference as negative. The goal of CRT is to take up where these institutional spaces lack and disrupt the systems in favor of positive change for marginalized groups. Although race is central to examining what shapes an individual's subjectivity, other social identities effect a certain lived experience and CRT acknowledges the intersection of identities while dismantling racism.

After the election of President Barack Obama, citizens have motioned to term America a post-racial society. There is a way in which this is almost laughable, considering the centuries of structural racism that are still deeply embedded in national policies and practices, including the Constitution. It is often difficult for individuals to hear that they participate in structural or institutional racism or are racist. The nation is currently still reeling from the aftermath of the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri at the hands of Officer Darren Wilson. More recently, the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, who died from a severe spinal cord injury after having been in police custody, has sparked days of protests and riots in Baltimore and protests in other major cities. The media coverage of the protests and riots revealed that the language used to talk about black protestors and rioters compared to the language used to cover a predominantly white riot after the University of Kentucky basketball team's loss in the final was inherently racist. The phrases the media and those debating the issues on social networks used

proved to be symptomatic of racism itself. Racism is so deeply embedded in our society that it is sometimes difficult to name. It is so much a part of our lives that we see it as normal.

Critical race theory is most popularly used to understand the ways racism functions in the United States today. It accounts for a racism that presents differently today than it did in during the 1960s. Racism rears its head in much more subtle ways. CRT emerged and gained footing based on the attitude and evidence that people treat each other differently based on race. This differential treatment is felt heavily on conscious and subconscious levels for racial and ethnic minority adolescents across the United States. Far exceeding any rigid disciplinary boundaries, CRT contains both the academic and activist dimensions. CRT "not only tries to understand our social situation, but to change it; it sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006).

The basic tenets of CRT as laid out by Delgado and Stefancic (2001) are that:

1. Normal Science- Racism is ordinary not aberrational; it permeates our society on every level, not just loud, blatant happenings. White-over-color ascendancy serves important purposes, both psychic and material.

2. Interest Convergence- Also known as material determinism. Racism advances the interests of most White people regardless of their socioeconomic status which creates a negligent amount of incentive to change things.

3. Social Construction- Race and racism are products of social thoughts and construction. Races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient.

4. Differential racism- The dominant society will often racialize different minority groups in accordance with economic and political currents. Intersectionality and anti-essentialism suggests that no person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity.

5. Unique voice of color- This element coexists in uneasy tension with anti-essentialism. The voice-of-color thesis holds that because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, black, Indian, Asian, and Latino/a writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their white counterparts matters that the whites are unlikely to know.

Another perspective of the central tenets of CRT as laid out by Lee (2008) are:

1. The Centrality of Race and Racism in Society- CRT asserts that Racism is a permanent component of American life.

2. The Challenge to Dominant Ideology- CRT challenges the claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy in society.

3. The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge- CRT asserts that the experiential knowledge of people of color is appropriate, legitimate, and an integral part to analyzing and understand racial inequality.

4. The Interdisciplinary Perspective- CRT challenges ahistoricism and the unidisciplinary focuses of most analyses and insists that race and racism be placed in both a contemporary and historical context using interdisciplinary methods

5. The Commitment to Social Justice- CRT is a framework that is committed to a social justice agenda to eliminate all forms of subordination of people

The strength of CRT being applied to the question of how systemic racism impacts African American adolescent identity development stems from the theory's ability to identify, challenge, analyze, and address the phenomenon from an interdisciplinary perspective. The importance of using CRT is further illuminated by what continues to be at stake as a result of not confronting the big issues affecting racial and ethnic minorities in the United States and their quality of life. CRT helps to examine the covert nature of institutionalized racism and racism as a social construct that functions through interest convergence. The systemic nature of racism means that it permeates the system at every level, ranging from national educational policy and reforms to the treatment approaches of therapists. Both at the ground level (in the home or in the classroom) and at the top of the big umbrella (education policies, zoning, and attitudes about racial and ethnic minority adolescent behavior), the adolescents' normal adolescent identity development, social identity development, and racial identity development very much influence and impact their societal identity performance. Lee's expression of the tenets of CRT offers space in which to challenge institutional ideologies in need of being reformed into more inclusive and integrative practices.

Critical race theory is more often than not used as a framework for studies, as opposed to a theory to be applied to a study. Empirical studies exploring CRT are not non-existent, but are few in number. Much of the literature surrounding this theory is in the education, law, property, healthcare, and prison realms. CRT provides a lens through which to understand inequities in our system and creates space for accelerated societal change and the beginning to the end of oppressive systems for racial and ethnic minorities. CRT in this thesis addresses the role of race

and racism in U.S. systems and helps to define how attention to the developmental processes of

the individuals affected can be used as a goal to eliminate institutional and structural racism. The

use of racism in this thesis refers to Wellman's (1977) definition of "culturally sanctioned beliefs

which regardless of the intentions involved, defend the advantages Whites have because of the

subordinated positions of racial minorities." CRT maintains that the fact that institutional racism

favors Whites while disadvantaging minority groups dates back to when enslaved Africans were

brought the United States. Slavery, property rights, and ownership are used to explain how these

entitlements endorsed both the self-interest of Whites and also provided a foundation for White

hegemony (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) throughout social systems.

