

Chapter 2

Self and Identity

Young people who think and feel positively about themselves tend to experience more positive life outcomes than those who feel and think negatively about themselves. Such positive life outcomes may include improved health and wellness, strong relationships with family and peers, high academic achievement, and reduced involvement in drugs and delinquent behavior. Attributes of the self and identity are unique for African American boys, when compared to African American girls and boys of other racial and ethnic groups. This chapter explores several characteristics of the self and identity for African American boys, including how the self and identity develop, unique features of the self and identity, and factors that contribute to positive and negative self-attributes.

The PVEST model discussed in Chap. 1 provides a framework for helping us understand how the self and identity of African American boys are affected by their culture, family, and the community and context they live in. For example, living in an urban low-resource community can lead to exaggerated masculinity in order for them to feel safe. Socialization in a single-female-headed family structure might promote an androgynous gender role rather than a traditional masculine gender role orientation. Discrimination across several environmental contexts affects his well-being in many domains, although ethnic identity can attenuate the negative effects of discrimination. Consistent with the PVEST model, this chapter addresses how culture and context interplay with how his self and identity are formed and expressed.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the self, followed by a discussion of ethnic and racial identity including the protective role of ethnic/racial identity against discrimination. Gender role beliefs are discussed next, along with a discussion of masculinity and hypermasculinity. This is followed by a discussion of sexual identity with a focus on the identity of gay, bisexual, and questioning adolescent males. The chapter closes with a conclusion.

The Self

The self is one's conscious awareness of one's own being or identity as an object that is separate from others (Baumeister, 1998). Both the lay public and academic scholars have discussed, at length, the ways by which self-attributes affect developmental outcomes among children and adolescents. Research and literature on the development of the self includes writings on attributes such as self-worth, self-esteem, and self-concept. A review of this literature reveals that for African American males, while some aspects of the self are similar to African American females and males of other racial and ethnic groups, some aspects of the self differ.

Self-Esteem, Self-Concept, and Self-Worth

Self-esteem is how one feels about oneself and can be contrasted with self-concept, which has to do with one's beliefs and thoughts about the self (Rosenberg, 1965). Self-worth is a more global term and encompasses both self-esteem and self-concept. These conceptions of the self are often interchangeable and terms used will be consistent with authors cited. A positive self-worth achieved during childhood and adolescence has long-term positive developmental outcomes. Children with high self-esteem are more likely to enter adolescence and adulthood with more positive self-attributes than children with low self-esteem.

Mizell (1999) confirmed the link between self-esteem during adolescence and competency during adulthood for African Americans. Mizell analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to determine which factors, over the life course, contributed to African American adult males' personal sense of mastery. Personal mastery is beliefs in whether or not one has control over one's environment. Mizell's findings indicated that self-esteem during adolescence, along with educational aspirations and parental education, were significant determinants of whether or not adult males believed they had achieved control over their environments. Interestingly, poverty and low socioeconomic status, factors that have been historically identified as important to mastery, were not significant in this study. This study is significant as it highlights the important role that positive self-esteem plays in long-term positive developmental outcomes for youth.

While high self-esteem has been linked to positive youth development across several domains including emotional health (Moksnes, Moljord, Espnes, & Byrne, 2010), academic achievement, and delay in sexual initiation (Longmore, Manning, Giordano, & Rudolph, 2004), high self-esteem has also been associated with problem behaviors. Contrary to expectations, youth who engage in problem behaviors such as delinquency do not necessarily have lower self-worth than those who do not. They may have even higher feelings of self-worth (Baumeister, 1998). Bynum and Weiner (2002) examined the relationship between self-concept and

violent delinquency among 155 urban African American adolescent males. Participants' ages ranged from 14 to 19. The findings revealed that violent offenders, those who had assaulted others, had higher scores on self-concept. The authors explain this finding by suggesting that these participants may have accepted their delinquent behaviors as appropriate and, thus, were comfortable with this aspect of their identity.

Ethnic and Gender Differences in Self-Worth

The findings from most studies suggest that African American adolescents score higher on measures of self-esteem than adolescents from other ethnic and racial groups (Birndorf, Ryan, Auinger, & Aten, 2005; Sullivan & Evans, 2007). In an examination of self-esteem among African American adolescent males and females from a low-income housing community, Sullivan and Evans (2007) found that both males and females scored significantly higher than national norms on global self-worth and physical appearance. However, in this same study, the authors found that participants had significantly lower self-scores in perception of academic competency when compared to national norms. Males in this sample also had lower scores on close friendship and athletics compared to national norms. The authors suggest that these differences might be attributed to living in a low-resource community where residents might be more cautious when interacting with others and where there may be fewer opportunities for athletic activities.

African American adolescent males may be more concerned with certain aspects of self-esteem such as physical esteem, while females may be more concerned with interpersonal and social aspects of self-esteem. Sullivan and Evans (2007) examined this issue using a public housing sample of African American adolescents. The authors found that males scored significantly higher than females on a physical appearance sub-scale of self-esteem. Males may be more confident than females about how they look to others.

