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Role model development in young African American males : toward a conceptual model

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Christian Edward Luis
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in Young African American
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ABSTRACT

This theoretical study explores the impact of role models on the adolescent African American male identity development. The study examines the current vulnerable status of African American males in the United States and reveals how they are presently at an overwhelming disadvantage to lead fulfilling and productive lives. In order to understand the phenomenon, this study utilizes literature on general identity development, male identity development, and ethnic identity development, in order to investigate how African American males define themselves and how role models can impact their identity development. Since there is some evidence in current literature that imitation and modeling can indeed make a significant difference in the way that positive identity development occurs with African American males, this study also reviews literature on Social Learning Theory.

The study concludes that the inclusion of adult African American male role models would be beneficial in breaking the cyclical pattern that African American males are caught up in, and which often results in their involvement in crime, drug abuse, and incarceration. The study also concludes that the implementation of mentoring programs in schools, as well as other institutions that serve this population, may clearly have a positive effect on both their identity development and their life goals. This study further concludes that mentoring by individuals from their local communities, with whom the

youth find similarities, will be especially helpful. The presence of African American adult males in the lives of African American adolescent males will demonstrate to this disadvantaged population that the possibilities of success in this country are far more viable than they may otherwise believe, and that the negative stereotypes and images that are portrayed by the media in American society do not necessarily have to be applicable to them.

ROLE MODEL DEVELOPMENT IN YOUNG AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES:
TOWARD A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

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

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	4
II. METHODOLOGY.....	11
III. PHENOMENON.....	25
IV. IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT.....	37
V. SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY.....	55
VI. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION.....	73
REFERENCES.....	96
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: Role Models for African American Adolescent Boys: A Conceptual Model	104

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

People of color in the United States are perceived today as “devalued groups” (Sabine, Seidman & Allen, 2005). The stressors and lack of resources that place minority populations, especially African Americans, at a disadvantage, are well documented. African American teens, often surrounded by poverty in their communities, are particularly vulnerable to this disadvantaged status. By the time these adolescents reach ninth grade they are already developmentally two years behind their counterparts. Gang violence, crime, delinquency, drugs, and the lack of male role models in their lives make it difficult to break the cycle of poverty in which they are trapped (Day-Hairston, 2002). Many students do not stay in school past the tenth grade, at which point they either end up on the streets, in jail, or on the way to other such perils. As a result, internalized feelings of hopelessness often become embedded as part of their identities (Eckholm, 2006; Fitzpatrick & Boldizar, 1993; Smith, 2005; Williams, Stiffman & O’Neil, 1998). Present day institutional systems place these adolescents at an overwhelming disadvantage by not allowing them to have access to adequate health care, educational opportunities, or the other basic necessities that are needed to be successful in their attempt to attain the "American Dream" (Aronson, Whitehead, & Barber, 2003; Berkman & Blunk, 1992; O’Connor, 2006). Some studies have demonstrated that the presence of

role models in the lives of African American teens can assist in breaking them out of the cycle of poverty and hopelessness. Thompson (1994) posits that a strong racial identity that is reinforced by exposure to role models of their own ethnicity can help adolescent black males manage the many stresses and conflicts that may occur during the adolescent transitional period. Research supports the theory that adult black male role models are essential for this group, since they can be more easily identified with, and can therefore offer the support needed by black male youths (Holland, 1999). In one study, feeling connected to role models in an educational setting helped initiate positive change in an adolescent's decision-making ability (Tabi, 2002).

Most studies on role models for youth tend to focus on outcomes of the role model relationship, such as how the presence or absence of role models have contributed to increased self-esteem (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003; Odih, 2002). However, there has not been a systematic attempt to examine the literature about the role model relationship using two theory streams that are very relevant to African American adolescent development: the theories of identity development, and those of social learning.

This theoretical study will examine the complex connections between race, gender, identity development and social learning that define the lives of African American adolescent males in order to formulate a theoretical framework that illuminates the important place that role models can have in the development of African American teenage boys.

Social Work and the Literature

Previous studies that have examined the characteristics of role models for young African American men, as well as the behavioral needs for urban African American male adolescents, conclude that it is beneficial to incorporate family and community members into the lives of these adolescent children (Day-Hairston, 2002). The existence of mentoring programs in schools and churches that introduce role models into the lives of these adolescents is important to examine. The growing number of sport celebrities, and their influence on young men, both positive and negative, needs to be examined so as to determine how they might affect the attitudes and behaviors of African American adolescent males today. Further exploration is also needed of programs such as the “Rites of Passage” program at the Union Temple Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., which have used successful black males in the community as role models for black male adolescents (Rubin, Billingsley, Caldwell, & Howards, 2000).

As social workers, we have an obligation to focus on the difficulties and challenges that disadvantaged and at-risk populations face in their daily lives, and who some consider are becoming an "endangered species" (Woodrow, Linz, & Lord, 1993). Social workers have a responsibility to attend to bettering the needs of all people, specifically focusing on “empowering people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers, p.1). This study will reflect my responsibility as a social worker to contribute to a better understanding of the ways role models can shape identity and social learning for African American teenage boys.

The importance of this study lies in its contribution to a better understanding of the central place of role models in these adolescents' lives. It is hoped that educational systems, communities, social workers, parent and the adolescents themselves will benefit from this understanding. Without the exposure of positive role models in their lives, who is going to teach young adolescent males how to be responsible, how to treat women, or how to fight against the pressures and realities of discrimination, racism, and classicism?

Theoretical Orientation and Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between role models, identity development and social learning for African American male adolescents. In order to fully understand how role models impact African American males, several key theories of identity development and social learning will need to be explored first. This theoretical thesis will first examine the various psychological and sociological factors that have contributed to the present day status of African American males in this country today, and then by using both identity development and social learning theories, will put forth a conceptual model of role model development for African American teenage boys that draws on elements on these two important theoretical frameworks. It is important when considering this phenomenon that both a micro and a macro analysis is applied, so as to have a more complete understanding of this complex topic.

It is important to first gain a broad general overview of how identity develops during adolescence, so that there will be a well defined context within which to place the more specific theories of both gender and ethnic identity development. Adolescence is a pivotal time in an individual's life, since it is the last life stage before transitioning into adulthood. The theories of gender identity development and ethnic identity development

are extremely relevant, given the different issues that this population faces in both the nature of their family structures and their unique ethnic histories. The consequences of growing up in a household without a male parental figure will be addressed and examined through a gender identity lens. The effects of living in a society that has subjected their race to discrimination and prejudice will be examined through an ethnic identity lens.

Once the theories of identity development have been explored, social learning theory will then be used to help formulate a model that accurately applies to the phenomenon. The role of the environment, observation, and reinforcement, are important factors when considering the possible positive and negative impact that role models might have on the identity development of African American males. The model developed in this thesis will hopefully be beneficial in the evaluation of the potential benefits of bringing successful black males into the lives of African American male adolescents as role models.

Sequence of Chapters

In order to clearly develop a conceptual framework for this study, the different theoretical areas will be considered in separate chapters. After a brief introduction of the thesis, I will describe the methodology, the phenomenon, theories of identity development, social learning theory, and then present a synthesis and general discussion of the material. The following is a brief chapter outline:

In Chapter II, after first presenting literature that illuminates and discusses the relevant issues pertinent to the thesis topic, I will outline in detail why identity development and social learning theories are important to consider when formulating a model for the establishment of role models in the lives of African American adolescent

males. I will additionally identify the specific components of each theory that are especially helpful when evaluating and interpreting the phenomenon. After describing how the theories will be used to analyze the phenomenon, I will then discuss the strengths and weaknesses, as well as any potential biases that exist as a result of the methodology.

In Chapter III, I will present a thorough description of the present state of African American adolescent males in the United States. There will also be a summary of the pertinent literature that addresses this specific phenomenon, as well as descriptions of some of the institutions that presently use role models in their programs.

In Chapter IV, I will explore identity development theories. The theories of Erickson and Marcia will be examined first so as to gain an overall understanding of identity development. Afterwards, both gender identity development and ethnic identity development theories will be discussed so as to aid in the formulation of an accurate and culturally sensitive conceptual model.

In Chapter V, I will examine the evolution and general principles of social learning theory. I will then demonstrate how social learning theory is very useful in examining the effects of role models on the identity development of African American males.

In Chapter VI, after first summarizing the major conceptual theories, I will offer some suggestions on how they can be applied to the phenomenon described in Chapter III. This will enable me to create a conceptual model that could aid social workers in their work with this target population, and could be beneficial to school systems, parents, educators, and African American males themselves.

Having stated the purpose of this theoretical thesis, introduced the theories being used, and discussed the methodology, I will now present in Chapter II a detailed description of both the conceptualization of the phenomenon and the methodology that will be used in this thesis. This will be the first step toward developing a conceptual framework that will be beneficial to use when introducing role models into the lives of African American male adolescents.

CHAPTER II

CONCEPTUALIZATION AND METHODOLOGY

Conceptualization

Adolescence is a critical period in ethnic identity development for African American males. If there is a lack of understanding of this development, it will then be difficult to learn how to integrate positive role models into their lives. Two important dimensions of ethnic development are group esteem and ethnic exploration. People of color in the United States are perceived today as "devalued groups" (Sabine, Seidman, & Allen, 2005). The fact that African American teens are surrounded by poverty in their communities causes them to feel that they are second-rate citizens and that there will never be anything better in their lives. These internalized feelings then become embedded as part of their identity.

At the very time when African American youths are developing their ethnic identity, they are also being subjected to many different social, economic and discriminatory pressures, such as those resulting from early pregnancy. By becoming parents at such a young age, they are stripped of the traditional and "normal" processes that other, more advantaged teens go through during their adolescence. Studies have demonstrated that feeling connected to role models in an educational setting could help initiate positive change in an adolescent's decision making ability (Tabi, M., 2002).

Studies have also indicated that programs using mentors and counselors to provide more and better information to these young men and women can help them make sound and informed decisions. By doing this it will enable these adolescents to have a more positive ethnic identity development. For purposes of this study, the terms “role model” and “mentor” will be used interchangeably, since much of the literature uses both terms to mean the same concept.

All adolescents need good role models in their lives, but it is especially important for at-risk African American males, who some consider are becoming an "endangered species". Young children look to their primary caregivers as role models to understand the world around them. If African American male adolescents are going to be able to survive and be assimilated into today's society, it is going to be important for them to be exposed to those values and beliefs that govern societal norms. Since human behavior is learned through observational modeling, today's African American leaders need to understand that they have the potential and responsibility of positively affecting these young African American males (Woodrow, Linz, & Lord, 1993).

It will also be important to review literature focused on the general nature of role models and to examine role models for African American adolescents specifically. Additionally, knowledge of present day institutions working with African American adolescents that effectively utilize role models in their programs will supply important background material for this study.

There is presently a lack of research that explores and analyzes mentoring practices with African American adolescent males specifically with regard to how practices can affect both male identity development and ethnic identity development.

Future research that focuses on the social, political and cultural processes for this population, and how the mentoring can play a positive role in the development of both their ethnic and masculine identities, needs to be done if it is going to be possible for African American male adolescents to have a realistic opportunity to be part of the “American Dream” (Odih, 2002).

If this disadvantaged population is going to be able to realistically hope for a better future, they will need the support and encouragement from adults that are present in their lives, especially the teachers who are working in their local school systems. Only when the experience of attending a school that is equal in quality to those of the surrounding communities, is coupled with exposure to a wide range of role models who can convincingly present a varied list of opportunities, will these students truly believe that they have a chance to break loose from their present economic environment. These mentors can help students to recognize and strategize on how to obtain the skills that are necessary to succeed in the world today. In the absence of male role models from within the nuclear family, schools can compensate by supplementing high academic standards with individual motivation that is supplied by expert role models from the local community (Askew & Carnell, 1998).

The inequality that African American adolescent males face today has been superficially determined to be the result of failure to train and re-skill the members of their population so that they can achieve a higher level of social status and financial independence (Driver & Martell, 1998). Mentoring remains as one of the more ‘cost effective cultural mediators’ in providing disadvantaged groups with educational and social resources necessary for them.

Foucault provides yet another perspective on the present day educational system by focusing on questions of social control and power within the school (Hoskin, 1979). Foucault stated that discipline only serves to define individuals with terminology that is only relevant to their cultural background, and then through observations and supervision subjects them to continuous surveillance. The keeping of files on individuals that include assessments, evaluations and examinations, and the recording of their progress, one against another, against a comparative standard, only serves to “problematise” the students and to give them an identity as a “normalized” individual (Foucault, 1979). In an attempt to counteract this traditional approach to education, educationalists who are focusing on how the present day educational system is not providing African American youth with an educational experience that will benefit them focus on creating ‘culturally authentic’ learning practices that is geared to promoting positive black male identities (Roberts & Singh 1997).

Arguably the best mentors for our youth are people that reflect the young people they are mentoring. Mentoring African Caribbean men, who have experienced lives that involve being excluded from the mainstream economy, have been extremely successful and has resulted with the disadvantaged men making significant changes in their lives, when the mentors were local men who had experienced hardships in their own lives (Chronicle World, 1998). As noted in Chapter I, Thompson (1994) posits that a strong racial identity that is reinforced by exposure to role models of their own ethnicity can help adolescent black males manage the many stresses and conflicts that may occur during the adolescent transitional period. Research supports the theory that adult black male role models are essential for this group, since they can be more easily identified

with, and can therefore offer the support needed by black male youths (Holland, 1999). A successful template for mentoring will need to have many of the similarities of a nurturing parent, as the mentor “advises, guides and protects the young man’s transition into adulthood” (Levinson, 1978).

