How African American Fathers Teach Racial Socialization To Their Children Attending Primary White Schools

Abstract

While Bettis and Sternod (2008) asserted the notion of boys being in crisis as not a new phenomenon but a historically cyclical one, present research contends that African American men are one of the most at-risk groups in the United States. School and criminal justice systems show similar results. African American men continue to lag in terms of graduation rates and college enrollment, while being overrepresented in victim violence and the criminal justice system. They also lead the nation in homicides as both victims and perpetrators. Despite these obstacles, many at-risk African American men graduate from college and excel in life. A variety of protective factors contributes to their progress. While the reasons for failed progress and risk factors are saturated within the research, there remains few outlets that focus on protective factors that have helped many African American men. As such, the proposed study will explore and identify protective factors that have contributed to the progress of successful African American men in hopes of aiding others in their community in overcoming risks and embarking on a more successful path.
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Literature Review

Racial socialization has been defined as the “transmission of parents’ world views about race and ethnicity to children by way of subtle, overt, deliberate and unintended mechanisms” (Hughes, 2003, p.15). As noted above, these world views have often been viewed as a class of adaptive and protective messages and practices used to promote positive racial identity and prepare ethnic minority children to combat racism (Bowman & Howard, 1985). In light of a number of recent studies showing evidence that particular messages about race, as well as socialization behaviors, compensate for and protect against harmful effects of African American racial discrimination experiences further research is necessary to learn about the nature of racial socialization processes and the mechanisms that underlie the relationship between socialization and positive youth development. Adolescents’ racial identity attitudes may be an important mediating factor in these processes. As a result, it is necessary to further investigate the link between racial socialization and racial identity.

The plight of African American men remains an area of interest for scholars. The research addresses internal and external forces that prevent full positive engagement in society for African American men. Several scholars have associated the dilemma of African American men with a lack of academic success, disparities in education, low social economic status, high unemployment, and over incarceration (Walton, & Oakley, 2008; Hawkins & Kempf-Leonard, 2005; Paschall & Hubbard, 1998; Foluke, 2001). These factors are believed to be contributory of what scholars deemed as endangered species or an under-crisis group, often failing to focus on the many African American men who have achieved success despite obstacles.

African Americans have a history of valuing education (Griffin & Wolf, 2007). For many, schools have been viewed as a protective factor and instrumental in helping African Americans to develop the self-efficacy needed to achieve academically (Holcomb, 2007). A college degree is reviewed as an even more viable benefit for society as it can result in an increased economic tax base, reduced reliance for social services, and a host of benefits to oneself. Individual benefits from higher education include enhanced career mobility and security, social networks, employment skills, and increased earning potential. These examples illustrate the tangible significance of achieving successive levels of
education. Many African American men enroll in colleges and universities; with the goal of enhancing their social and economic mobility, graduating from college, and excelling in life (Johnson-Bailey, Ray, Lasker-Scott, 2008).

Statement of the Problem

Despite insurmountable risk factors, many African American have completed college. Stayhorn (2008) report that only approximately 40% of African American students enroll in a school of higher education or some type of program among the small number who graduate. As the desolate representation of African American men in college has been noted by numerous researchers (Harper, 2006a; Palmer & Stayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008a, 2008), at only 5.18% of total postsecondary enrollment, Bush and Bush (2008) note community colleges serving as a primary pathway into education for African American men. The largest proportion of African American men 33.2% are enrolled in community colleges. The distribution of African American men by institutional sectors suggest that public two-year colleges serve as a primary revenue of access into postsecondary education. Still there are more than three million African American men enrolled in colleges and universities around the nation (Lee, 2008). Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) provide a large level of access to postsecondary education for African American men as more than one hundred thousand men are enrolled in these institutions. HBCUs are defined by federal law as colleges and universities with a mission focus on serving African Americans established prior to 1964 (Lee, 2000).