Here, Whiteness, as a value, leverages and perpetuates their system of advantages and privileges

(Sanchez, 2014). Harris (1993) rights of property defines these rights as: "(1) rights of

disposition; (2) rights to use and enjoyment; (3) reputation and status property; and (4) the

absolute right to exclude" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 59). CRT explains how privileges

associated with Whiteness sustain the objectification and subordination of minority groups, and

highlights another way in which social messages and cues about identity are observed or

perceived. CRT focuses on the experiences of people of color and overtly interrogates the

dominant ideology and white privilege (Yosso, 2005).

Conclusion

Critical race theory's mission to examine and refute dominant ideologies provides a lens

for understanding how social issues, especially systemic racism, might impact people of color in

the U.S. CRT was created with minority groups in mind, and in response to the many ideologies

and liberal theories that have been created with the dominant group in mind. Although CRT

asserts that there is no need to focus on individuals to understand structural issues, this study argues that in the case of African American adolescent identity development, it is important to create a significant dyadic feedback loop between person and environment. The nature of this argument still fits within the goals of CRT. In order to make up for some of this attention to institution, this study will use social identity theory for its focus on the aforementioned feedback loop.

CHAPTER V

Social Identity Theory

As Beverly Tatum (1997) notes, to answer the question "Who am I?" depends in large part on who the world around us says we are. She further asks "What message is reflected back to me in the faces and voices of my teachers, my neighbors, store clerks? What do I learn from the media about myself? How am I represented in the cultural images around me? Or am I missing from the picture altogether?" (Tatum, 1997, p. 18). Biological changes associated with puberty, more developed cognitive abilities, and the ever-shifting societal expectations trigger this intense process of simultaneous reflection and observation (Tatum, 1997). In the United States, the self-creation of one's identity tends to happen during adolescence for the aforementioned reasons and the choices we make during adolescence ripple throughout the lifespan (Tatum, 1997, p. 20).

The "Big 8" commonly recognized and referenced social identifiers include ability (physical and mental), age, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. Additional identifiers include appearance and body image, family origin and family structure, geographic/regional background, language, learning style/behavior, academic/social achievement, and beliefs (political, social, religious). Tatum (1997) discusses a classroom exercise she regularly uses with psychology students wherein she asks them to complete the sentence, "I am _____," using as many descriptors as they can think of in sixty

seconds. One pattern that has revealed itself is that in general White students rarely mention being White unless they grew up in strong ethnic enclaves, but students of color usually mention their racial or ethnic group (Tatum, 1997). She discovered that:

Common across these examples is that in the areas where a person is a member of the dominant or advantaged social group, the category is usually not mentioned [...] in Eriksonian terms, their inner experience and outer circumstance are in harmony with one another, and the image reflected by others is similar to the image within [...]. The parts of our identity that *do* capture our attention are those that other people notice, and that reflect back to us. The aspect of identity that is the target of others' attention, and subsequently of our own, often is that which sets us apart as exceptional or "other" in their eyes. (Tatum, 1997, p. 21)

Tatum (1997) asserts that dominant groups set parameters and assign roles to the subordinates that reflect the latter's devalued status. In situations of unequal power, subordinate groups are charged with focusing on survival, as opposed to a focus on thriving or mobility (Tatum, 1997).

This brief introduction to the way social identities such as race can feature in adolescent identity development for racial and ethnic minority students connects with CRT and identifying and examining areas which might help social workers and institutions engage in race consciousness to reform practices and interventions in identity development which were designed with only the dominant racial group in mind. Social identity theory was developed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979 in an effort to understand the psychological basis of intergroup discrimination. Social identity is commonly referred to as a person's sense of who they are and how they relate to the world based on their social group memberships. Social identity theory

focuses on the meaning associated with being a member of a social category and asserts that category membership has consequences for self-esteem (Burke & Stets, 1997). Tajfel and Turner (1979) identify three variables as important to the emergence of ingroup favoritism:

1. The extent to which individuals identify with an ingroup to internalize that group membership as an aspect of their self-concept.

2. The extent to which the prevailing context provides ground for comparison between groups.

3. The perceived relevance of the comparison group, which itself will be shaped by the relative and absolute status of the ingroup.

This thesis is less interested in the aspect of favoritism and is more interested in what is at stake when this social identity is threatened.