A positive mentoring experience that offers support and encouragement needs to be provided with an empathic perspective in order to overcome the challenges that are faced by oppressed groups like African American males. It is especially important to overcome the present day preconceived stereotype that individuals who are in need of mentoring are in some ways deficient, inadequately socialized, and lack self-respect (Philip, 2000). Mentoring that is positive in nature allows for the opportunity to replace the notion of mentoring being needed by people who have negative issues associated with being oppressed, to that of guidance and support in a culturally affirming environment (Noguera, 1997).

An additional problem is that existing literature tends to rely on description and the resulting recommendations, rather than to place mentoring within the existing social, political and cultural relations that surround the youth (Kerry & Mayes, 1995). A perspective that focuses solely on a cultural perspective will have a tendency to place more significance on pathology and the low level of functioning of the target population. From a social psychologists perspective, however, the emphasis will be on the cognitive processes involved as the target population develops its male and ethnic identities (Odih, 2002). It is critical that caring and responsible African American men are promoted as mentors for black boys from within communities because without this support and

guidance a life that revolves around crime and violence might easily be their only solution to a life without hope (Odih, 2002).

Previous research focuses on cultural aspects and the relationship to dysfunction and pathology with the cultural attributes of Afro-Caribbean students. Furthermore, social psychologists have focused on the cognitive processes involved in the development of black male identity. Neither perspective, however, offers a complete picture of the situation, or a possible solution, for although society is made up of groups of individuals, it is also true the individuals can't exist without being part of a society (Askew & Carnell, 1998).

A 2004 study of African American college students that examined the relationship between the presence (or absence) of role models and the resulting sense of their own identity, gives additional support to the importance of having role models who youth can relate to on a social and cultural level. In this study forty-four percent of respondents reported that their role model was from within the nuclear family, usually a parent, sibling, or grandparent. In this study twenty-three percent of the sample, reported that they had no role models, and nineteen percent stated that they had role models that were either athletic or entertainment figures. It is interesting to note that twelve percent of the remaining students chose themselves as their own role model (Bennett, Davis, Harris, Brown, Wood, Jones, Spencer, Nelson, Brown, Waddell, & Jones, 2004). The African American males who chose themselves as their own role model were predominately dark-skinned males. Research indicates that lighter skinned African Americans are considered to be less disadvantaged as compared to darker skinned blacks, as is indicated by their higher level of education, greater income potential, and overall higher socioeconomic

status (Celious & Oyserman, 2001). One might posit that light-skinned subjects might have a stronger and more supportive social and extended family network which will allow them to have role models outside of their self as compared to a small proportion of darker skinned black males. The darker skinned African American youth may eventually resort to having themselves as a role model as a means to compensate for their perceived low social status or value (Bennett et al., 2004).

Having role models that youth can relate to on all levels will lead to a higher quality of mentoring, since it is the quality of the mentoring that is critical, not just the presence of a mentor who may not be empathetic or understanding of the youth's environment. Indicators of a positive mentoring experience are a stronger sense of ethnic identity, higher levels of self-esteem, and a decreased involvement in drug use (Yancy, Siegel & McDaniel, 2002).

Although relationships have been found between father absence and delinquent behavior and emotional distress with African American adolescent males, it would be incorrect to say that black men do not play a pivotal significant role in the lives of their sons, even if they are not presently living in the same household (Chestang, 1972). There is also the question of whether this idea of an uninvolved and uncommitted father is just an unfounded stereotype of a social work system that has been historically dominated by white society (Earl & Lohmann, 1978). It is important to recognize that just because a male parent is not presently living in the household with his son, that one doesn't assume that he is not emotionally accessible to his son. It is always important to view clients in the framework of their own culture, and not to impose the very different culture of the white society upon them.

More adult males are involved in the lives of African American adolescent males than previous research would indicate. Forty-four percent of all participants reported that they had significant contact of at least once a week, with uncles, twenty percent with a grandfather, and seventy-seven percent with a cousin. Additionally, twenty percent of the participants reported that they had significant contact with a male neighbor, and eighty-four percent stated that there was a male in the neighborhood whom they regarded as a friend and that six percent felt that they had good contact with their mother's boyfriend (Earl & Lohmann, 1978).

Research also indicates that the relationship with the father was more important than even the mothers realized. Although seventy-six percent of the boys said that they would go first to their biological father for help, only five percent of their mothers predicted that that would be the case. The lack of understanding regarding whom African American youth look up to is further indicated by the fact that although the mother identified uncles as thirty-three percent influencing their son, the only eleven percent of boys themselves stated they would go to an uncle for help, indicating that the boys did not regard uncles as being quite as influential as their mothers expected (Earl & Lohmann, 1978).

It is important to note that the physical absence of the father from the home should not be taken as evidence that the father has little interest in, or contact with his family. Social workers should be supportive of efforts by mothers and sons to find alternative male role models in cases in which the father is both physically and psychologically absent from the home. Social work professionals should also encourage efforts to provide even greater male contact for children from broken homes through the

hiring of more male elementary school teachers and recreation leaders. More men in direct contact with young male children may permit still further identification with male models (Karunanayake & Nauta, 2004).

Role models may be especially important for a minority individual's career development. African Americans' long history of discrimination, and the resulting limited career options, may have created a deficit in self-esteem and led to a lower career goal aspiration (Hackett & Byars, 1996). Lent suggests that role models who have been successful in their own careers may serve as "contextual support, and could increase an individuals' self-efficacy and outcome expectation, thereby increasing self-esteem and the possibility of attaining higher aspirations in educational and career plans (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994). It is also possible that minorities who have been discriminated against for long periods of time may have internalized negative societal stereotypes that can possibly be dispelled by powerful role models of the same ethnicity. Assibey-Mensah (1997) Hackett and Byars (1996) also posited that minority individuals may especially benefit from observing and interacting with role models who have developed successful coping strategies for dealing with the bias and discrimination in today's society. In fact, there is empirical support for the positive effects of role model influences on racial minority student's academic performance and achievement related goals (Zirkel, 2002).

Unless an adolescent is able to identify with a role model, he will not be able to be positively inspired by that individual. Bandura (1986) observes that a youth's observation that a dissimilar person may succeed does not necessarily result in individuals feeling that they too can have the possibility to achieve the same positive outcome. This is further supported by Karunanayake & Nauta's (2004) study of 220

students from a midwestern college, where the majority of career role models identified by students were of their own race. This was true even among role models who were not members of their family. These seem to be clear evidence that dissimilar persons who succeed from time to time do not necessarily persuade the observers of their actions, that they too can attain similar outcomes from their efforts (Bandura, 1986).

Methodology

In order to investigate the interrelationships between identity, social learning, and role models in the lives of at-risk urban African American male adolescents, it is important to fully understand what is known about identity development, especially as it pertains to: 1) racial identity; and 2) gender identity. First, it is necessary to understand the fundamental theories of identity development. The theories of Erickson and Marcia are especially illuminating on this topic. It will then be possible to perceive more clearly how the theories of ethnic and gender identity can be used to further understand the overall identity development of African American males. These theories will provide the foundation for understanding how role models can play a factor in an African American male adolescent's determination of self-concept. Greenson's and Diamond's theories on the development of masculinity identity, and Cross's theories on African American identity development, will both be crucial to consider with my target population of at-risk African American adolescent males living in households that are headed solely by women.

Social learning theory as it was formulated first by Bandura and then by Marcia and by Diamond adds additional insights on how the presence of role models may help sculpt the identity development of African American males. The imitation and modeling

of individuals whom are respected by the observer, are key components to social learning theory, and are extremely relevant to this study. Social learning theorists stress the importance of having the opportunity for young people to learn by observation, and that individuals learn by imitating adults.

For a young black male who lives in a low-income community, the opportunity to observe a successful black adult male provides a chance for that young person to be exposed to a different type of life that he may not have previously considered possible for him to attain. For many black males who live in low-income environments, the internalized negative self-images provided by the media, when coupled with the lack of meaningful employment opportunities, provide little hope for change in their status quo. Social learning theory suggests that a role model can be a positive experience in an African American male adolescent's life, especially by giving individuals a "hands on experience" in the work force environment that they will soon be joining. It is important for young black males to have hope to receive respect from the society that surrounds them, as well as to have meaningful economic opportunities in their future.

According to social learning theory, the process of learning always takes place within a social context, that is, people learn from one another. The awareness of positive reinforcements or punishments can also have a significant impact on behavioral choices. According to social learning theorists, individuals are motivated to seek out positive reinforcement when they are making choices about possible behavioral changes (Ormrod, 1999). Social learning theorists also stress the importance of the environment in the learning process. The relationship between the environment and modeling is an especially

important relationship with this target population. The personality and identity of an individual should not be considered as being independent from their environment.

Individuals are much more likely to engage in behaviors that they consider, as a result of their previous experiences, to be “good”. At the very least, individuals need to consider their behavior as “justified”, if they are going to behave in a specific manner. Regarding behavior as “justifiable” is especially relevant when considering the learning process of African American youth. After being regularly subjected to acts of discrimination, and not being presented with the same opportunities in the work force as their white counterparts, African American males are especially prone to engaging in behaviors that are based on justification. According to social learning theorists, the longer individuals have been reinforced for a certain behavior, the more convinced an individual is that the outcomes of their behavior will never be different. In order to change behavior that has been negatively reinforced for such a long period of their lives, African American adolescent males will potentially require a longer period of positive reinforcement by the role models in their lives in order for new behavioral patterns to be internalized.

After separately considering the theories of identity development and social learning, it will be important to then link the two theories together in order to construct a model that accurately describes how role models can affect identity development for African American males. By first understanding identity development and the factors that contribute to how black males view themselves, and then considering the way individuals learn as presented in social learning theory, it will be possible to not only evaluate the

impact of role models on African American male adolescents, but also to predict what attributes future role models should have to most successfully serve this population.

My work at the Met Center in Providence, Rhode Island may have produced a methodological bias in my choice of the theories that were used in this study. The Met Center is a very unique educational institution where students are required to obtain internships with professionals from the local work force. The students have regular academic classes for three days of the workweek, but then participate in their internships for the remaining other two days. The internships provide these students with the opportunity to observe, evaluate, and then model an adult that has been successful, and whom they respect. By having a substantial time of their academic experience be taken up by the internship, it also allows time for significant positive reinforcement to occur from both their mentor and by other individuals that they encounter during their placement. The way that the Met Center experience mirrors the theory of social learning theory was a determining factor in my choice of using that particular theory in order to create a model that is useful when working with African American adolescent males.

My choice of using identity development theories was also influenced by my therapy work with several African American adolescent males at the Met Center. It became strikingly obvious from the very beginning of my clinical work there, that none of my clients from the Met Center had a male parental figure living in their household. Adding gender identity development theories, as well as ethnic development theories, to the general theories of identity development presented by Erickson and Marcia, therefore seemed to me to be a logical choice.

There are certain strengths and limitations in the overall plan of this thesis. Although the initial theories on identity and gender development were developed for the white majority, these theories do offer valuable background material that serves to clarify, and place into broader social context, the more specific and relevant theories on African American male identity development. The fact that social learning theories were also based on the white majority might also be considered a limitation in this study, however, the increasing use of role models in institutions that work with African American males does give some validity to those theories.

There are two other areas where limitations are potentially present in the approach to this study. The term “African American” is in reality a very broad term in our society, since there are many different ethnic groups that are often lumped together as “African American”. Future research may wish to break down the target population into more specific ethnic groups. The second area where there is the possibility of a limitation is with the debate over the importance of not having a male parental figure living in the household. Literature indicates that this may be less of an issue than was first believed, since recent studies have indicated that many fathers continue to be actively involved in their son’s lives, even after being removed from the immediate household environment.

Chapter III will both provide a detailed summary of the current status of African American males in the United States and describe the problems and issues that have placed this population in such a vulnerable position. After considering the specifics of the phenomenon, I will then describe programs that successfully use role models.

CHAPTER III

AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

“The combination of poverty, joblessness, despair and alienation are the social chemicals that bring the urban crucible to predictable eruptions of violence and a flood of so called social problems.” (Majors and Billson, 1992)

The Phenomenon

As a result of the countless years of injustice, discrimination, and the legacy of slavery, many of the basic necessities of life that the dominant white society in the United States takes for granted, have been consistently and systematically striped away from African Americans (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). It has been especially difficult for African American adolescent males to envision the possibility of a brighter future for themselves, as they confront the epidemic of inequality and injustice that surrounds them. Their feelings of hopelessness and despair are only reinforced by having to witness their white counterparts benefit from their own disadvantaged positions (Smith, 2005). Mental illness, higher levels of unemployment and lower standards of living have become part of their internalized identities. They also have higher levels of infant mortality, increased risk of being infected with the AIDS virus, and a greater possibility of being involved with, or witnessing, homicides. Elevated rates of suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, a greater chance for imprisonment, lower income potential, a lower life expectancy, limited

access to adequate healthcare, and fewer educational opportunities are all part of an impressive list of disadvantages and challenges that African American males face in their daily lives (Aronson, Whitehead, & Barber, 2003; Berkman & Blunk, 1992; O'Connor, 2006).

Although African Americans made up only twelve percent of the U.S. population in 1993, one study showed that forty-six percent of those arrested were African American. Fifty percent of all arrests for violent crimes were African Americans and African American males were five times more likely to be arrested than whites (1,429 African Americans per 100,000 vs. 274 white people per 100,000) (Williams, Stiffman & O'Neil, 1998).

African American males are three times more likely to be incarcerated than white males and African American males are also involved in, or witness to, multiple acts of violence on an ever increasing frequency (Fitzpatrick & Boldizar, 1993). The discrepancy in sentencing received by young black males, as compared to their white counterparts, is an indication of the way this population is being regarded by today's society. The longer sentences that are given to African American male adolescents by judges, as compared to those of women and older offenders, demonstrates how judges view male adolescent African Americans as being more threatening and dangerous to their society (Smith, 2005). Criminal records show that young black males are at a higher risk for being involved in future crimes. In 1998 forty-one percent of black male high school dropouts between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four were either in prison, on parole or on probation for a variety of crimes (Eckholm, 2006).