African American men face greater challenges than their peers. The research acknowledges select characteristics of African American men in postsecondary education, including background characteristics and environmental pressures that have been shown to influence outcomes for African American men. Age has been shown to be an important consideration in success as being younger was a positive predictor of persistence (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2007). Generation status is also thought to be a consideration that influences success as first generation students are less likely to succeed than student’s who parents have earned a college degree (Freeman & Huggans, 2008). Strayhorn (2006) reports that first-generation students typically have limited cultural and social capital needed for success in academia. While college-educated parents are more likely to provide intellectual stimulation within the home and more likely to prepare them for higher
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Moreover, the majority of African American men in college are independents which may involve a level of external responsibility with collegiate commitments. Financial barriers were also found to be a negative predictor of African American success in college (Mason, 1998). This illustrates that various forms of capital whether financial or social, are highly correlated and often not accessible to African American men.

Purpose of Study

This study will set a positive tone, often neglected in the research, in its discussion of how at-risk African American men can successfully complete college and make extraordinary contributions to society despite various obstacles. The study will attempt to explore and identify the protective factors that contribute to the progress of successful African American men. These identified protective factors are intended to aid future generations of African American men in overcoming risks and embarking on a more successful path.

The study identifies multiple considerations that exist far before admittance to college. There are a host of components, including but not limited to, parental involvement, community dynamics, education, and psycho-social detriments that are relative to the African American male experience. These components will be addressed in detail. This qualitative study will consist of interviews with various successful African American men who have completed college. The interviewees will discuss attributes to their participation in college and success. The study will investigate these attributes to determine if a common theme exists among participants. The participants will be given a short survey to determine if they meet the qualifications of the study. The participants must self-identify as an African American man, have an at-risk background, and completed a 2 or 4-year college. Once completed, the study will outline risk components and provide protective factors that will increase knowledge of the experiences of African American men.

Parental Involvement

Recent Census Bureau figures reveal that the percentage of African American families having two parents has continuous fallen since the 1990s. A majority of African American boys are being raised by single mothers (Robinson, 2008). McLanahan (1991) found that growing up in a single-parent home had a
significantly negative impact on a student’s educational achievement, including negative consequences for grade point average, school attendance, and high-school completion. Parental involvement has also been identified as a significant predictor of college enrollment, as a number of studies have linked it with schooling outcomes (Kim & Schneider 2005; Perna & Titus 2005; Riegle-Crumb 2008). Similarly, Engberg and Wolnaik (2008) showed parent contact to positively impact the likelihood of a student attending a 4-year college. It is suggested that marital status can also have a direct impact on parental involvement as added resources may allow more time and energy to devote to a child. Varner and Mandara (2008) suggest that African American children raised in households with both parents are more balanced in levels of responsiveness and behavior control. Although single mothers are charged with having the same interest and willingness as married parents to help their children with educational, parents who possess large quantities of human capital are in a better position to invest in their children (Robinson, 2008).

Parent Relationships

Differential socialization in terms of parent relationship accounts for the large achievement disparities between African American adolescent males and females. Varner and Mandara (2008) concluded that reducing differential parenting could aide in narrowing gender differences in achievement among African American adolescents. African American mothers engage in more behavioral control with daughters than with sons, monitor female adolescents more, and give females more rules regarding curfews and dating. African American mothers have higher expectations for girls for future academic and professional success (Varner & Mandara, 2008). These differences in maternal beliefs and expectations could contribute to differences in academic self-beliefs and achievement in males compared to females.

The differences in parenting may be due to higher expectations as African American males underperform females throughout the educational pipeline as they have lower grade point averages, standardized test scores, graduation rates, and college matriculation. Societal trends of higher educational attainment among African American women and higher rates of incarceration among African American men may also lead to mothers having lower expectations of their sons. Another possible theory suggests that African American mothers provide more
warmth and affection for their sons, while holding more expectations for their daughters (Varner & Mandara, 2014). Still, in some ways the research is mixed, as Smetana and Gaines (1999) found middle-class African American mothers of boys are found to engage in more conflict with their children about schoolwork and homework than mothers of girls. Concern about protecting boys from racial discrimination contributes to them punishing boys more frequently (Smetana & Gaines, 1999). Hence, parenting has been linked to outcomes of psychological well-being and academic achievement among African American youth.