Social identity theory assumes that individuals strive to maintain a positive perception of their groups and collectives (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). When *social identity threat* occurs, individuals perceive that the groups to which they belong have been evaluated negatively. Stereotype threat is the more popular term and speaks to concerns of individuals about themselves. Social identity threat also speaks to concerns in individuals, but those concerns are about their perceptions of their groups and collectives (Derks, Inzlicht, & Kang, 2008). Social identity threat is a focus in this thesis due to the consequences of the threat. The phenomenon in question is the challenge of African American adolescent identity development and the impact of racism on an African American adolescent's ability to form a cohesive and positive identity. Areas of consequence as a result of social identity threat include performance, specificity of cognitive deficits, learning, social identity, and the suppression of prejudice. All of these

consequences are recognizable as being a part of the social environment. When racial and ethnic minority adolescents have occasion to believe--through messages received through schools, teachers, community members, health services, the government, the media, and the larger U.S. education system--that their racial social identity group is perceived negatively in terms of achievement and ability to succeed, these consequences might override any ability or talent they otherwise possess. CRT is a useful lens through which to explore social identity theory and how multilayered and pervasive social identity threat might be and our role in reducing and ultimately eliminating it.

Social identity theory seeks to explain human action in the social context. Similarly to critical race theory, social identity theory aims "to account for when and how social structures and belief systems impact on what people do" (Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2010). Also similar to CRT is social identity theory's wide range of applications. In terms of literature, it is most interesting for this study to highlight literature which influenced the development of social identity theory. Postwar intellectual Europe was plagued by the problem of evil (Judt, 2008). Many social psychologists were Jewish and were working and thinking in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Social psychology questioned why group membership was so powerful that it could sanction violence to others (Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2010). Prior to the development of social identity theory, hateful actions were accounted for by the idea of individualism. Sherif's (1966, 1967) studies asserted that when groups exist in competition members both feel and act negatively towards each other.

Studies after Sherif's attempted to explain what might transform a group of the best adjusted people into "wicked, disturbed and vicious" (Sherif, 1966, p. 58) people when in

competition with another group. Further studies sought to learn about the conditions that make

such group transformations possible. These studies from the 1960s suggested that bias against

outgroups could be found without explicit or implicit competition (Reicher, Spears, & Haslam,

2010). Tajfel and Turner developed social identity theory to learn more about the minimal

conditions that will produce group bias.

Social identity theory was developed within the framework of the Holocaust, but was also

responding to the social movements of the 1960s that were based on race, class, gender and

sexuality. With social change on the agenda, the role of groups and collective processes in

producing and ensuring social change was on Tajfel's radar (Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2010).

The understanding of multiple social identities and how those identities and sociocultural

locations are acted out and acted upon in society problematized the bases of collective action

from an objective aspect of a social location. Tajfel focused on group processes based on his

understanding that collective action is the sole way in which the powerless can challenge their

subjugation (Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2010).

Conclusion

Social identity theory was developed with the dominant group in mind, so, like identity

theory, it does not fully capture the experiences or fit the needs of racial minority adolescents in

the U.S. However, social identity theory was developed hoping to understand how oppressed

and/or marginalized groups might use collective action to create social change, which aligns with

the goals of this study. The following chapter will examine how both social identity theory and

critical race theory can work together to provide a more in-depth explanation of challenges to the

process of identity development for African American adolescents. The symbolic interactionist

framework will provide the dyadic feedback loop perspective that is necessary for this

exploratory study to examine the case of JC and JC's role in his African American adolescent

identity development.

CHAPTER VI

Discussion

This final chapter combines the theories presented in earlier chapters with the ultimate purpose of affording a more complex and dynamic understanding of how racism affects the identity development of African American adolescents. To begin, the application of CRT will be woven into the understanding of how social identity theory applies to African Americans as a large and complex social group as well as to individual adolescent African Americans. This application of theory will highlight structural racism that runs through the veins of all major systems and institutions in the United States and will discuss the stereotypes, microaggressions, threats and negative group perception that accompany racial identity development as a result of racism. Social identity theory will be used to understand the social construction of racial group membership and what is at stake when that racial group membership identity is threatened by the many forms and manifestations of systemic racism. The symbolic interactionist lens will be present in the analysis of the case of JC as a study of the role of the individual and the subjective and shared meanings that inform human behavior. The voice of color tenet of critical race theory is used in the end to note the experience of the author of this theoretical study and an African American woman who works with adolescent students of all races, but holds a position as Advisor to Black Students at the independent boarding school at which I teach. The questions explored in this thesis are the result of both my scholarly studies and interests, my professional

work, and my personal lived experiences as a member of the African American racial group in social environments at various ends of the social spectrum.

Social Identity Theory in Racial Social Groups

Social identity theory describes the formation of a group identity as having three parts. These parts are mental processes that take place in a particular order (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). First there is social categorization, then social identification, and finally social comparison. It is a natural cognitive process to group objects together by sometimes exaggerating differences between groups as well as exaggerating the similarities of objects within the same groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Tajfel and Turner aimed to study the minimum conditions for in-group hostility or discrimination to exist and this process focused on the in-group. The "in-group" holds the status of "us" while the outgroup holds the status of "them". Tajfel (1979) suggested that groups are the most important source of self-esteem. Social identity proposes that the in-group *will* discriminate against the out-group in order to enhance their own group's self-image (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). There are two ways to increase the self-image of the group. One way is to enhance the status of the group to which we belong, and the other is to discriminate and hold prejudiced views against the group we do not belong to, the "out-group" (McLeod, 2008).