The relationship between environmental and behavioral risk factors for African American youth, and how specific environmental factors can lead to the involvement in violent behaviors, is important to consider when examining the present state of African American males. Williams, Stiffman & O'Neil's 1998 study in St. Louis of 796 adolescents between the ages of fourteen and seventeen, indicated that environmental variables were directly related to subsequent involvement in violent behaviors for African American youth. Additional studies demonstrated that factors such as exposure to violence, a deteriorating school system, negative peer environments, personal traumatic experience, posttraumatic stress, alcohol and substance abuse, were all predictors of future violent behavior for African American males (Williams, Stiffman & O'Neil, 1998).

Studies in Chicago have indicated that forty-five percent of youth witnessed more than one violent event (Bell & Jenkins, 1993), and another thirty percent had witnessed three or more events (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998). Structural characteristics, such as poverty, lack of mobility, and the social organization of a neighborhood can strongly influence how a family functions while living in high a risk environment (Gorman-Smith, Tolan & Henry, 1999). The relationship between family and neighborhood is further indicated by Furstenberg's 1993 study of parenting by single mothers. Furstenberg showed that living in a dangerous neighborhood often results in the family isolating themselves out of fear, which then prevents them from receiving help from potential support groups such as extended families and welfare programs. As the mother's sense of safety for family increased, her social supports were taken away (Sheidow, Gorman-Smith, Tolan & Henry, 2001).

“One legacy of slavery, and the sociopolitical restrictions in its aftermath, has been the diminished authority and presence of black men to fill traditional roles of provider and protector of the family.” (Smith, 1988, p.269)

During the last decade there has been an ever-increasing debate and dialog on the relevance and potential impact of the growing number of “absent” black fathers in the African American family (Anderson, 1999; Beaty, 1995; Leve & Fagot, 1997; Mandura & Murray, 2000). This phenomenon is especially important to address when African American males become fathers during their adolescent years. Adolescent fathers can still play an important and vital role in their child’s growth by giving extra support to their children, even when not living in the household. The stereotype of irresponsible and uninvolved black adolescent fathers has been interpreted by the dominant white society as a result of lack of interest, and has resulted in the development of social welfare programs that predominately only serve single mothers (Smith, 1988).

The present day status of the African American male is a result of the historical lack of opportunity in their lives, and the subsequent view of a constricted self in their environment. This constricted view of self subsequently leads to African American males developing limited life plans (Fiske, 2003; Roy, 2005). The result is the eventual formation of a cyclical pattern of not believing that there is hope for a better future, and therefore not attempting to set positive goals for themselves. Their limited life plans can result in adolescent fatherhood as a means of improving their self-esteem and sense of importance. Adolescent fatherhood then perpetuates the cycle. With fewer opportunities

of success in the workforce of today, black men are at a far greater risk of feeling despondent about their future (Fiske, 2003).

The historical restriction of opportunity within conventional institutions means that black adolescent males are forced to find alternative ways to attain positive sense of identity in their adulthood. The lack of viable alternatives results in the perception of a self that is unable to succeed in their environment by traditional means (Bayos, 2002). This can create a deficit in self-esteem and lead to the destruction of their dream for a better future. Involvement in drug related activities, as well as other illegal enterprises, can often seem to be the only way out of their present situation. Some cognitive theorists have shown that human behavior is affected profoundly by the anticipation of future events (Smith, 1988). Very often black male adolescents have a limited vision of their future and may view fatherhood as one of the few viable ways to achieve a sense of achievement in their adulthood.

The family structure of African Americans has long been a focus of attention when evaluating “problem behavior” in African American adolescent males (O’Connor, 2006). There is data that indicates that the absence of fathers in households can cause higher levels of delinquency, alcohol, drug and tobacco use, lower self-esteem, and leaving school before graduation (Ensiminger, Kellum & Rubin, 1983; Steinberg, 1987). This research however has been focused primarily on white upper-middle class families (Barber & Eccles, 1992).

Research on family roles within black families, however, continues to be limited to date. Research by McLanahan (1985) did find that the high school dropout for African American adolescent males was related to the absence of fathers in African American

families and not for white families. Partridge & Kotler's study (1987) posits that adolescents living in homes without fathers have poorer psychological and behavioral outcomes as compared to youth that live in stable family constellations. Farnsworth (1984) and Ensiminger (1990) could not, however, find conclusive evidence that family structure can cause an increased risk of delinquency among low-income urban fifteen-year-old African American youth.

There have been several studies that focus attention on the relationship of family structure and psychosocial outcomes in African American adolescents. What has been left out in the equation, however, is how extended kinship can play a significant role in African American families (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). Most studies compare and contrast white mainstream America directly to African American families, but research within the same ethnic groups is needed in order to give a more accurate and culturally sensitive picture of the African American family (Jackson, Tucker & Bowman, 1982).

A study by Maton & Zimmerman (1992) focused on African American youth that didn't complete high school. In the study of 254 African American male adolescents from an urban city on the east coast who were living in single mother households, there was no indication that these adolescents were living in more stressful environments than youth living in more "normal" or traditional family environments. The study also posits that there was often more parental support present in single-mother households than in homes that consisted of other family constellations. Single mothers can actually compensate for the absence of fathers by offering greater support to their sons, and by utilizing an extended family network. Other studies also confirm that influences outside the house

can play a vital role in the well-being and health of African American youth (Hogan, Hoa & Parish, 1990; Taylor, Chatters, Tucker & Lewis, 1990).

There is the myth in the dominant white society that the absence of a father in the household results in a lack of communication and involvement with their sons. It has been reported that youth who did not live with their fathers still received support from their fathers and that two-thirds of youth reported the primary role model in their lives. This study confirms that the absence of fathers does not indicate that there are any psychological or physical effects in the youth's lives (Maton & Zimmerman 1992).

There is an assumption that particular family structures serve the same purpose and meaning in both white and African American cultures. A key element that is not considered when studying African American families is kinship care that white families do not always rely on. When culturally relevant factors such as kinship care are considered this may help to explain the influence of family on adolescent development (Allen, 1978; Ogbu, 1981). When studying African American families, the traditional nuclear family should not be weighed as heavily because of the different types of family constellations that make up many African American families (Zimmerman, Salem & Maton, 1995).

"Its time to move from words to deeds and work to save our most vulnerable population." (Smith, 2005, p. 26)

Statistics illustrate that African American males in this country are suffering tremendously from the lack of equal educational opportunities. Although the assumption amongst educators is that all students should have the right to be taught by qualified

teachers in well-supplied facilities, the reality is that graduation rates for African American and Hispanic males are decreasing. Today's educational system is not meeting the needs of the African American populations (Garibaldi, 1992; Gibbs, 1988; Macleod, 1987; O'Connor, 2006). Fewer than half of black males receive high school diplomas in this country. In the school year 2000-01 African American males represented 8.6 percent of all public schools nationally but they represented forty-one percent of the special education population. Recent statistics show that twenty-two percent of African American male students are expelled during the academic year, and another twenty-three percent are suspended (Smith, 2005).

In the metropolitan areas of the United States, it is estimated that fifty percent of African American males drop out of high school before graduating. The fact that it is more likely that a black male will receive his GED from prison than graduate from college, only serves to underline the dire circumstances of the African American male in the educational system that is presently in place. As this human tragedy continues to happen, the public schools across the nation have done little to introduce improvements to the educational environments in the urban communities that these adolescents live. Smith (2005) states that simply pointing out the achievement gap does not provide a solution that will enable African American male adolescents to break free from their limited opportunities. The inventing a label for the situation will not in itself level the playing field for the African American adolescent male, and one can only assume that the public lack of outrage has only compounded the problem. Research supports the theory that our present educational philosophies and approaches are "leading to an educational genocide of our most vulnerable students" (Smith, 2005, p. 28).

The Supreme Court's decision in *Brown vs. The Board of Education* is always held up as a landmark in the African American's struggle for equal education. The statistics noted above however, demonstrate that although the inequality and injustice that African Americans have had to endure for hundreds of years may have been addressed in that court case, it is clear that this remains a significant problem today. The lack of qualified teachers, insufficient and outdated technology in the science labs, few or no advanced placement courses, and poor teacher to student ratios are everyday realities of the black urban schools, and these conditions are not being addressed by the politicians who have the ability to create change (Smith, 2005). The 2004 Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, "Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis," reports that only fifty percent of all African American students will graduate from high school. The prospect for African American males is even more dismal; only forty-three percent of African American males will graduate.

In California, although the overall high school graduation rate was approximately seventy-one percent, it was fifty-six percent for African Americans. While California graduates almost three-quarters of the white male students, they are failing to educate their black boys. Urban districts in New York, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Chicago, and Tampa have graduation rates for black boys that are about half those of the rates in California (Smith, 2005).

The effect of athlete role models on teens is an especially important area to investigate. Studies have illustrated that professional athletes can directly, or sometimes indirectly, influence the attitudes that these youth have and what is important to them (Bush, Martin & Bush, 2004). "When I take my kid out and hit him ground balls at

shortstop, he wants to be Derek Jeter. He doesn't want to be me. So any professional athlete who tells you he's not a role model is full of baloney" (p.108). If teens watch an athlete make a poor decision, there is a greater chance that this action will be replicated in these young men's lives. In my last placement, at an alternative high school in Providence, Rhode Island, most African American males wore the newest Jordan shoes and clothes because of the influence that a professional athlete had had on them. It is critical to now examine how that same type of influence could be used to be address the issues facing the communities of at-risk African American males. It will also be important, however, to consider the role and importance of peer pressure as a factor in determining life style choices of the target population.

It is especially important to examine how young people define their role models and how they perceive the older people in their lives. Students have the need to be loved by others, the need for someone to listen, and the need for acceptance. Teens also feel that teachers, counselors, and parents help them the most to meet these needs. Studies indicate that caring is a crucial element of programs in institutions that are the most successful in working with young people (Lawrence, Jones, & Smith, 1996). Although adolescents need love from their primary caregivers, they also look to teachers and counselors for further role modeling.

Programs that successfully use role models

Most studies on role models for youth tend to focus on outcomes of the role model relationship, such as how the presence or absence of role models have contributed to increased self-esteem. Previous studies that have examined the characteristics of role models for young African American men, as well as the behavioral needs for urban

African American male adolescents, conclude that it is beneficial to incorporate family and community members into the lives of these adolescent children.

It will be very helpful to look at existing programs in educational and other institutions that utilize role models and to then evaluate the effect of these programs on adolescents. The evaluation of a drop out prevention pilot program that was completed in a community of predominately African Americans in a midwestern city concluded that the ability to develop close relationships with adult tutors, who were involved and cared about the success of their students, decreased the drop out rate in schools significantly (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). "Students reported that they liked meeting African American role models who encouraged them to be hopeful about their own future and to be optimistic about life's possibilities" (p. 3). These students gained a better appreciation of their education and thought of the school as a stable, caring environment, which in essence gave them a sense of belonging.

It is important that teens can develop different strategies that will improve their decision-making processes and therefore reduce disciplinary reactions in school settings. Carledge and Middleton state that "the dynamic interaction between race and poverty doubly jeopardizes urban African American adolescents who misbehave and leads teachers to make more negative attributions about infractions committed by African Americans than their other race and gendered peers" (Day-Hairston, 2002, p. 1). Other studies indicate that it is beneficial to incorporate family and community members into the lives of these adolescent children. By utilizing school counselors, close relationships are established that "exude warmth, nurturing, trust and personal respect" (Day-Hairston, 2002, p.3). The importance of including African American male role

models in the process needs to be a primary goal of future mentoring programs.

Mentoring programs that help to pair students with role models within the community are especially helpful as an early intervention tool (Day-Hairston, 2002).

Another institution that has been supportive in helping adolescents overcome adversities by using role models has been the black church. It was reported in a recent study that 176 out of 635 churches in the northeastern part of the United States offer at least one program for adolescents living in low-income environments (Rubin, Billingsley, Caldwell, & Howards, 2000). The purpose of this study was to evaluate the nature and success of youth programs being offered by black churches, and to identify specific churches that offered adolescent programs that focused on the most salient issues in the lives of these black teenagers. The "Rites of Passage" program at the Union Temple Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. was used as an example of a successful program that used successful black males in the community as role models for black male adolescents. In the African American community the church has been the primary institution practicing a positive role in black family life. Black churches are actively assisting families in socializing their children and strengthening family life (Rubin, Billingsley, Caldwell, & Howards, 2000).

Chapter IV will consider the different factors in identity development for African American male adolescents and how they contribute to their own understanding of who they are as individuals. Furthermore, a general overview of identity development, masculine identity development and finally African American identity development will also be explored in order to create a culturally and sensitive conceptual model for future research.

CHAPTER IV
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THEORY

Introduction: General Identity Theory

To fully understand how African American adolescent males define and describe role models in their lives it is helpful to first examine identity development theory in general. By examining different theories of identity development collectively, the nature of role models in the lives of my target population of at-risk African American male adolescents can then be put into a societal and cultural context.

Identity is the core of a person's existence. It serves as the mechanism for people to make sense out of their experiences and environment, as well as to communicate those experiences to those around them (Josselson, 1987). A person's identity is shaped and defined by such questions as: what matters to a person, what goals does a person decide to pursue, how does a person want others to think of them, what does a person truly believe in, what guides a person's actions, and what are the important values to that person (Josselson, 1996). People define who they are and what they consider to be important by exploring and discussing these questions and then applying them on a personal level. Either consciously or unconsciously, identity development is always an individually unique process that takes place within an interpersonal and cultural context

(Collins, 2001).