Psychosocial Determinants

Impact of Stereotypes

African American men are often viewed through stereotypical lenses. Stereotypes pose a challenge to raising healthy men. The violence and hypersexualization of black men in films and videos can have detrimental effects. The acceptance of these stereotypes can be used to either perpetuate dominant notions of masculinity or to undermine dominant conceptions. Major and Billson’s (1992) concept of the “cool pose” referring to ways of speaking, gestures, aesthetics, etc. that constitute black masculinity can be used to illustrate this point. African American men engage in attitudes and actions such as this concept to empower themselves due to a lack of institutional power (Kunjufu, 2001).

Stereotypes have become part of schooling experience due to a history of racial and ethnic stratification. The impact of stereotypes on a person who is required to complete tasks related to particular stereotypes can also be a challenge. Horowitz (2008) propose that when a person performs a task that involves a negative stereotype for their group they will perform poorly due to the threat associated with the task. Hence, the person develops a threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm the stereotype, referred to as stereotype threat. Steele and Aronson (1998) coined the term stereotype threat as central to understanding African American’s perception about academic achievement.

According to Steele and Aronson (1998) stereotype threat is a major culprit to the underperformance of African American undergraduate students. Stereotype threat is credited as an explanation as to why capable African Americans fail to
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perform as well as their counterparts often receiving lower standardized test scores, lower college grades, lower graduation rates, etc. Other findings indicate that weaker academic identity and skills do not provide a reasonable explanation for stereotype threat (Steele 1999).

Protective Factors

Despite the aforementioned risk factors, all African American men do not succumb to negative outcomes. Although many African American men are confronted with a massive array of risks, many manage to navigate these obstacles with success. Still, little is identified as protective mechanisms that foster resilience and success for African American boys. Protective factors are categorized as internal and external strengths that reduce the negative influence of risks on outcomes (Thomas, Caldwell, & Jagers, 2008). Noguera (2003) noted the misperception in knowing less about those African American males who employed resiliency, perseverance, and coping strategies when surrounded by hardships than those who succumb and become victims of their environment. As such it is important to acknowledge the numerous protective factors that have contributed to college graduation and the success of African American males.

Harvey and Hill (2004) contend that interventions cannot just occur in school but also within the family unit. Social support within neighborhoods and connectedness are protective factors for African American boys. In terms of differential parenting, findings from Varner and Mandara (2008) support that reducing gaps in parenting may help in reducing gender gap achievement by providing empirically informed and culturally sensitive parenting interventions. Interventions beneficial to boys include awareness of subconscious tendencies to raise sons and daughters differently and helping parts learn effective ways to respond to parenting difficulties.

Harvey and Hill (2004) examined a multifaceted Afrocentric youth and family rites of passage program that intervened with youth in various domains: individual, peer group, immediate family, extended family, and community. The Rites of Passage program offered three interventions: an after-school component, family enhancement and empowerment activities, and individual and family counseling. The after-school intervention was fostered around teaching interpersonal skills, promoting positive peer relationships, and nurturing high self-
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esteem among youth. The extended family intervention focused on family enhancement and empowerment sessions held as a retreat for parents and guardians to enhance parenting skills, family involvement, bonding, and cultural identity. The final intervention of individual and family counseling focused on problem solving, decision making, awareness and identification of feelings, appropriate expression, improvement of communication skills, strategies for conflict resolution, and expressing appreciation and understanding of each family member. The results of the interventions showed that youth experienced sizable increases in self-esteem, racial identity, cultural awareness, and enhanced bonding. The program also yielded positive effects on parents and guardians of the youth as there was positive statistical differences in parenting skills, community involvement, cultural awareness, and racial identity. Based off the success of the program, it is proposed that at-risk youth ascertain culturally competent interventions.

Often encouraged to be used with other support systems, mentoring has been used as an effective tool for working with at-risk adolescents. Mentoring programs that address the unique cultural needs of African Americans as evolving from a social process and structure that includes oppression and discrimination are needed. Mentoring creates positive opportunities for collaboration, goal achievement, and problem solving. Dependent on the need of the mentee, mentors can function in many possible roles including advocate, teacher, counselor, role model, or source of support (Williams, & Bailey 2008).