Categorizing people is the first of the three mental processes involved in distinguishing the in-group from the out-group. This is the first way in which we attempt to make order out of chaos and attempt to understand things and people in their social environments (McLeod, 2008). The next step is social identification where we adopt the identity of the groups with which we have grouped ourselves, and likely begin to act the way we believe members of the group act. This is the point at which self-esteem and emotional significance become intertwined with the

group membership (McLeod, 2008). Finally, there is social comparison, a process during which, as members of one group, we compare that group with other groups. Ideally, the group compares positively or favorably with other groups, so as to maintain self-esteem. Hostility and competition between groups consists of competing for resources and favorable identities (McLeod, 2008).

When Tajfel took this work on, he and other social psychologists were working to try to understand how groups were capable of out-group hostility and violence such as the Holocaust. The genocide that occurred during the Holocaust was an extension of the three mental processes of social identity theory. Not only will in-groups discriminate in order to enhance their self-image, but the in-group will *seek* negative aspects of groups to make the difference between "us" and "them" even more pronounced (McLeod, 2008). McLeod (2008) asserts that prejudiced and discriminatory views of another racial social group could result in racism, which could result in genocide. This chain of events is supported by the large-scale instances which demonstrate this progression in history, including--but not limited to--the genocide that "occurred in Germany with the Jews, in Rwanda between the Hutus and Tutsis and, more recently, in the former Yugoslavia between the Bosnians and Serbs" (McLeod, 2008). Though the condition of African Americans in the United States is not genocide, the systemic racism sustained by the dominant group (white Americans) has kept African Americans in a subordinate position for more than four centuries on the basis of prejudiced and discriminatory views which became the foundation of widespread structural racism.

All of the groups mentioned in connection with genocide were perpetrators or victims of extreme racism. In the United States, the racism is sometimes less blatant but is arguably more

historically pervasive as a result of America's particular and peculiar version of slavery. Social identity theory is useful for understanding what motivates the in-group to fully differentiate from and discriminate against the out-group. However, social identity theory does not explicitly address the nature of in-group versus out-group in terms of power dynamics. The language of racial groups in the United States, particularly non-white versus white racial groups, includes the language of dominant group versus subordinate group. These distinctions have everything to do with the power and privilege that is afforded to the white racial group in America based on their historical oppression of non-white racial groups.

In social identity theory, it is not clear who the "us" is in the "us" and "them" categories. Racism adds a power dynamic to the social categorization that the theory does not seem to naturally account for. Through the lens of racism the in-group of "us" carries the dominant status, while the out-group of "them" carries the subordinate status. This thesis is based on an understanding that racism is a part of the everyday experience of African Americans in the U.S. The normal science tenet of CRT, which states that racism is ordinary and not aberrational and permeates our society on every level, supports this fundamental understanding (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). If racism is the collective understanding of Wellman's (1977) definition of "culturally sanctioned beliefs which regardless of the intentions involved, defend the advantages Whites have because of the subordinated positions of racial minorities," then we can clarify the in-group and the out-group through racism's lens. Here, the in-group is not determined by individual subject, but instead by the group in power, which here would be white people. For the purposes of this study, the out-group will be African Americans. In this proposed understanding of the impact of racism on the in-group/out-group distinction, African Americans are the

out-group by definition. The nature of the in-group is to be determined to seek to find negative

aspects of the out-group and to seek to find positive aspects of their own in-group to enhance the

group's overall perception (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Unlike a sports team or nation, the

consequence of racism underpinning an in-group/out-group distinction is the psychological and

emotional distress of an entire group of people.

The status of race as a social construct complicates the meaning--and social

understanding--of group membership. Tajfel (1978) discussed social identity group membership

as not foreign or artificial, but as vital and real for the person. The terms "vital" and "real"

applied to "construct" affirms race as real, true, and in some ways undeniable. Race as a social

construct has become a "real" social issue. In the United States, for many African Americans it

can be considered the most salient social identity and group membership by default, as skin color

is one of the first things people notice about other people. Whereas one might choose to identity

with a sports team, nation, or hobby, race is bestowed upon people and not chosen. Race as a

social construct might be understood as one of the earlier in-group distinctions or avenues of

discrimination. Social thought by the dominant group invented or constructed race, which

consequently functioned as a way to manipulate their own in-group's self-esteem and enhanced

their in-group favoritism and status.