Identity is also the nucleus or core of a person's being, even as change continues to occur for that person. There constantly remains a particular set of characteristics which embody and define each individual and which sets them apart from others in a group. Identity is a combination of the roles, beliefs, and values that work together in order to create a person that is uniquely different from another (Collins, 2001). Josselson (1996) gives the example that identity is like a tapestry in which each strand woven together in multiple layers results in an entire piece of work.

The development of a person's identity takes place in an interpersonal context in which an individual figures out who they are and who they are not, by comparing themselves to others in their social setting. This comparison to others helps each individual to compare what goals and values they have in common with the people in their culture, as well as to determine and contrast what is unique about them as an individual (Josselson, 1996). It is becoming increasingly clear that a person's culture plays a central role in identity development. A person's perceptions of their society's shared cultural beliefs, goals and attitudes collectively impacts a person's identity by either having them adopt those ideals, or by having them resist and reject them as part of their own identity.

For African American adolescence males such as those living in the south side of Providence, Rhode Island, there are many shared common threads that work together to form their individual identities. It may consist of the negative images that result from the

general lack of resources, such as not having access to adequate health care and education, or the feeling of continual oppression that is a result of not having an equal opportunity to progress and succeed in the dominant white society that surrounds them. Their identities will be based on what they experience and value in their respective local communities, as well as what the larger society believes to be important to them (Taylor, R.L., 1989).

Since African Americans in the south side of Providence are predominately low-income, their struggling to maintain adequate housing causes them to internalize their daily struggles, and then these struggles become a part of their own identity. These internalized feelings of hopelessness can result in the development of poor self-esteem, as well as the lowering of their expectations for what they may reasonably expect out of life. Other negative consequences can include substance abuse issues, involvement in gang violence, and domestic disputes within their African American families, which include a significant number of single-family households where the mother is the primary caregiver.

Any identity that is examined must be identified with a particular ethnic or cultural group. Each person uniquely defines their own identity based on not only where they live and what their environment is, but also what they believe to be important. In the same way that Josselson states, "I am a woman, but my identity as a woman is my unique way of being a woman in the culture in which I live" (Josselson, 1996, p. 30), an African American adolescent male in Providence Rhode Island will develop a sense of identity that is sculpted and defined by the culture that he lives in.

Historically Erik Erickson has been known as an icon in the development of theories of identity development. Erikson's Eight Ages of Man, which outlines a psychosocial timetable that is similar to Freud's drive theory, is often thought of as the foundation of identity development theory. Erickson's Identity vs. Role Confusion stage focuses on the adolescence years of 11 to 18. During this stage an adolescent constantly battles with their own self-acceptance and their acceptance by others. An individual's identity is also based on the processes that exist within the group identity and they are almost consumed with who is "in" and who is "out". Adolescents often are in a state of "suspended morality" as they define personal ideologies based on values that differ from their parental figures. The development of an adolescent's identity can only be truly understood when it is placed in the context of the sociocultural and historical context in which the adolescent is living (Berzoff, Flanagan & Hertz, 2002).

The goal of adolescence is to gain a sense of stability of the self which must match the individual's past, present and future. Adolescents struggle with defining themselves in relation to their surrounding environments. "Establishing identity involves a synthesis of childhood self-images with present self-evaluation and future ideals" (Widdick, Knefelkamp, & Parker, 1978). Erickson also highlights the importance of a person's relationships in the external world that surrounds him as being a significant contribution to the process of self-definition. Erickson (1980, p. 109) states that identity "connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself or self sameness and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others."

Erickson (1980) additionally poses a theory that even in a disenfranchised culture an adolescent's identity is influenced and shaped by their environment. Erickson's work with the Sioux Indians, and my target population of disadvantaged African American at-risk males, have many similarities. As Erickson points out, just because an adolescent is socially or economically disenfranchised does not mean they should be seen as deviant. If they were seen as committing pathological behaviors such as truancy or passive aggression, it is important to note that these are behaviors in response to the disruption of their ongoing identity development and the community that surrounds them (Berzoff et al, 2002).

Erickson believes that each developmental stage depends on the successful completion of the previous stage and that each stage occurs in a predetermined order under a certain time frame. The task and completion of each developmental stage consists of resolving a crisis in order to continue to move forward developmentally. "Crisis is used here in a developmental sense to connote not a threat of catastrophe, but a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential" (Erickson, 1968, p. 96). If individuals fail to complete a developmental stage, identity confusion can be the result.

James Marcia, on the other hand, focuses on crisis and commitment as the main principals in his theory of identity development, although it was based on Erickson's work. Crisis for Marcia refers to a time period of decision-making, where other alternatives and options are tried and explored. It is a time that new ways of imagining

ones own identity are considered and even “tried on for size.” Coming to Commitment for Marcia occurs when making choices about values are determined when the individual is settling on a self-definition. The extent of resolution of the identity is determined by whether crisis and commitment had been fully experienced in the development of an individual’s identity (Collins, 2001).

In place of Erickson’s Eight ages of Man, Marcia (1980) formulated four identity status types: Foreclosure, Identity Achievement, Moratorium and Identity Diffusion. Marcia’s Foreclosure status is comprised of individuals who, although they have committed to values, beliefs, and ideas of their childhood without examination, they have not experienced a period of exploration. These individuals fulfill their life according to previous expectations from external forces and by holding onto family traditions. Individuals in the Identity Achievement status, however, have experienced crisis periods and have questioned whom they are and have made a commitment about who they will be in the future. An individual in the Moratorium status has yet to discover and define the “right” choices for themselves but have committed to and are involved in a state of exploration. Finally, when an individual has not experienced either crisis or commitment, nor engaged in exploration or are concerned about exploration, are considered by Marcia to have an Identity Diffusion status. These individuals are characterized as, “taking one day at a time.”

All four statuses signify different levels of identity resolution, but are not developmental stages, as in Erickson’s Eight ages of Man, because they do not follow a

linear hierarchical pattern. Marcia would consider identity Achievement, to be a greater level of identity resolution. However it should be noted that they are not considered completely stable either (Marcia, 1966).

Identity development is also the process during which people make choices and decisions that eventually result in self-definition. According to Josselson, “it is a simultaneous negotiation of deciding who one is and who one is not” (Josselson, 1996). This process is slow and unique to that person and their particular situation and there are many different factors that contribute and influence the process of making choices and decisions that include, personality structure, childhood conflicts, cultural norms, and family dynamics (Collins, 2001).

Adolescence is also a time for the exploration of different identities during the process of developing and defining an adolescent’s individual and unique identity. In Josselson’s research on feminist identity, he furthers this idea by theorizing that the foundation for an individual’s adult identity forms during late adolescence. Their identity development, however, does not end at this point of his or her life, since growth is constantly occurring throughout the course of their life as their identity is always reexamined and revised as different experiences occur (Josselson,1987). The process of growth and revision affects identity by expanding it without completely changing it. A particular constancy occurs in identity and remains during this shift, which then provides continuity during the revisions.

While Erickson posits a very basic and fundamental understanding of identity development, it is clear that Marcia and Josselson have utilized Erickson's concept of identity development and have taken it to the next level. Erickson poses a structured approach to identity development by creating a linear path, Marcia and Josselson create a unique process in which there is the ability to move back and forth between what they call statuses rather than stages. It allows for a less rigid formulation since other influences and factors can then contribute to the evolving identity formation. In other words, an individual will experience many environmental influences that have the capacity to change and shift a person's identity, where as Erickson limits the ability for uniqueness by creating more of a linear process

Although it is helpful to be aware of the important contributions of Erikson and Marcia to identity development theory, it is also important to consider the identity development theories that focus specifically on masculinity identity and ethnic identity. The identity development theories of Erikson and Marcia were mostly based on the life experiences of the white middleclass society, and are therefore not sufficient to understand the unique identity development process for a disadvantaged at-risk African American adolescent male living in a household that is headed solely by a female.

Gender Identity Theory

How do boys establish a masculine identity in the absence of a father, or other male figure? Michael Diamond addresses this issue and formulates an alternative to the normative model of male identity development that was initially posited by Greenson. (1968, p. 372) who states that starting in infancy, boys develop a feminine pole or

predisposition that was a result of a “primitive symbiotic identification with a mothering person.”. By the time boys are 2 years old, Greenson theorizes that they have already established a primary femininity. For boys to achieve a masculine gender identity, Greenson believed that they had to first disidentify from their mothers in order to be able to counteridentify with their fathers. Furthermore, in order for the boy to individuate from their mother, he determined that boys needed to actively reject, and even cast aside their feminine identifications, if they were going to be able to gain a secure sense of their own masculine identity.

Greenson (1968) suggests that the success of the boy’s identification with being male depends on his ability to disidentify from his mother. The question to be answered in my research, therefore, is: How is it possible for male adolescents being brought up in a household without a father to disidentify from their mother in order to develop their own sense of masculinity when there is no male figure in their household to counteridentify with?

Diamond has indicated that in several studies there are indications that boys will not only move emotionally away from their mothers, but that they will actually move physically away from their mothers and toward their fathers, or to some other male role model. In African American families, where there is an absence of the father, perhaps the presence of another male figure would be sufficient to create the stable male identity that Diamond speaks of. According to Greenson, the father’s active presence is necessary to bring about the needed maternal disentanglement. Once more, one has to ask how this is going to occur for African American adolescents that are being raised in households without the presence of the father.

Diamond (2003) questions Greenson's theory that active rejection and separation from a maternal presence is actually necessary in order for a young male's psychological development to occur. He also questions whether it necessary for a boy to create a mental barrier against his desire to maintain his dependent relationship with his mother, who is his primary source of satisfaction. Furthermore, he also questions whether the counter identification process needs to take on the qualities of a struggle or conflict, and where the final identification with the father will necessarily have to lead to a "heightened phallic narcissism caused by their father's contemptuous, devaluing attitudes toward women" (Diamond, 2003, p. 362). In this case the resulting defensive masculinity is manifested in the painful loss of dependency and love and an accompanying overwhelming envy of his mother.

Diamond's less conflictive theory of male identity development is more applicable to African American boys being raised by single mothers. Diamond proposes a normative form of gender identity development and emphasizes a progressive differentiation rather than an oppositional differentiation. He posits that masculine gender identity needs to be based on a father, or surrogate father figure, and a mother who willingly recognizes and even affirms her son's developing maleness. Diamond proposes a triad relationship composed of the son, a watchful and somewhat protective father, and a fully attuned mother who all work together to diminish the difficult and sometimes traumatizing process of the separation-individuation stage that the young boy is experiencing.

Freud (1921) believed that the father's role was extremely important during the gender identity development of a son, especially during the beginning relationships

between the mother, father and son. How can an African American male, without a male role model in his life, be able to separate from his mother who does not have a husband to be aligned with as she attempts to maintain an ongoing and consistent presence in her son's life? A pre-oedipal father has the ability to hold his son's defensive tendencies somewhat in check as he attempts to disengage from a mother, who by her nature is unable to affirm her son's maleness. This leaves the adolescent male in a type of limbo with no male figure to help him organize and develop his gender identity.

Instead of creating an oppositional counter-identification with the symbolic father against the mother, as Greenson proposes, the boy is able to develop a reciprocal identification with the father, or a father figure. The result of this more organic and complimentary relationship in the triad relationship that Greenson proposes creates a unique and secure sense of self for the son. The resulting mutual bond with another person who is in many ways similar to the self, but who is still capable of being independent and outside one's control has also been described as "mutual recognition" by Benjamin (1988). The father's presence is critical in regards to his son's development if the son is going to be able to go beyond the phallic narcissistic position. The internalizing of a relationship with an admired man results in "a genital paternal imago being established which than results in a healthy and fluid masculine gender identity" (Diamond, 2003, p. 373).

Diamond (2003, p. 374) states, "The underpinning for a boy's achievement of a healthy masculinity is founded upon a secure and involved attachment to both mother and father (or surrogate)". Therefore single-parent African American households headed solely by women are excluded from this theory because of the lack of a male figure that

completes the triad relationship described by Diamond. Diamond has theorized that the development of male masculinity is a relational process that occurs when both male and female identifications are involved in the boy's life. Furthermore, he focuses on the mother and father's unconscious and conscious relationship with their boy, and one another, in order to better examine the nature of the boy's unique identifications and subsequent sense of masculinity. It is in the security of his attachment to his mother, and the mother's capacity to recognize both her own and son's subjectivity, that are both critical pieces in understanding a boy's attachment-individuation process.

When one begins to examine the possibility that the way an adolescent from the dominant white society develops identity might be different from how an African American develops their identity, the theories of William James are very enlightening. James (1890) considers a person's identity to be the sum of "content", that is what one knows about one's self, and "process", that is the cognition, motivation, and attentional processes. The understanding of both of these aspects of the self is critical since they work together in developing a sense of a person's identity. Content and process work hand in hand to help a person decide who he is and where he belongs. James believes that the self is a cognitive structure that acts as both a mediator and organizer of everyday experiences as it regulates affect and then channels motivation.

The sense of self-concept becomes an important part in the making of everyday choices that are so critical for adolescents. It is during the adolescent years that a youth begins to create an outline of the self they will become as an adult and it is the choices that they make at this pivotal time of their lives that will then result in either negative or

positive consequences later in their life. If an African American male adolescent drops out of school, it will dramatically increase the likelihood of unemployment and even delinquency. The choice of staying in school, however, improves the possibility of becoming a permanent member of the labor market and being able to have increased future earnings.