Noguera (2003) proposed that schools take actions that can reverse the patterns of low achievement among African American males. One way this could be accomplished involves studying the schools and programs that have proven successful in changing the patterns of low achievement. It is important to investigate the factors related to classroom maladjustment for those who are most at-risk. Various examples of reforming and improving educational settings by integrating conflict resolution, social skills training, counseling, etc. exist. These methods have worked well with particular populations in certain settings. In addition, various schools have implemented programs and curriculum suited for urban low-income males (Noguera, 2003).

Robinson (2008) revealed that single- African American mothers who expressed active attitudes and behavior influenced their son’s academic success. The mothers were deemed proactive in building skills related to their son’s best
interests by interacting with key people involved in their environment and teaching them positive lessons for success. The mothers encouraged and motivated their sons by building on their interests, being attentive and available. Several characteristics were apparent in the strategies used by the mothers. The most common characteristics of single African American mothers of academically successful African American boys in low performing schools included being a knowledgeable resource, tactful motivator, and supporter of “whole-child”.

Robinson (2008) also noted the importance in teaching skills and resources to teach their son’s how to be successful and ensure that other key people are assisting in keeping their son on a positive path. While a tactful motivator involved motivating their sons by nurturing passions and strengths and redirecting negative influences. Mothers were able to be the supporter of “whole-child” through constant monitoring and providing financial, psychological, and emotional support to their sons. There are also notable strategies implemented by single-parent mother’s that are used to influence academic success of African American boys including talking to their son regularly, surrounding sons with positive role models in the community, and addressing the root of the problem affecting their son until the problem is resolved. (Robinson, 2008).

According to Uzzo (2008), hypothesized risk and protective factors reflects three systems of influence from a developmental ecological model. Interagency collaboration at the community level can provide an understanding of the impact of publicly monitored risks. Possible opportunities to partner with school leadership to generate prevention and intervention programs to better support the education of African American boys. Enhancing family engagement within African American boy’s educational experiences by improving communication between parents and teachers and providing opportunities for contribution was also found effective. Finally, opportunities to increase the academic engagement of African American boys by increasing the amount of emotional and instructional support that African American boys receive through teacher-student interactions. Also, the aid of professional development can potentially increase understanding about how race and gender matter and provide strategies to improve interactions with African American boys.

Shub (2008) noted that African American boys and men need their own theoretical framework which can capture their position and trajectory accounting
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for pre- and post-enslavement experiences while capturing spiritual, psychological, social, and educational development. Hence, the following tenets were highlighted in the development of African American Male Theory. It is proposed that the individual and collective experiences, behaviors, outcomes, events of African American boys and men are analyzed using an ecological approach, incorporating all interconnected environmental systems. The African American Male Theory also examines and discovers what is distinctive about the unique experience as a group and individual distinctions within the group. The theory is also built on the premises that there is a continuity and continuation of African culture, consciousness, and biology that influence the experiences of African boys and men. The theory posits that African American boys and men are born with an innate desire for self-determination and with an unlimited capacity for morality and with an unlimited capacity for morality and intelligence. It is also contended that racism, classism, and sexism have a profound impact on every aspect of the lives of African American males. The theory addresses the ability, capacity, and powers that people and/or systems exhibit that allow them to rise above adversity.

Conclusion

Interventions that recognize black males as being active agents in their own future are successful. Johnson (2008) explored the term somebodiness and its meaning to African American men. Somebodiness was described by having a sense of personal worth and value, discovering one’s purpose and making something positive out of one’s life, and helping the African American community. Somebodiness was found to be a fundamental need for African American men which allows them to believe they are persons of worth. Ethnic pride was also seen as a protective factor that promotes positive feelings about oneself and their group conducive to a generalized feeling of positive self-regard. African American male students were noted to obtain more academic benefits from feeling connected to their ethnic group (Johnson, 2008).

References

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