Application to African American Adolescents

Reflecting back on the adolescent identity development literature and Cross' (2001)

racial identity development model, social identity threat poses the biggest risk to the racial

identity development of African American adolescents. Racial identity includes the extent to

which an individual defines herself or himself in terms of race, sense of pride in group

membership and evaluation of the relative merits of the group, and beliefs about how others view the group (Rowley, Burchinal, Roberts, & Zeisel, 2008). The processes of social identity theory are all crucial to racial identity development. The first stage, social categorization, involves the most action outside of the group. This stage relies on the messages received through social environments to help individuals understand to which group they belong and what it means to be a part of this group. The second stage, social identification, is where we adopt the identity of the group in which we have categorized ourselves. Some have argued that in terms of African American identity, having a strong identification with being Black and embracing the definition of Blackness that focuses on an African value orientation is essential for healthy psychological functioning (Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006). In the third stage, social comparison, the group would acquire information through a comparison with the white racial group which confirms or validates positive perceptions of the group in order to boost the group's self-esteem. African American racial identity development is intertwined with an individual's ability to cultivate a positive relationship to their group membership in a nation full of systemic messages that might contradict any positive perceptions one might have about being African American.

In the pre-encounter stage of racial identity development, the African American individual's world view is dominated by Euro-American determinants (Cross, 2001). If these determinants are negative or clouded by negative stereotypes, this is a black person's first real sense of the perception of our racial social group. In America, most African Americans will be surrounded by other African Americans. Many adolescents will be unable to ignore or dismiss the experience of *being* African American and taking on that social identity (Oyserman &

Harrison, 1999). Most people African Americans adolescents encounter in their everyday life

will likely be black, and many in the adolescent-age cohort do not stay in school. This, combined

with poverty, employment issues, and crime, will be a part of many African American adolescent

social worlds and they are naturally charged with making "sense of how it is that members of

one's own group appear to be badly off" (Oyserman & Harrison, 1999, p. 58). The charge to

make sense of this social identity makes the intergroup boundaries more salient and results in the

construction of a social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The African American adolescent starts

to understand the difference between "us" and "them" at a very young age, and this might bring

them into the encounter stage of racial identity development wherein an individual might have

strong anti-Black or pro-white sentiments. The way an individual responds to the negative

stereotyping of their racial social group can contribute to their psychological well-being,

self-esteem, and behavior as a member of that group, for good or for ill (Ruggiero & Taylor,

1995; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Social identity threat occurs when one of a person's many social identities is at risk of

being devalued in a particular context (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). This threat is best

understood in the context of individual behavior in groups. Due to the pervasiveness of racism in

U.S. systems, social identity threats permeate major structures and institutions. A social identity

contingency is the condition "that a given social identity forces us to face and overcome in a

particular setting [...] which affect[s] our everyday behavior and perpetuate[s] broader societal

problem" (Steele, 2010). Social identity contingencies relevant to African American adolescent

racial identity include stereotype threat--the fear of what people could think about us solely

based on one or more of our social identities. Stereotype threat has the capacity to undermine

feelings of belonging, competence, and aspiration (Steele, 2010) and explains the ways in which our actions contribute to persistent and systemic racism and racial segregation.

For an adolescent African American, their various social environments and social identities might present a threat to the value of their racial identities. Whether the threat is "real" or "symbolic" it can impact their well-being and ability to maintain self-esteem and form a positive and cohesive identity. Unlike other social identities where it might be possible to develop an alternative salient social identity (Nadler, Harpaz-Gorodeisky, & Ben-David, 2009), the emphasis on racial differences and the vast inequity that results from this emphasis makes it almost impossible for some African Americans to fully disconnect from this social identity. A contrast to developing an alternative social identity is attempting to reinforce the identity. Nadler, et al (2009) assert that the response individuals in groups consider might depend on their level of commitment to the group or identity. For adolescent African Americans, the conditions of racism take away a lot of the choice in racial social identity salience.

For most African Americans, group membership is not chosen, but is instead assigned in any given social environment. Group membership for African Americans can be a double-edged sword. Group members might receive many societal messages which suggest a negative or inferior whole group perception. These societal messages, real or symbolic, might challenge any positive perceptions of the collective group. Research illuminates the importance of positive identity and self-concept development and acknowledges maintaining a positive social group image as just as crucial. When individuals experience threat, the threat is likely to manifest as negative emotions or behaviors that align with perceived group norms (Walton & Cohen, 2007) and might compromise performance and create anxiety around group membership (Steele, 1997).

One definition of threat describes social identity or stereotype threat as "the threat that members of a stigmatized group experience when they believe that they may, by virtue of their performance in a domain of relevance, confirm a negative stereotype about themselves and members of their group (Steele, 2012, p. 60; Kellow & Jones, 2008). Research supports the claim that in threat conditions, individuals underperform on cognitive tasks compared with non-group members (Kellow & Jones, 2008; Steele, 1997). The individual and her or his group are not easily separated.