Ethnic Identity Theory

For African Americans, the developing sense of identity for an adolescent is going to include both a personal identity that is independent of their cultural and ethnic background, and a racial component that is centered on what it means to them to be an African American living in a society that is dominated by whites. On one hand they belong to a group that is unique in its traditions and heritage, but on the other hand they also belong to a larger society that has a much more individualistic foundation and has negative stereotypes of African Americans.

Research on African American identity has historically focused on content that centered on the issues of feelings of satisfaction with ones position in life vs. depression and of competence vs. inability. In order to have a positive identity, strong and positive connections within the black community, coupled with feeling competent, have always been the measuring sticks. Past studies have always focused on that connectedness and the sharing of a common fate, as well as having a positive sense of their heritage and history, and yet also being aware of racism and negative stereotyping within their identity

development. Historically, a positive identity has not been related to success in school and involvement in the white society that they live in. (Harrison, 1998).

Rather than accept an “outsiders” view, that is an interpretation of their identity from a white perspective, it is important to focus on an “insiders” perspective, or how do the people within their ethnic group interpret and define their own identity. From the perspective of an African American, not only are the majority of people in their everyday life most likely to be black, many in their age group do not stay in school. These adolescent males are going to be painfully aware of unemployment realities, increased crime, as well as other forms of stress that are so predominant in their social setting. These disadvantaged African American adolescents need to be able to make sense of how and why so many people within their social group appear so badly off. This is especially true in the inner-city schools like the Metropolitan Career and Technical Center in Providence Rhode Island that has a significant population of African American youth.

Studies indicate that positive interactions within ones ethnic group can have positive results in identity development such as increasing their sense of self-esteem, having less emotional stress, and less incidents of delinquent behavior. A more grounded racial identity can also result in reduced risks of depression. When a person feels more connected to their community they will have a more positive sense of their roots and an increased sense of belonging. This will then have the positive results of having diminished feelings of isolation and desperation.

A sense of awareness of racism is also an important part of ethnic identity development since the awareness of this provides a non self-denigrating explanation for failures and therefore limits excessive self-blame. All these factors work together to provide a greater sense of rootedness for the individual. Although it is important for African American youth to know where they came from and to feel a part of their cultural community, it is also important for them to have an understanding and awareness of the negative responses from those other groups who may expect less from them because they are black (Adams, Abraham & Markstrom, 1987; Shooter-Gooden, 1999).

Given the focus of past research on the relationship between black identity with poor self esteem, feelings of vulnerability to stereotyping, and an identity that is based on being oppositional to the white dominant culture, it is not surprising that research on the effect on identity of school environments has consistently focused on under-achievement rather than school success. There are, however, increasingly more histories of African American youth who have succeeded in school. These individuals have in many cases contributed their success to their parents, or other role models, by instilling in them that being a good son or brother went hand in hand with being a successful student. These successful black youth reported that it was their relationships with positive role models, both parental and non-parental, that resulted in their success and their belief in the possibility for future successes.

Several theories, however, point out that there can be in-group boundaries established that might result in the policing of ethnic mixing and therefore the

development of ethnic identity. It is not uncommon for a person in a group who affiliates themselves with the dominant white culture, or who engages in their activities, to be sanctioned by their own ethnic group. This may result in cultural inversion or viewing conventional successes and achievements as not black and even as threatening one's blackness. A youth that has feelings of connectedness with the black community and its heritage, has an awareness of racism, and also has a view of achievement as being an integral part of being African American, is better off in succeeding at school. They also have a more limited risk of depression (Oyserman, Gant & Ager, 1995). An African American youth who views their performance in school as actually being linked to being African American result has a higher percentage of sustained efforts in school and therefore will have better school outcomes, especially if the other components are connectedness and awareness of racism are present

Cross's (1971) model for African American identity development proposes the existence of five progressive stages in the process of securing positive black identity. Similarly to Marcia's model of identity development, Cross's model allows for people to move back and forth between the stages without having to, "complete" each stage before progressing forward to the next.

His first stage of "pre-encounter" includes individuals who view race and ethnicity as irrelevant to their lives and whose main goal is to become totally assimilated into the white dominant society that surrounds them. The emphasis in their lives is highlighted by their individual accomplishments and not by their existence as part of a group that has

a shared experience. If an individual experiences a crisis, or some other significant event in their life, that individual then enters Cross's second stage of encounter. During the "encounter" stage the individual begins to question previous assumptions that were part of his identity up to that point of his life. There are two parts to the encounter stage, first the encounter experience itself, and then secondly, the resulting interpretation of the world around him that is based on this new experience. It is during the encounter stage that individuals test new ideas and behaviors that are either directly or indirectly related to insights gained in the encounter experience (Cross, 1971).

In the third stage of "immersion-emersion", the individual initially totally immerses himself into the black culture and actively rejects the dominant white culture that surrounds him. During this stage individuals often embrace and incorporate African dress and hairstyles into their identities, as well as participate in African American creative arts, such as poetry, music and art. This is an attempt to express their commitment and devotion to their newly found black culture. While initially there are many positive aspects to their new sense of ethnic pride, eventually anger and rage begin to surface toward white people and a strong group identity and belief in collectivism begins to occur (Cross, 1971). During this stage, however, the individual eventually develops a more dualistic view to their identity and has a more complex understanding of African American experience as it relates to existing within the white culture. This modifying of their anger is a natural progression, since the individual has a difficult time maintaining the intense emotions over time, and therefore through the immersion process

is able to stabilize his emotions. Pride will replace feelings of guilt during the immersion phase.

During the fourth stage of "internalization", the individual continues to resolve his intense feelings between the conflicts between their old identity and the new experiences and points of view he is now experiencing. It is during this stage that an individual gains increased self-confidence and develops a much more pluralistic view of life. The final stage of "internalization-commitment" is when an individual fully accepts his new internalized sense of self and involves himself in meaningful activities that help to address the concerns and problems shared by African Americans, or other oppressed groups. A collective responsibility develops during this stage as the individual acts as a mentor and guide for people who are experiencing their own earlier stages (Cross, 1971).

Chapter V will consist of a general overview of social learning theory, as well as placing it into an historical context. After considering the components of social learning theory and how they can be applied to the learning process of African American male adolescents, it will possible to create a model that describes how role models can than be incorporated into the lives of this population.

CHAPTER V

SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

Overview

The basic principal of social learning theory is that a person learns by observing, imitation, and modeling within a social context. In the same way that Erickson is noted for his theories on Identity Development, Albert Bandura is thought of as the central theorist in the development of social learning theory. To capture the total essence and subtleties of social learning theory, the ideas and contributions of other psychologists, such as Akers, Piaget, Rotter, and Vygotsky should also be considered (Ormrod, 1999).

Social learning theorists accept that people's physical traits and mental personalities may predispose and therefore influence an individual's behavior, they additionally suggest that behavior is a direct result of factors from within their environment. The nature of the specific behavior, such as how often does aggression take place, where the aggressive behavior is displayed, and the eventual target of a person's aggressive behavior, are all derived from a social learning process. According to social learning theory, a person's analysis and interpretation of his environment plays a significant role on how an individual will behave in the future (Pfohl, 1994).

In order to fully understand social learning theory, it is important to highlight the various components of the theory and to then examine each component's function. Social

learning theorists posit that people learn by first observing the behavior of others and then evaluating the outcomes of those observed behaviors. It is important to note that social learning theorists also believe that learning can occur without an actual change in an individual's behavior. As opposed to behaviorist theorists, who believe that learning has to be accompanied by a change in behavior, social learning theorists believe that when an individual learns through observation, the result of their learning is not always immediately shown in their behaviors (Bandura, 1994). Over the years, social learning theory has tended to become increasingly more cognitive in nature, as it attempted to explain the processes involved in learning (Ormrod, 1999). Awareness of past experiences coupled with the expectations of future reinforcements or punishments, can have a major effect on the behaviors that people exhibit. In many ways social learning theory can be considered to be a middle ground, or transition, between behaviorist and cognitive learning theories.

Environment is a critical component in social learning theory, especially in the complex multi-dimensional relationship that exists between a person's environment and the role modeling that is present in an individual's life. Although it is clear that the model will often positively reinforce people when they imitate the behavior of a respected individual, Bandura suggests that there are other ways that the environment can also be a reinforcing factor for the individual. The actions of a model have the potential of reinforcing and then internalizing the behavior of an observer.

In the adolescent culture of today, clothes are often considered to be an important part of an individual's identity. A student who changes his appearance to "fit in" with a particular group that he respects at school, not only has a greater chance of being

accepted by that group, but the behavior of the observer will also then be reinforced by that group. A third party also has the potential of altering and reinforcing the behavior of an observer. When a third party is observed to benefit from imitating the behavior of a model, the observer will then choose to incorporate that same behavior into his identity. If a respected neighbor acknowledges and praises a certain behavior of a model, and then compliments and praises the observer for modeling such behavior, the result will be that the behavior will be reinforced.

Reinforcement can also occur vicariously. When the model is reinforced for a certain act, the observer on seeing the model praised may change his own behavior so that he too can receive praise. Bandura's famous demonstration of this concept was when he allowed students to watch a movie of a model hitting an inflated clown doll, known as Bobo the clown. When children saw the model being praised for this action, and without receiving any reinforcement themselves, the children reenacted the observed behavior by also hitting the doll in an attempt to receive praise themselves.

Imitated behavior can also result in reinforcing actions. Behaviors that are learned from other people can in turn produce satisfying or positive reinforcing are often going to be permanently incorporated into a person's identity. By observing a peer enjoy and benefit from having a job may result in that student also finding a job and therefore receiving enjoyment and satisfaction from the modeling action.

The principles of social learning theory today are a synthesis of the ideas, research, and theories of many different prominent theorists from the past. In order to fully understand and appreciate the central ideas of social learning theory, it is critical to first examine and follow the development of the different social theories starting with

Gabriel Tarde. By placing social learning theory in an historical context, it will be easier to then apply it to African American adolescent males.

Gabriel Tarde

The roots of social learning theory can be traced back to the late 19th century and Gabriel Tarde (Ormrod, 1999). Tarde identified three stages that he felt were required in the learning process. He theorized that close contact, imitation of superiors, and insertion were all necessary for learning to occur. Although Tarde's studies were primarily focused on how social learning relates to deviant behavior, his theories on the role of imitation in the process of learning eventually became the foundation of modern-day social learning theorists. Tarde's three laws of imitation are still applicable to the issues that African American adolescent males face today, such as substance abuse and gang behavior. Tarde argues that those behaviors would be learned by observation and should be considered an imitated phenomenon. Tarde's theories can be directly applied to African American male adolescent population throughout the United States. Living in an environment that is full of negative media images, having inadequate resources like health care, housing, dismal educational schools, and with the added legacy of slavery, has internalized a sense of hopelessness into their identity. According to Tarde (1969), the feelings of being disenfranchised could be passed on by not only person-to-person interactions, but also by group to group. Although Tarde was initially focused on deviant behavior within the population, his theories can be used to explain the behavior of today's African American male adolescents as being a socially learned acquisition that reflect the circumstances of their environment. By imitating the role models that

surround them, African American male adolescents will engage in similar behaviors that will then continue the status quo.

The first law of Tarde's social learning theory was based on the belief that when individuals are in close intimate contact with one another, the imitation of each other's behavior will be the inevitable outcome (Tarde, 1969). By the existence of close contact, he believed that there would be a greater chance of people imitating the customs of those that they shared their environment with. Specifically, Tarde argued that if a person were surrounded by people who were heavily involved in deviant behavior or at-risk lifestyles, then they would be more likely to imitate these people, rather than others with whom they had little physical or emotional contact. In other words, "direct contact with deviance was believed to foster more deviance." It is therefore unrealistic that African American adolescent males are going to imitate their white counterparts with whom they that they minimal contact on a day-to-day basis.

Tarde's second law of imitation added that not only did there need to be close contact between individuals in the learning process, but also that imitation trickles down from the "superior" individual (Pfohl, 1994). Tarde argued that crimes committed by the poor and low-status young people in the 19th century, was really an attempt by that population to imitate wealthy, older, and higher-status individuals that they observed in their surrounding environment. Tarde believed that individuals would innately model the behavior of individuals who they perceive high-status, with the hope that their imitative behavior will result in the rewards and benefits that they associated with being a member of the superior class.

This second law is extremely applicable in today's society, as the disadvantaged populations try to emulate the more well to do populations. In the south side of Providence, it is perfectly clear that the African Americans who are trapped in a life filled with poverty and who have a lack of adequate resources to help them out of their economic hardships, will attempt to capture the trappings of the advantaged. It is no coincidence that many young males drive around the south side of Providence in fancy vehicles and wear clothes that they feel gives them the same status as the more well-to-do populations that surround them. Tarde would argue that this act of imitation, although with their own ethnic and cultural trappings, it enables them to feel that they are a part of the "superior" class.

Tarde's third law of imitation states that the powerful attraction of newness and novelty will result in new behaviors ultimately replacing old behaviors, and eventually becoming incorporated as part of a new identity. Reinforcement of behavior serves to either help preserve older customs or create new ones (Tarde, 1969).

Gabriel Tarde's three laws of imitation and his learning perspective were critical in the development of social learning theory. His study of deviance, and its eventual application to broader social issues, has had a major impact on how theorists view how individuals learn, as well as how we define, feel, and act within our environment.

Ronald Akers

Ronald Akers' differential reinforcement theory posits that people learn to evaluate and alter their behavior as a result of their interactions with the significant individuals and groups in their lives. Akers shared Tarde's belief that close contact was a prerequisite of learning. The individuals and groups that a person interacts with will be

the sources of reinforcement that will help an individual define his behavior as being right or wrong. This observational learning will provide the opportunity and tools to evaluate behavior. Akers posits that individuals who are able to define their behavior as good, or at least justified, are much more likely to continue to engage in that type of behavior. Youth that surround themselves with peers who are involved in the drug culture, either by encouraging the use of drugs or its sale, will be encouraged through this social learning experience to use and distribute drugs themselves.

Akers argues that the primary influence on individual behavior comes from those groups that supply the most significant sources of reinforcement to an individual, and who expose the individual to behavioral models that contribute to the formation of their normative definitions (Siegal, 1998). Peer and friendship groups, schools, churches, and other institutions are all potential sources of reinforcement. Furthermore, Akers argues that deviant behavior amongst certain populations can be reinforced as a positive goal, and be considered desirable, or at least justifiable, as compared to the more traditional behavior of the dominate culture. Deviant behavior that originates from imitation can then be sustained and reinforced by the social support from within their own social environment (Siegal, 1998).

Jean Piaget

Jean Piaget was one of the first psychologists to study the moral development of children. Piaget looked at the moral lives of children by studying how they play games in order to learn more about children's beliefs about right and wrong (Piaget, 1932/65). As with Tarde and Akers, Piaget posited that behavioral development was a result of the

interactions and relationships within their environment. While studying children and how they play, he concluded that morality is considered to be a developmental process.

Piaget believed that morality needed to be considered as a part of the developmental process of adolescents. He concluded that children initially experienced a "heteronomous" stage in their moral development, where a strict adherence to rules and the obedience to the authority of the respected individuals of their environment was normal. He theorized that young children couldn't combine their own values with the perspectives of others. The result of this egocentrism is that children are required to then project their own values and wishes onto others.

Additionally, the sense of powerlessness that children have, also results in children accepting the reality that power is handed down from above, as with Tarde. Eventually as the child's cognitive structure develops, he is able to begin to act with a sense of reciprocity with the adults in their lives. Piaget therefore viewed a child's moral identity development as a result of the interpersonal interactions in their lives.

Rotter's Social Learning Theory

At the time that Rotter created his social learning theory, learning approaches were formulated using Freud's drive theory, which stated that a person's actions were psychologically based impulses seeking self-satisfaction. Freud focused on the individual's instinctual motives as being primary in determining their behavior and people were viewed as being unaware of their unconscious drives. Rotter, however, believed that a psychological theory should have a motivational principal, and rejected the instinct-based psychoanalysis and drive based behaviorism (Rotter, 1982).

As an alternative to Freud's drive theory approach to learning, Rotter developed his empirical law of effect as the motivational factor in the learning process. Rotter posited that people are motivated to learn by positive stimulation and attempted to avoid negative feedback. In essence, Rotter combined behaviorism with the study of personality, and eliminated instincts and drives as the motivating forces in the process of learning.

Rotter agreed with Piaget concerning the importance of environment in the development of personality and identity. In fact, Rotter believed that a person's identity couldn't be thought of without considering the nature of an individual's environment. To understand behavior, one must first look at the individual's life history of learning and then consider the circumstances of their environment. By examining the stimuli that the person is encountering and responding to, one can then determine the stable set of behavioral potentials that will cause an individual to react and behave in a certain manner.

Rotter (1954) posited that personality and behavior were always changeable throughout a person's life. If the way a person thinks can be changed, and if the environment that a person is responding to altered, then there is the opportunity for behavior to be changed. Although Rotter believed that change in behavior was always possible, he also believed that the more experiences in life that reinforce ones beliefs and behaviors, the more effort and time will be required for change in behavior to occur.

Rotter's learning theory was optimistic in nature, for he believed that an individual was constantly driven by establishing goals in their lives, and the seeking of positive reinforcement for their actions (Rotter, 1982). In other words, individuals were

not going through life only trying to avoid punishment. For a positive learning experience to happen, Rotter posited in his social learning theory that four main areas, which he believed predict behavior, had to be considered: behavior potential, expectancy, reinforcement value, and the psychological situation.

Rotter proposed that given a specific situation, there might be several behaviors that a person might engage in. Behavioral potential is the likelihood that an individual will display a specific behavior for a specific situation. Rotter posited that for each possible situation, there is a behavioral potential that can be determined and the individual will behave according to the greatest potential. Rotter theorized that behavior potential is a function of expectancy and reinforcement value, and that the likelihood of a person responding with a particular behavior can be determined by examining the probability that a certain behavior will lead to a specific outcome and whether the desirability of that outcome. When the expectancy and reinforcement values of a certain behavior are both high, then Rotter hypothesized that the behavior potential for that individual will also be high. Additionally, if either the expectancy or reinforcement value is low, then the likelihood of a specific response will be considerably lower. Given that for a specific set of conditions that there are a limited number of options for a behavioral response, an individual will react in the way that has the highest behavioral probability potential.

Expectancy, that is the subjective probability that a specific behavior will lead to a predictable conclusion, was a central part of Rotter's theory. When an individual has a strong expectancy for a behavior, the individual is then confident that the behavior will result in a predictable outcome. On the other hand, when a person has low expectancy,

the individual believes that their behavior will not result in positive reinforcement. When there are multiple outcomes, which are equally desirable, an individual will respond with a behavior that has the greatest likelihood of paying off, i.e., has the highest expectancy of positive reinforcement.

Rotter believed that expectancies are formulated on the quantity and quality of the reinforcements from past life experiences. The greater number of times that a particular behavior resulted in a particular reinforcement, either positive or negative, the greater the individual's expectancy will be that that particular behavior will achieve a similar outcome. Within the African American communities across the nation, there is a certain expectancy that they are faced with due to the injustice, inadequate resources, and the negative images that society has associated with this population. The seemingly unending negative reinforcements that African American adolescent males have experienced throughout their lives, such as discrimination in the work force, unequal educational opportunities, lack of adequate health services, and the unequal treatment in the court system, all serve as reinforcements for their present behavior. It is important to add, that although expectancy is an individual probability, there is also the possibility that the individual will form irrational expectancies. This will result in there being no relationship between the individual's subjective assessment of a potential reinforcement and what the actual objective probability of the reinforcement will be. Individuals can either over or underestimate likelihoods of specific reinforcements, and both distortions can potentially lead to problematic pathologies.

Rotter's reinforcement value component refers to the perceived desirability of a behavior. If the anticipated outcomes are attractive to an individual, then there will be a

high reinforcement value, but if the consequences of a certain behavior are negative, then the opposite will occur with the accompanying presence of a low reinforcement value.

Individuals will always be directed toward the outcome they prefer the most.

Similar to expectancy, the reinforcement value for a specific individual is a subjective response that will be determined by each situation and experience that an individual encounters, and will be dependent on that person's past experiences in their specific environment. A negative response from an African American father, which to a white child might be considered negative, might seem positive to a child who is neglected by his father, since a negative response might be perceived as better than no response.

Rotter's psychological situation component was not incorporated into his predictive formula, however, Rotter did propose that people would interpret and experience identical situations very differently. As with Tarde's theories, Rotter posited that the environment was critical in determining how an individual interpreted their situation and therefore their potential behavior. Life is not just an objective collection of stimuli that determines an individual's behavior, but rather a group of subjective responses to an environment that the individual experiences in their own unique way.

Rotter was additionally concerned with whether a person believed that they were capable of controlling their own future, that is, determining the "locus of control" in an individual's life. Rotter (1989) posited that "internals" have a strong internal locus of control and feel that the responsibility for whether or not they get reinforcement lies within themselves. "Externals", however, feel that success or failure is purely a result of chance and the actions of powerful others. In other words, reinforcement has very little to

due with an individuals own efforts and the amount of reinforcement they receive, but rather is determined by people and factors outside of their control.

Vygotsky's Social Development Theory

Vygotsky's Social Development Theory concludes that social interaction is a necessary prerequisite to learning and that cognitive behavior is the result of the socialization process. It is important to note that this theory was directly opposite to Jean Piaget's development theory, which stated that social development followed learning. Vygotsky states, "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice, first on the social level, and secondly on the individual level. Furthermore on the second level, it occurs between people (interpsychological) and then internally or intrapsychological)" (Vygotsky, 1978). He also proposed the importance of the presence of a "More Knowledgeable Other", who the individual regarded as more experienced and wiser than themselves. The "More Knowledgeable Other" did not need to be a parent, but could be another older adult or peer.

Vygotsky believed that there was a relationship between an individual and the sociocultural context in which they lived (Crawford, 1996). Specifically he posited that as children developed their social skills, they improved their skills to communicate and then internalization these tools resulting in better cognitive capabilities (Vygotsky, 1978).

Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura, a central figure in the development of Social learning theory, used Tarde's theories as a foundation for developing his laws of imitation and modeling. Bandura's principles are especially useful when they are applied to the contemporary issues that face the African American male adolescent population today. Bandura

proposed that in the modeling process the steps of attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation were central (Bandura, 1977).

Bandura posited that without first attaining the attention of an individual, the role modeling learning process can not begin. Any distractions or other factors that interfered with accomplishing attention inevitably results in a decrease of learning, including the observational learning from a role model. Some obvious examples of factors that lead to a deficit in attention include lack of sleep, illness, lack of confidence, as well as the existence of emotional and psychological factors. Having a sense of hopelessness for a better future and experiencing discrimination in ones life, can also create competing stimuli that restrict the effectiveness of the role modeling learning process.

If the model is considered to be prestigious to the observer, or at least competent and successful to the observer in their own social environment, the chances of the observer paying attention are considerably improved. Bandura notes, however, that the attention received by a model can be for either positive or negative behaviors that the model is displaying. This is an especially important factor with African American male adolescents, since the most glamorous role models in their lives are not necessarily involved in the most positive behaviors. Additionally, Bandura proposed that when a model is similar to the observer, the observer is more likely to be able to relate to the model and an increase in the observer's attention will therefore be the result.

In order for learning to be successful, retention of the observed behavior needs to occur, so that the observed behaviors and their reinforcements can be internalized into the observer's identity. Imagery and language are critical components in the process of retention and are ultimately responsible for an individual's ability to remember the

behavior of the model. Bandura posited that individuals store observations in the form of either mental images or verbal descriptions. Once stored, the images can then be retrieved so that the observed behavior, that has also been positively reinforced, can be replicated.

To truly have a certain behavior learned, the ability for the reproduction of the observed and retained behavior is necessary. Bandura believes that the retention of the images alone is not sufficient for behavioral change to occur, but rather that the individual needs to have the ability act upon their observations and to reproduce the observed behavior of the model. If an individual watches a businessman, whom they respect, and is able to reproduce what they observed in his behavior, their behavior can then become altered and eventually internalized.

Bandura notes that not only will our ability to imitate models increase with repetition, but just the belief alone that our abilities have improved, can result in improved performance and behavior. An example of this is seen in today's sports world when athletes attempt to imagine a successful performance before attempting their routine. Any internalization of behavioral change that is retained can lead the observer the realization that change and a positive outcome can be a realistic possibility.

The final factor of the learning process for Bandura is motivation. Bandura considers motivation to be a critical component of learning, since a person who does not have significant motivation will find it extremely difficult to attempt the imitation of a respected role model. Bandura believes that unless there is a realistic chance for success, behavioral change is unlikely.

Additionally Bandura describes several types of motives that occur in his social learning theory. Past reinforcements (as recognized by traditional behaviorism), promised reinforcements (incentives that an individual can comprehend as realistic), and vicarious reinforcements (reinforcements experienced through others), all have the ability to help the observer to recall the behavior of the model. Although some theorists would argue that these motives mentioned cause and promote learning, Bandura believed that these motives don't initiate learning but are ways that demonstrate to an individual what he has learned. Bandura, therefore views these actions as motives.

Bandura also addresses the issue of whether all motives are only a result of positive reinforcement, or whether the presence of negative motives can result in the hesitancy to imitate a models behavior. As with positive motivation, Bandura posits that there are three potential distinctive types of negative motives: punishment, promised punishment (that is threats), and vicarious punishment. Bandura ultimately proposed that any type of punishment is not as affective as positive reinforcement and can in fact often result in the opposite goal being achieved.

The ability to self-regulate our behavior is considered by Bandura to be a critical piece of the human personality and identity development. Bandura proposes that there are three concepts that encompass self-regulation and therefore the controlling of ones behavior: self-observation, judgment, and self-response.

An individual needs to be able to realistically look at their own behavior and retain their observations internally. The ability of self-observation is the critical first step of self regulation. Judgment then follows self-regulation, as individuals consciously, or unconsciously, compare themselves to perceived standards in their environment. In the

judgment process, individuals either compare their performance with traditionally accepted standards, or create their own arbitrary judgments that are based on their previously internalized experiences. If an individual feels good about the judgment of their self-observation, then positive self-responses will be the result. If, however, an individual judges themselves negatively, a punishing self-response is experienced.

Self-esteem is a direct consequence to the concept of self-regulation is self-concept. If an individual meets their self-defined standards over time, and experiences self-praise, the result will be an increase in the individual's self-esteem (Siegel, 1992). On the contrary, if an individual judges that they have failed to meet their expectations, and punish themselves, there will be a deficit in self-concept, and a lowered low self-esteem.

Overall behaviorists believe that reinforcement is far more effective in the learning process than punishment. The three most likely results of self-punishment are: compensation, inactivity, and escape. With compensation the individual adapts by having delusions of grandeur or superiority. Inactivity, as a result of self-punishment, can be seen in behaviors of apathy and depression. Finally, Bandura identified his last form of self-punishment as escape, which can include the use of drugs and alcohol, or if there seems to be no hope for the individual, the ultimate escape of suicide.