The inextricable interconnectedness of the individual and the group might mean that when adolescents experience negative or limiting societal messages, it is difficult to distinguish the perceived limitedness of the group stereotype from the limitedness of the individual. In the United States, the condition of systemic or structural racism means that an abundance of negative stereotypes are available for African American adolescents to take in starting from a very young age. The lack of racial diversity in even children's TV or Disney films (or the sole stereotypically dim-witted or comedic African American character) sends messages early on about where African Americans do and do not belong and why. Further, many studies suggest that the sexual and sexualized scripts in music videos typically known as black music videos reinforce stereotypical images of African American hypersexualism, amoralism, and materialism (Emerson, 2002). The stereotypical messages offered in many of these media perpetuate negative stereotypes and offer negative models for home and family goals in the black community (Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005). The "demonic" media depictions of African American men, in particular, justifies incarceration and close scrutiny of African American males (Rome, 2004). These limited, offensive, and yet *believed* stereotypes have centuries-long roots in justifications

for American slavery and are a way for the dominant White American group to maintain power over African Americans (Steele, 2012).

A more subtle way in which White Americans maintain power over African Americans is through the daily, covert, and ambiguous art of the racial microaggression (Sue et al., 2007). Racial microaggressions can be destructive to people of color because of their ability to impair performance in various social environments and settings by creating inequities and draining the recipient's psychic and spiritual energies (Sue et al, 2007; Steele, 2012). The power of microaggressive acts and messages is in their invisibility to both the perpetrator and the recipient (Sue, 2005; Steele, 2012), and their ability to often leave the recipient wondering whether or not they actually happened (Sue et al, 2007). For African American adolescents, the experience of microaggressions is likely to happen on a profound basis in schools. Research suggests that many African American students experience microaggressions through invisibility in the educational environment, differential treatment by teachers, and the feeling of being stereotyped based on derogatory perceptions (Allen, 2010). Sue et al. (2007) call for the need for the enhancement and in-depth study of racial microaggressions in the study of systemic racism. Research might acknowledge more blatant forms of racism, but these more subtle forms are discounted because they cannot be proven, despite the long-term impact racial microaggressions can have on self-esteem, self-concept, and racial identity development (Steele, 2012). The experience of covert and overt racism in many settings and many U.S. systems significantly impacts the ability of African American adolescents to find and maintain positive images, messages, and models of African American identity and to form cohesive identities as proud members of this historically oppressed racial group.

Application to the Case of JC

In the case of JC, we see the very early stages of his African American adolescent identity development and, in particular, his racial identity development. JC's presenting problem of anxiety diminished over the course of our work together. When we first started to work together, he presented as so shy that he would hide in the bathroom for at least ten minutes before each session (which took place at his home). When pressed about what it feels like in his body when he knew that I was coming, he commented that he was sad that he did not have a "good" house and that he does not even allow his friends to come to visit because they all live in bigger houses and many of them live with both of their parents. Within the structurally racist system in which JC lives, messages about black property, family structures, and feelings of inferiority or being less than manifested in severe anxiety. The more JC offered information that illuminated the depth of these feelings of inferiority, the more I understood my "real work" as his therapist as needing to encourage positive identity development and positive racial group membership values. JC lived in low-income neighborhood where his family was the only black family in the apartment complex. He would often discuss the number of Latino people who both lived there and went to school with him and would suggest that his Latino peers could all be friends with each other, but he did not necessarily want to be friends with the other black students in his class because they are known for being "stupid and poor" and he did not want to be associated with them. JC's anxiety increased before any big assessment and sometimes left him unable to take assessments due to panic attacks. JC was in a special education program and had an IEP, despite how bright and naturally capable he seemed to me in my experience of him.

Viewed in light of stereotype or social identity threat, JC's anxiety before assessments, despite his knowledge of and excitement about the materials, seems to be an example of the underperformance that can accompany perceived threat (Kellow & Jones, 2008; Steele, 1997). JC's teachers would admit that he was able to demonstrate knowledge of the objectives being assessed, but they did not work around his anxiety and instead placed him in special education classes. Researchers have noted this tendency as a result of structural racism where teachers' preconceived notions and stereotypes of African American students lands African American males, in particular, disproportionately in special education classes or in disciplinary situations. JC's fear of participating in this negative stereotype and/or being grouped with peers in his racial social group ultimately compels him to reinforce those stereotypes despite his fear of doing so.

Similarly, JC's models of black masculinity have become more limited with this move to a predominantly white town. I noted in the case study material JC's fear of his father's physicality. JC is known in his family for being "too sensitive" and "too worried" or easily alarmed. Before visits with his father, JC experiences increased anxiety symptoms and near-panic attacks. JC's mother reports that JC's father's parenting style is one of "tough love" though he reports feeling uncomfortable with his disciplinary perspective (spankings, etc.), and that his father favors his younger brother (who is more athletic, tough, etc.). JC witnessed his father perpetrate domestic violence with his mother as the target and ultimately distanced himself from his father, whereas his younger brother became closer with his father. In ways in which he both does and does not understand, he has witnessed his family physically change at the hands of his father. His ultimate anxiety is that technology is going to takeover and everything will be destroyed. He experiences a milder version of Freud's annihilation anxiety where an individual

or collective is always facing imminent destruction or catastrophe. For JC, he fears catastrophe or destruction on an almost-daily basis.