Bandura posits that there are three ways that people who have negative self-concepts can improve their self-esteem. Bandura posits that self-observation as primary to improving self-esteem. An individual needs to have an accurate picture of their own behavior if they are going to be able to improve their self-esteem. Bandura's second recommendation for poor self-concepts is termed as regarding standards that is making

sure that your standards are not too high to achieve. Too high standards will result in failure and standards set too low will eventually appear to be meaningless. Bandura's final concern with an individual with poor self-concept was termed as self-response. A person who rewards himself or herself and does not self-punish, and who celebrates their victories instead of dwelling on their failures, will most likely have a healthy self-concept.

In Chapter VI, I will begin by reviewing the theories of identity development and social learning theory that were presented in chapters three and four. I will then relate these theories to the findings of Chapter three, which evaluates the present day state of African American adolescent males in the United States. By doing this, a conceptual model will be formulated that could be informative and beneficial to the social workers and institutions that are working with African American teenage boys.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This theoretical thesis investigates the present day socio-psychological state of African American adolescent males in the United States today, and then using identity development and social learning theories, formulates a model that posits how gender identity, ethnic identity and social learning all contribute to the utilization of role models in the lives of these youth. The way an individual's identity, gender, and ethnicity all interact to affect the learning process is critical to consider when determining if and how role models might be introduced into the lives of African American adolescent males.

According to the NASW Code of Ethics (1999. p. 1), “The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.” Due to their vulnerability, and the persistent neglect by the dominant white society that surrounds them, it is our obligation as social workers to promote further research with populations such as African American adolescent males. My work at The Metropolitan Career and Technical Center in Providence, Rhode Island, an alternative high school with a majority of students who are disadvantaged African Americans, inspired me to undertake this thesis. My clinical work with several African American adolescent males, many of whom did not have a

male parental figure living in their households, played a significant role in my decision to pursue this topic. As I reflected on my sessions with these young men, the theories of identity development and social learning seemed especially pertinent to my research with this target population.

Late adolescence is an age when adolescents are still impressionable to the actions of the individuals whom they respect. Rather than let these youth be solely influenced by role models from their peer group, or by individuals who are engaged in crime, or be unrealistically and vicariously influenced by the sports figures whom they see glorified in the media, it seemed critical to attempt to formulate a model that would enable the institutions that these youth are presently involved with, such as schools, youth groups, and churches, to positively impact these youth. In order to break the cycle of frustration and hopelessness that these youth are caught in, social workers need to act now before it is too late to have an impact on the behavior and life choices that these youth are about to make. This may be the last chance to have an influence on these adolescents before they enter adulthood.

To accomplish this goal identity development needed to be examined first, so as to gain a better understanding of the factors that have contributed to the psychological make-up of this population. Not only was a general comprehension of identity development required, but the additional understanding of male identity development, as well as ethnic identity development, was required in order to have a complete and culturally sensitive understanding of the identity development of this population.

Once an understanding of identity development was established, it then coupled with the principles of modern day social learning theory, since determining a relevant

role model structure had to take into consideration not only the identity of the individual, but also the social context that the learning process took place in. Social learning theory was especially helpful in this study, since the use of role models and the effect of the environment are both critical components of social learning theory. As can be seen in the writings of Tarde, Rotter, Bandura, as well as others, social learning theory focuses on how imitation and observation play pivotal roles in how people learn, as well as how the environment impacts people during the learning process.

Findings

Identity development is a key component when evaluating individuals who are in the process of transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. In many ways identity can be considered to be the main element of a person's very existence and it enables individuals to make sense out of their personal experiences, as well as their environment. Whether it is a conscious or unconscious process, identity development is a unique experience for each individual and occurs within an interpersonal and cultural context (Collins, 2001). By viewing themselves in comparison to others in their environment, the interpersonal experiences of individuals help an individual to focus on who they are, and by the process of elimination, who they are not. In the always evolving process of identity development, an individual is continually comparing what goals and values they share with others in their community in order to help themselves decipher and contrast what is unique about themselves as individuals (Josselson, 1996). Since each individual ultimately defines their identity in juxtaposition to their environment and what they believe to be important within their community, a person's identity is inextricably linked to their ethnicity.

Self-Acceptance and the relationship of person with external world

Erickson specifically speaks about the relationship between a person and his external world, and how it contributes to the process of an individual's self-definition. African American adolescent males, who are presently engaged in Erikson's stage of Identity vs. Role Confusion, are constantly struggling with their own self-acceptance, the acceptance by those living around them in their community, as well as the acceptance from those individuals outside their community who may not have a understanding of the individual's cultural history.

Role of crisis and commitment: new ways of imaging identity

The next layer in the theory of identity development, which is supplied by Marcia, is the addition of crisis and commitment as significant components in identity development. Marcia states that it is important to construct new ways of imagining ones own identity, and to even "try on for size" possible behaviors that are being exhibited by the people that an individual respects, has contact with, or sees in the media. For Marcia, adolescence is a time for experimentation as an individual attempts to find their niche in society. A person, who an adolescent may attempt to emulate one week may be replaced by a different individual the next, as they are constantly being exposed to different role models by the media.

Marcia and Erickson both posit that the process of identity development will be different for each person, since their situations and experiences will encompass many unique factors. Childhood conflicts, cultural norms, family dynamics, and even innate personality tendencies, will all contribute to and influence the process of an individual's behavioral choices (Collins, 2001). In other words, the role and importance of an

individual's environment is critical when considering the identity development of African American males.

As compared to Erickson, Marcia, along with Josselson, suggested a less structured and non-linear process in their formulation of identity development. By allowing for the possibility that an individual might shift back and forth between identity development stages, it further promotes the idea that identity development is a constantly evolving and unique process for every individual.

Role of gender identity

In considering identity development for African American male adolescents, it is very important to also consider the role that masculine identity development has in their overall identity development process. This is especially important for many African American males since many of them have been raised in households without the presence of a male parental figure. Greenson (1968) and Stoller (1968) argue that, as a result of the interactions between mother and child during infancy, boys develop a feminine pole and that if boys are going to eventually be able to individuate from their mother as their male identity develops, that they will be required to actively and physically reject their feminine identifications. In order for boys to develop their masculine identity, Greenson posited that male adolescents had to first disidentify from their mothers in order to counter identify with their fathers, if the process of developing their own male identity was going to be able to move forward. An African American adolescent male who does not have a male parental figure living in the household, however, is going to find it difficult, if not impossible, to make the separation that Greenson and Stoller refer to.

Diamond, however, provides an alternative to Greenson's and Stoller's theory, and actively questions whether the process of individuation from the mother needs to be conflictive. Diamond also views male identity as a constantly evolving and progressive experience that is not based on rigid and delineated stages. Although Diamond acknowledges the importance of being able to identify with a father, since having a bond with an individual who is similar to oneself is important, it is also essential that eventually the individual become individuated from the father in order for that male adolescent to develop an independent, strong, and healthy sense of their own masculinity. Although Diamond believes that the development of masculine gender identity is aided by the presence of a father or surrogate father figure, he also believes that a young male benefits from the presence of a mother who will accept her son's exploring and developing maleness.

Role of ethnicity

Another key component of identity development for African American males that is essential to consider in this model is the role of ethnicity. At certain stages of their lives, the identity development of African American males progresses and evolves solely as a result of their personal experiences and is not affected or influenced by issues surrounding their ethnicity. There are other times, however, where the reality that they are a member of a group that has its own traditions and values, which include living in an environment that is dominated by whites and having a long history of discrimination, plays a significant if not dominant role in their identity development.

African Americans are living in a society that on one hand values an individualistic approach to life, but on the other hand broadcasts negative images and

promotes stereotypes of African Americans males that are demeaning and destructive. In order to have a grounded identity, it is important for African American youth to know both where they came from historically, as well as to have an emotional and even physical connection with their ethnic community. It is also important for them to have knowledge of, and to acknowledge, that there are individuals and groups within the larger surrounding society that expect less from them, for the sole reason that they are black. Feelings of vulnerability, and constantly being put into relationships with members from the dominant white society that are oppositional, inevitably results in issues of poor self-esteem. African American youth have a much better chance of succeeding if they feel connected to their own black community while maintaining a “healthy” awareness of how racism has affected their life.

Cross’s hallmark theory on African American identity development (1971) was especially important to consider. It shared Marcia’s and Josselson’s flexible approach to general identity development, since it proposed that African American youth will move back and forth between the various stages of their ethnic development, without having to “complete” any one stage before progressing forward to the next. Cross’s Encounter Stage, was especially helpful to consider when evaluating the identity development of African American Youth today. As African American males begin to question the assumptions that had been the foundation of his identity up to that point of his life, he may easily decide to drop certain aspects of his previous identity, and take new components in the future. This ever evolving sense of ethnic identity resonates with Marcia’s belief that adolescents need to experiment with different identities before settling on one.

Although Alfred Bandura was not the first psychologist to propose the ideas that are presently incorporated in social learning theory, he is considered to be one of the most prominent figures in its development. The two ideas that are most central in today's social learning theory are that learning takes place in a social environment and that people learn from one another by observation, imitation, and modeling. An individual's behavior will therefore be determined by how an individual interprets the actions of the role models that they encounter in their own environment.

Gabriel Tarde's Three Laws of Imitation centered on identifying the social processes that not only target and affect thinking, feeling, and behavior, but which are also passed on from person to person and from group to group. Bandura eventually incorporated Tarde's ideas about imitation and suggestion, specifically Tarde's three stages of close contact, imitation of superiors, and insertion. Not only did Tarde argue that feelings, such as those associated with being disenfranchised, are not only passed on from person to person on an individual basis, but that they are also passed on as part of their groups internalized ethnic identity. As a reaction to the feelings that accompany being a member of a disadvantaged population, Tarde would suggest that disadvantaged groups, such as African American males, will model the behavior of those that they feel are in a superior social, political, or economic position.

The belief that an individual's behavior was determined by observing the interactions of the significant people in an individual's life was also posited by Akers in his differential reinforcement theory. Akers, however, added yet another piece to evolving theory of social learning: that it was necessary for individuals to be able to consider that their behavior was at the very least justifiable, if not good. Akers theorized

that unless this judgment occurs, individuals can never be able to fully adopt the observed behavior as their own. Akers additionally posited that the most significant influence on an individual's behavior was supplied by those individuals who are in a position of supplying the greatest amount of reinforcement to the individual. Without reinforcement, new behaviors are far less likely to become a permanent part of an African American male's identity.

Moral development as a factor in the learning process, was first proposed by Piaget. As with Tarde and Akers, Piaget theorized that the interactions with one's environment are critical factors in affecting behavioral patterns and changes. What was especially important to Piaget was the importance of the social relationship between children and adults, and its effect on the incorporation of morality into the identity of youth. Similar to Tarde's belief in the importance of imitation of superiors, Piaget felt that power was given to children from the adults, who were in positions of superiority to the children. The role of adults and influence of environment, are therefore critical factors in the learning process. Piaget viewed moral development as a vital part of identity development of children and that identity development was a result of their interpersonal interactions with the adults in their lives.

One of Julian Rotter's contributions to modern day social learning theory was his proposal that people are motivated as a result of positive stimulation or reinforcement and that they will attempt to avoid negative stimulation. Rotter agreed with Tarde, Akers, and Piaget, that an individual's identity is a result of the interactions that he has with his environment. Rotter determined, however, that objective stimuli would not ultimately determine behavior. In order to initiate a positive change in behavior, Rotter believed that

either the way an individual thinks needs to be changed, or the environment within which the individual is functioning needs to be altered. If either one of these options occurred, change in behavior would then be possible. It is important to note, however, that the longer an individual is subjected to reinforcement for past behavior, the more difficult it will be to alter an individual's behavior in the future. This is especially important for African American males, since they have had such a long and intense history of negative reinforcement from the dominant white society.

Bandura's social learning theory is in many ways a synthesis of his predecessors. Not only did Bandura propose that individuals start the learning process by observation, he also posited that a role model whom the observer considers to be most like himself, would be the most beneficial. The first component of the learning process is observation. Without observation, learning will not play a significant role in the development of an individual's identity.

Observation, however, is not in itself the final goal. The evaluation of what was witnessed by the observer is the required next step. Additionally, the awareness of past reinforcements, as well as the expectations of future positive or negative reinforcements, will ultimately effect the type of behavior that an individual will display. What is especially notable about social learning theory is that learning doesn't necessarily result in an immediate change in behavior. In other words, after the initial observation and the following evaluation, there might not be a change in the behavior of the individual that is immediately measurable. Over time, however, the observations and evaluations of the individual will help to shape and sculpt a different attitude about particular behavioral responses that will result in an eventual change in behavior.

Once the attention of the observer is secured by a person who is considered prestigious by the observer, the behavior of that individual is much more likely to become internalized, especially if it is being reinforced by an individual from within their own social and ethnic environment. Reinforcement may be positive or negative, although Bandura proposes that negative reinforcement, such as punishments, threats, and vicarious reinforcements are not nearly as likely to be productive as positive reinforcements.

Synthesis

A conceptual model for understanding role model development in African American teenage boys is offered as Appendix A. The model is a synthesis of the major theories discussed in this thesis. Erik Erickson's stage theory stands at the center of the conceptual model as it seems to really capture the essentials and essence of the struggles and battles that African American male adolescents face as their identities develop during what could be considered the most confusing, and sometimes overwhelming, period of their lives. The role of the environment, identity development and social learning theory are also central elements on the conceptual model.

Many adolescents live their lives on the basis of attaining instant gratification, and without considering the long-term affects of their decisions. Adolescence is the time period when individuals are struggling with self-acceptance and for the acceptance by their peers. With peer pressure being such a powerful force in the lives of these youngsters, their peers will inevitably help to determine their standards and ultimately their future behavior. An adolescent's social environment and physical surroundings will work together to determine the outcome of their self-definition and how their identity will

eventually develop. As Erickson would state, their “external world” is the primary piece to the process of their self-definition.

African Americans in the 21st century live with the internalized negative feelings that are associated with the legacy of slavery. They have incorporated into their identity the external environmental influences of injustice, discrimination, and persistent lack of opportunities that continuously place them at an almost overwhelmingly disadvantage, as compared to their white counterparts. Internalized negative self-images eventually translate into a deficit in self-esteem and the potential lack of motivation to attempt to change their present circumstances or their behavior.

Marcia describes adolescence in his model of identity development as a time during which youth experiment with the incorporation of many different identities. This is an extremely important factor when working with this target population, since their impressionability results in them being extremely vulnerable to the temptations and suggestions of others who appear to be successful. The role models that are made available to African American males need to be individuals that the youth can both relate to and respect. Additionally, the role models that these youth are given need to provide options and opportunities that are truly realistic, and not just be successful sports figures like Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan. This is especially important given the reality that African American youth are often presented with role models who offer promises of a better life through the involvement with drugs and crime, but which will most likely only result in them becoming just another statistic in the United States court system.

In order for black adolescent males to succeed and achieve success in this country, it is essential for them to develop a healthy and positive masculine identity.

Many African American youth are living in single-parent homes, with the mother as the parent that runs the house. Although the absence of black fathers in households has in some studies seemed to result in higher rates of delinquency, alcohol and drug use, lower self-esteem, and increased drop-out rates from high school, the absence of black fathers in single parent households is still being debated today. Recent studies have shown that these fathers are still very much involved both physically and emotionally in the lives of their children. The lack of presence in the actual physical household may not be as critical as first perceived.

What also needs to be considered in the lives of African American adolescent males is that kinship support is a central piece of the African American culture. This is evidenced in the conceptual model. It is difficult to determine if previous models that were formulated by white theorists are applicable to the culture of African American males today. With grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles very much invested and involved in the lives of African American families, the absence of fathers doesn't therefore need to necessarily result in poor masculine identity development for African American males. There is also evidence that in a single-parent family that is headed by the mother not only can the mother compensate for the absence of the father, but that the support provided by the mother can result in a greater sense of respect for women. This is contrary to what has lately become a stereotype for black males in the United States. Kinship care within the African community also has the potential to foster a greater pride in their African American heritage and culture.

When considering both identity development and social learning theory, the influence of environment is pivotal, as noted above. African American adolescent males

are not being presented with positive, respected, and realistic role models in their schools and neighborhood youth centers, whom these boys can emulate. Without the help of the adult role models that Bandura proposes in his social learning model, the status quo for African American males will remain unchanged, and the inability to achieve or even hope for success will not be a viable option for African American males.

As evidenced in the conceptual model, without the opportunity to have their behavior evaluated and reflected during interactions with significant, but similar, individuals from their own social environment, and without the reinforcement that Akers feels is critical to an individual's ability to change their behavior, there is even less chance that their behavior can be influenced in a positive manner. Positive role models from within the African American community have the ability to provide sources and patterns of reinforcement, and to define behavior as right or wrong. Without those role models in their lives it will be difficult to achieve positive self-definition since they have no one to observe or imitate in their social behaviors and career aspirations. African American youths can mature into young men who will be able to disseminate their new-found self-efficacy and self-esteem, allowing them to contribute as future role models themselves, as is evidenced in the arrows at the lower left side of the conceptual model.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The presence of role models has been proven to be a positive mechanism to improve self-esteem for young black males in this country. It is imperative that if we want to save our most vulnerable populations that we develop structures and support systems to help our country's disadvantaged populations to achieve something other than working at menial jobs that offer no hope for advancement, and which do not allow them

to provide adequately for their families. We must provide our at-risk populations with realistic opportunities to help themselves succeed, achieve the American Dream, and not just become another statistic in our justice system.

The conceptual model presented in this thesis will hopefully enable communities and educational programs, as well as other institutions, to not only better understand the lives of African American adolescent males today, but to also realize how role models can be used to break the cycles of hopelessness and with their accompanying behavioral patterns. By first understanding the importance of role models in the development of their identities, especially with those male adolescents who grew up in households without the presence of a male parental figure, it will hopefully inspire institutions to expand their use of role models in the programs that they offer.

Additionally, this conceptual model concludes that it is not just the presence of role models that will be helpful, but that these role models need to be individuals who the youth can both relate to and respect. By providing African American male adolescents with role models who are successful members of their own black community, and who have experienced many of the same difficulties that the adolescents are presently faced with, there is a far greater chance that the addition and presence of role models in their lives will have positive results.

According to Rotter's social learning theory, the longer an individual has been exposed to reinforcement, the more difficult it will be to change their behavior. With the case of African American male adolescents, the many years of negative reinforcement that they have been subjected to has resulted in them having little hope that they can expect anything better in their future. To counteract this belief, social workers should

attempt to introduce role models into the lives of these disadvantaged youth at a much younger age. Additionally, by having a greater number of grade school teachers be male, it will provide an additional positive model for the African American boys to emulate. Although the introduction of positive male role models at an earlier age is essential, the additional exposure to role models in other institutions also needs to be established. While there is nothing wrong with aspiring to be the next Michael Jordan, it is important for these young men to see that they can succeed in the American Dream in other ways as well.

My own experiences at the Met Center support the hypothesis that extended periods of role model exposure can have positive results. By having the same adult be a student's mentors for four consecutive years, a student at the Met has an extended period of reinforcement for their behavioral changes to occur. The exposure to additional positive role models through their intern experiences, also adds significantly to the amount of positive reinforcement that they receive. The increased graduation rates and higher percentages of students who continue on to institutions of higher learning, support this approach.

Social workers need to be more aware that identity development can not be separated from social context. This is especially true with the legacy of slavery and discrimination that is still negatively affecting the black youth of today. If social workers are not culturally informed themselves, such as with the knowledge of how important the extended family is in the African American culture, they will not be able to be an empathetic presence in the lives of African American male adolescents. As social workers become more culturally sensitive they need to be careful, however, not to lose

sight of the fact that although discrimination and hopelessness has been internalized into the identity of many African Americans, how each individual will interpret and react to that discrimination will be very different. As Marcia and Erickson point out, since every individual has a unique set of experiences, their interpretations, judgments, and their resulting behaviors, will also be unique.

Social workers, and role models, need to be especially aware of Akers' focus on how individuals do not need to necessarily define behavioral choices as being good, but only as justifiable. As the temptation of easy money through drug transactions and other crimes is placed in front of African American males, the belief that they are justified to engage in at-risk behavior as a result of all the injustices that they feel their race has had to endure, is a very powerful force to counteract. Justified behavior needs to be replaced by behavior that an individual defines as good. This can be a direct product of exposure to positive role models.

Social workers should also be very careful to never lose sight of the fact that in the learning process, results are not always immediate. As Bandura posits, an immediate and permanent behavioral change does not need to occur to prove that learning has occurred. Although behavioral theorists would disagree, learning may have occurred even when there is not an obvious change in behavior. Through the observation of others that occurs over an extended period of time, African American male youths can incorporate their observations into their identities. Behavioral changes as a result from interactions with positive role models may not become evident until a later time.

As social workers, we need to continue to promote programs that reach out into the local communities to find and promote role models that African American male

adolescents can view as similar to themselves. While not giving the impression that menial jobs are demeaning, it is important to supply role models that can inspire these youth to have higher career aspirations. By having exposure to other black males who have made the behavioral choices that resulted in them having a lifestyle that can be viewed as valuable and respectable by a young black male, it can help black adolescents to realize that there are interesting possibilities and exciting options that they can explore.

Strengths of Theoretical Thesis

Although empirical studies were used to describe the phenomena, this thesis was not driven by the statistics. By conducting a study that examined the effect of role models on identity development of African American males with a qualitative approach, it enabled the model to not get bogged down with quantitative specifics that could have introduced stereotypical biases into the model. An additional strength of this study was that the identity development and social learning theories that were used did not only apply to African American youth, but were broad based. Although the theories took into consideration the importance of environment, especially ethnicity, they considered the broader and more general identity issues that African American males have in common with their white counterparts.

The identity development theories of Erickson and Marcia were especially useful, since they enabled us to gain a fundamental understanding of identity development in general. Their theories also established a solid foundation for the addition of gender and ethnic identity issues. Although the identity theories used do apply nicely to the target population, they are not limited to that population, and are therefore useful in social work with other ethnic populations.

In the same way that the identity development theories provided a wide base for the development of this model, the social learning theories also presented a universal approach to how learning occurs during the adolescent years. By including the importance of environment and modeling into the discussion, the result was that these theories were extremely relevant to specific populations, such as African American male adolescents. By viewing the phenomena through a theoretical lens it was possible to avoid having the model tainted by racial stereotypes. The identity development theories of Erickson and Marcia, although initially formulated for the white majority, enabled us to gain a fundamental understanding of identity development in general. Even with their focus on white youth, their theories helped to establish a solid foundation for the eventual addition of gender and ethnic identity theories into this study. Similarly, the social learning theories were developed by white theorists did introduce the importance of environment and modeling into discussion of how learning occurs during the adolescent years with African American males. By viewing the phenomena through a theoretical lens it was possible to avoid having the model being tainted by racial stereotypes.

Limitations of Theoretical Thesis

Potential limitations to this study exist in several areas. My own personal professional experiences with African American adolescent males, the fact that the theories used were predominantly formulated by white middleclass theorists, the broadness of the term “African American”, and the lack of certainty concerning the importance of a male parental figure physically living in the household, are all important factors to consider when evaluating this model.

Our personal experiences can influence and impact the way in which we look at the world. Working with African American youth in Providence, Rhode Island, confirmed my perspective that African American males continue to suffer from unequal opportunities and the lack of respect by the larger society. Although this may have influenced my approach to this study, I was also aware that I was formulating a model that was potentially based on only one experience in one school.

As more and more studies are completed, it has become evident that, although most of the theories on identity development include environmental and ethnic components, the fact that they were for the most part formulated by members of the dominant white society may significantly impact on how relevant they are to different ethnicities and cultures. Although there are certain principles that clearly apply to the general population at large, more care needs to be taken to make sure that developed models are constructed in a way that is culturally sensitive and knowledgeable.

It has become increasingly evident that the term “African American”, as it is used today, is far too broad. In the same way that “European” or “South American” can encompass very different cultures, “African American” can include very different cultures and ethnicities. Individuals who might be classified as “African American”, but who have their roots in Africa, the Caribbean, South America, or from the United States, will all have very different histories and cultures, that will potentially alter how their identity develops and how they learn.

An additional and potentially significant limitation of this study is the present lack of research as to the actual importance of the lack of a male parent living in a household. Stereotypes are easily formed as to the relevancy of this phenomenon.

Although it is easy for individuals who were raised in traditional white households with two parents to formulate an opinion as to the importance of the absence of a father figure, until more studies are completed that take into account the extended families of African Americans, as well as the continued contact of the fathers with their children after they leave the household, this limitation will continue to exist.

Summary

In order to fully understand the effect of role models on African American adolescent male identity development, theories on identity development and social learning were considered. Adolescents are constantly struggling with who they are and where they fit in, as they seek acceptance from their peers. To understand this struggle it was important to first examine how their identity was affected by their ethnicity, their family, and by the larger society that surrounded them. African American males are currently struggling academically, even as compared to their black female counterparts, and they are disproportionately represented in the prison populations. African American males are also at a higher risk of developing emotional, physical, and psychological problems.

This study reassured the author that there is significant evidence that role models can have a positive effect on the identity development of African American adolescent males. In a society where African American males are stereotyped as unmotivated and underachieving, adults have the capacity of helping this population transition into adulthood. The insertion of adults into the lives of this population can make the difference between being able to avoid the negative temptations and behaviors that they are subjected to in their daily lives, or following a path that leads towards poverty and

possibly crime. Role models have the opportunity to help these youth to adopt alternative adaptive techniques through emulation and mirroring. Since some adolescents find it extremely difficult to develop close relationships with an adult outside of their family, it is important for schools and other institutions to take an active role in introducing role models into the lives of this population.

The presence of significant male role models who are admired by adolescents, not only has the ability of not only enhancing their identity, but also in promoting resilience. There is ample evidence that an adolescent male without a male parental figure in their life but who had a substitute male as a role model, was likely to have a more positive outcome. Role models can provide adolescents with an increased sense of self-worth, and through their relationships, they are also able to present opportunities and resources that these youth would not otherwise be aware of or consider possible.

The absence of a father, or father figure, can increase the acceptance of negative influences from peers. Having siblings that act as role models may also increase problematic behavior, since the attitudes and experiences that older siblings may have previously experienced, are sometimes introduced into their present relationships. Positive role models provide individuals with a sense of being respected, and the opportunity to share positive mentoring activities, as they transition into adulthood. There are compelling theoretical reasons to believe that same race role models may be especially beneficial for minority students.

It is important to consider that this study was impacted by own clinical experience at the Met Center in Providence, Rhode Island. The Met Center was a place that provided their students with opportunities to model and imitate not only their teachers, but also

professionals from the local work force. These interactions gave this vulnerable population the opportunity to see that there could be a brighter future for them. The Met Center was in many ways a representation of the ideas incorporated in modern day social learning theory.

Future qualitative studies will help to really capture the voices of this population, and through their narrative stories to more fully understand how role models have affected and impacted their lives. If this population is going to break free from the bonds of their past experiences, more African American male role models need to be identified and incorporated into the lives of these youth. It is important to have young black males see that success is possible, despite all the adversities that they are faced with daily. It is imperative that this type of opportunity continues to grow and be implemented in schools and institutions throughout the U.S. Without the help and support of adults to encourage, empower and to show that black males can be successful, then the concept that African American male adolescents are an endangered species will come true, and this country will be responsible for failing them.

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Appendix A

Role Models for African American Adolescent Boys: A Conceptual Model