JC watches a great deal of television and in light of the riots following the Ferguson non-indictment decision, the NYC non-indictment decision, and later the Cleveland non-indictment decision and the riots and protests that followed, JC obsessively watched coverage of the events and discussed with me his fears that people in school would be upset with him the next day for being black. Soon after that, one of the other African American boys in his school got into a physical conflict with another student and despite the fact that JC knew neither of them, he spiraled into a panic attack. JC is aware of and responsive or reactive to the many negative messages about what it seems to mean to be black and to be a black male. Due to the systematic nature of racism and his age, it seemed unrecognizable to JC that these were not the only ways of being and ways of identifying available to him and he experienced feelings of "otherness" and isolation both at home and in school. Twelve-year-old JC, who is only beginning to head into adolescence, is both running from and running towards these negative perceptions and his ability to build a positive identity and positive social identity is being critically challenged. Although JC did not explicitly create an alternative identity and did not explicitly reinforce all of the negative stereotypes he witnessed (Nadler, Harpaz-Gorodeisky, & Ben-David, 2009), he did find an interesting outlet in the gaming world.

JC's revelations about his SIMS family suggested that white families are inherently happier than other families. Although there is an option for race, even JC as the father in the SIMS family was a white man. JC would play the SIMS most days after school and almost obsessively took care of his "family" there. This could be read as a technological version of

creating an alternative identity wherein he might experience familial security and a sense that he

will be a man who is able to keep his family together instead of breaking it up the way his

mother reports his father as having done. This could also be read as a virtual manifestation of

stage two of racial identity development, the encounter, wherein African Americans might

express strong anti-black and pro-white sentiments (Cross, 2001).

Even the application of social identity theory to analyze JC's fear that people in school

might be upset with him because he is black and his decision to have a white family for his SIMs

family is better understood through the lens of critical race theory. At least three of Delgado and

Stefancic's (2001) five theories seem to be at play here. First, the normal science tenet of critical

race theory, which asserts that racism is ordinary not aberrational and permeates every level of

our society, can be used here to analyze both the blatant happenings of the media coverage of

riots after a highly charged non-indictment and JC's feelings that white families are happier. JC's

response to both circumstances, one a subtle feeling and the other an instigated and emotional

outpouring, demonstrates the intensity of racism's condition of permeating every level of society.

On one hand, white-over-color ascendancy manifests in the officer's non-indictment in the

killing of an unarmed young black man and the racialized and divisive media coverage that

followed. On the other hand, white-over-color ascendancy serves the purpose of foreshadowing

happiness or unhappiness in the family structure. The two instances pull together the psychic and

material purposes of racism and white-over-color ascendancy in ordinary, daily life that the tenet

illuminates.

Two other CRT tenets, social construction and differential racism feature as useful lenses

for understanding some of JC's inner processes. The social construction tenet asserts that race

and racism are products of social thoughts and construction and can be invented, manipulated, or retired when convenient (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Through the lens of society, to which JC seemed to be very much attuned, blackness had been manipulated to mean badness. JC's responses illustrate what it meant for him to take on the blackness and badness and the anxiety and catastrophic thinking this sometimes invoked in his world. The differential racism tenet proposes that the dominant society will often racialize minority groups in accordance with political currents. This tenet pulls in the negative messages received by media coverage and how that racism and racialization was the product of a political societal issue of the disproportionate brutality by police officers against black men in the U.S. Differential racism acknowledges intersectionality and anti-essentialism which suggest that no person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Race is often viewed in our society as a single, easily stated, unitary identity especially due to stereotypes which have been historically accepted by the dominant society. JC's experience seems to be that people will be upset with him because of his racial identity, despite the other identities that make him the complex person he (at some level) knows himself to be (gamer, intelligent, friendly, hardworking, etc.). CRT lays the groundwork for both placing JC in the context of his larger societal experience of racism and places racism in the context of JC's social interactions and perceptions based on the information available to him.

Here I argue that JC's anxiety was mostly a reaction or response to the social identity or stereotype threat that he has been experiencing for much of the conscious part of his life due to the effects of structural racism on his everyday lived experiences. I also argue that his experience of subtle and blatant racism, as demonstrated by the application of CRT to parts of

his case, challenges his ability to create a positive identity and cohesive sense of self. The dominant group has for centuries controlled and perpetuated the negative messages and stereotypes about people of color in the United States. His father is more than likely a victim of the negative impact of racism on the black psyche and JC has become another heir to social identity or stereotype threat. African American adolescents are bombarded with negative aspects of both group and individual identity and are required to actively make decisions about who and how they want to be and where they belong in a society that mostly tells them that their place is at the bottom of the United States' social hierarchy and that they are relegated to the role of perpetually subordinate "other". In the United States, it seems much easier to reinforce negative group identities and stereotypes rooted in structural racism than it is to break free. There is risk in associating with the African American racial group and risk in not doing so.

Strengths and Limitations

As mentioned in Chapter II, CRT and social identity theory provide a strong and comprehensive foundation for a discussion of the challenges of African American adolescent identity development. Working to understand this through a symbolic interactionist lens accounted for bringing in an individual case study and understanding the social and systemic structure of racism through individual interactions with other individuals and with society. CRT addressed and challenged the dominant ideology inherent in social identity theory by providing a social analysis of the everyday lived experience of racism in the worlds of people of color and the symbolic interactionist framework illuminated the individual experience of one African American youth (out of millions) as a way to start to understand individual internal processes as best we can. The full theoretical framework presented in this thesis--especially with the

involvement of critical race theory--is consistent with the social justice perspective valued by the field of social work and the commitment to anti-racism to which the program the author is pursuing her degree from aspires. Finally, the author's identity as an African American woman is a strength, in line with the voice of color tenet in CRT and promotes the ability of people of color to see and understand racial dynamics--in instances and institutions--that White people often do not.

This study has as many limitations as it does strengths. The author's racial identification and closeness to and investment in the community being analyzed here makes any objective analysis difficult. This study also uses definitive language around racism and oppression due to the author's commitment to challenge dominant ideologies and illuminate the pervasive and embedded condition of racism in the fabric of American society. The conceptualization of racial identity development presented here may be more applicable for African American adolescents who do not live in urban centers and predominantly black neighborhoods, as that population's experience of social identity and stereotype threat might manifest much differently with so much interaction with African American peers (in stark contrast to JC's world). Finally, the lack of research on internal processes for identity development and/or the interaction between mainstream adolescent identity development and racial identity development is a major limitation of this study. A greater foundation of empirical research on this topic would lend credibility to the theoretical application introduced in this thesis.

Applications for Social Work Practice and Research

This study has important implications for how social workers and therapists can conceptualize their cases. Clinicians should pay attention to the impact of race and racism on

their clients' presenting concerns. Work with clients of color should warrant an application of CRT or any other critical theories which challenge dominant ideologies and examine social structures to explore individual theories of behavior, personality, and mental health. Clinicians working with African American adolescents should examine racial identity development models to account for nuances and challenges unique to racially marginalized and oppressed populations.

Additional research could strengthen the body of literature addressing the impact of racism on African American identity development. Researchers would first need to examine the history and pervasiveness of racism in the United States and also the lasting effects of the peculiar institution of American slavery on the perpetual subordination of African Americans by the dominant White American group. It would be interesting for researchers to revisit social identity theory and the meanings of "in-group" and "out-group" in a way that would account for the very real power dynamics in our society. The intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality in particular might illuminate nuances in African American adolescent identity development in light of other forms of marginalization or oppression. Finally, future theorists may want to consider more ways that critical race theory can be applied to dominant liberal theories to highlight, even further, the condition of structural racism in the United States.

Conclusion

When I was first researching the Smith College School for Social Work, I was fascinated by the school's explicit commitment to anti-racism and started to imagine all of the "radical and revolutionary" research and practice I would do if only the school gave me a chance by admitting

me. This thesis was inspired by that same energy, though brought down to a more manageable size by the limitations of a thesis project.

The purpose of this theoretical thesis was to complicate our understanding of the already challenging and critical adolescent identity development by introducing racial identity development for African American adolescents and highlighting the negative impact of racism on all of the above. Racism has infiltrated every aspect of our world and people of color experience this widespread racism that situates us as a perpetual "other" and we experience it differently within our own racial groups. The History of Racism in the U.S. course that we are required to take demonstrated the long-term impact and embeddedness of racism in the fabric of our culture in a way that seemed to warrant significant and immediate action. The NASW methods of social practice challenges social workers to examine the interaction between individual and social environments and provided even more impetus for accepting the challenge set forth by the school's anti-racism commitment and the course's mission to produce agents of change who will work in the ways we can to eliminate all oppressions.

Though quite broad in its scope, this thesis still has many limitations. My greatest hope is that it might serve as a call to action for the social work profession--specifically researchers, therapists, and other social workers who might work with African American adolescents--to think critically about theory, practice, and intervention models and the ways in which they participate in dominant ideologies and therefore support structural racism. Critical race theory serves as an excellent model for combining theories to achieve more in-depth and complex understanding of practice that works for adolescents whose dominant form of oppression is racism. Racism is our country's severe mental illness and everyday that we do not work to

dismantle it and eliminate racial oppression we ignore the detrimental impact it has on the

everyday lives of people of color as individuals and as a collective. I challenge the social work

profession to keep learning, working with, and consciously creating practices, interventions, and

modalities and aim to dismantle racism, which, we must first acknowledge, is structural and

systemic and permeates all systems and social interactions.

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