Family Factors and Self-Worth

Family factors such as parenting communication, cohesion, conflict, nurturance, and monitoring impact self-worth of all children and adolescents including African American boys. However, research suggests that family factors might impact self-esteem differently for African American girls and boys. When looking at the type of family factors, factors such as household structure and supervision might be more important for males, while family relationship factors might be more important to females' sense of self-worth. Mandara and Murray (2000) found that family structure was linked to self-esteem for boys but not girls. Boys with married parents had higher self-esteem than those who did not. This finding held true even when family

income and family functioning were controlled. Marital status of parents was not related to self-esteem among girls. For girls (but not boys), family relationships was related to self-esteem. The finding of a greater influence of family structure on the self-worth of boys rather than girls may be because boys in two-parent households receive more monitoring and supervision, as research suggests that there is less parental monitoring among boys than girls (Richards, Miller, O'Donnell, Wasserman, & Colder, 2004). Also, boys with a paternal figure present have a role model to emulate in developing their self-conceptualizations.

Self-worth might also be enhanced among boys who reside in two-parent households because support from two parents provides opportunities whereby boys can explore and participate in after-school activities, obtain guidance on their school work, and achieve mastery. Perhaps it is the achievement of these competencies that boosts their self-worth. On the other hand, a girl's sense of self and identity is more closely tied into her relationships with others including family relationships. This may account for why family relationships are more essential to her well-being (Belgrave, 2009).

Although family structure seems to be important for positive self-development among African American boys, many do not grow up in households that support the needed monitoring and structure. About 67 % of African American males grow up in single-parent-headed households (Kid Count Data Center and Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014). In female-headed households, the mother is likely to be working and close supervision and monitoring may not be available. When boys are raised in a one-parent household, whether female or male headed, it is important to provide monitoring and supervision. Supervision and structure can come from other family members, friends, or after-school activities. After-school programs within and outside of the school can be used to augment structure and supervision from parents.

Depression and Anxiety

One consequence of low self-worth is depression and anxiety. Statistics on depression among adolescents are available from the Centers for Disease Control Youth Risk Survey (CDC, 2012a). This survey consists of data from a national sample of students in grades 9–12. Students are asked several questions about depression. One question is whether or not the students have felt sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 or more weeks in a row, and if they stopped doing some usual activities during the 12 months before the survey. The prevalence of feeling sad or hopeless was higher among White female (34.3 %), Black female (31.4 %), and Hispanic female (41.47 %) than White male (20.7 %), Black male (18.0 %), and Hispanic male (24.46 %) students. As these statistics show, there was little difference in depression among African American and White males (both slightly lower than for Hispanic males). Depression was substantially lower among African American males than African American females.

The statistics cited here are not intended to suggest that depression is not a serious problem among African American adolescent males but that the prevalence is not as high as for African American females. This is true for other ethnic groups, as females across all ethnic groups report more depression than males. Depression and anxiety might manifest differently among males who engage in externalizing behaviors such as drug use, aggression, and anger to mask depression. These behaviors involve aggressive acts toward others rather than oneself.

Similar to depression, there are gender differences in anxiety. African American adolescent females report more anxiety than African American adolescent males. This is true for other ethnic groups as well. Palapattu, Kingery, and Ginsburg (2006) looked at gender, gender role orientation, and anxiety among a sample of African American adolescents aged 14–19. The authors found that African American girls reported higher levels of anxiety than boys. Furthermore, gender role orientation was a contributor to anxiety. Higher levels of feminine gender roles were correlated with higher levels of anxiety in both males and females. Feminine gender roles endorse compassion, caring, and concern about others. Conversely, higher levels of masculine gender role beliefs were associated with lower levels of anxiety. Masculine gender role beliefs endorse independence, assertiveness, and confidence.

Discrimination contributes to depression and anxiety. Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers, and Jackson (2008) examined psychological well-being in a national sample of Black adolescents including 810 African Americans and 360 Caribbean Black youth. The majority of youth had reported one discriminatory incident in the previous year. Perceptions of discrimination were positively linked to depressive symptoms, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. Consistent with other research findings, males in this study reported more discrimination than females. Older adolescents reported more discrimination than younger adolescents. The authors suggested that African Americans in early rather than later adolescence may have been in an earlier stage of ethnic identity where identity had not been explored and subsequently they did not perceive that they have been discriminated against based on ethnicity.

In summary, African American boys are likely to report higher overall self-esteem and self-worth than African American girls and boys from other ethnic/racial groups. Living in a household with father present contributes to a positive sense of self for boys more so than for girls. African American boys experience levels of depression and anxiety similar to that of boys from other racial/ethnic groups and lower than that of African American girls.

Racial and Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity is one's feelings of belongingness, attachment, and connection to an ethnic or racial group (Phinney & Kohatsu, 1997). Racial identity is identification with and feelings of attachment based on one's racial group. High racial/ethnic identity is associated with several positive developmental outcomes including better academic performance (Bernal, Saenz, & Knight, 1995), higher self-perceptions

(Allen, Philliber, Herrling, & Kuperminc, 1997), prosocial behaviors (Smith, Walker, Fields, Brookins, & Seay, 1999), and less substance use and risky sexual behaviors (Belgrave, Brome, & Hampton, 2000; Belgrave, Van Oss Marin, & Chambers, 2000). While many studies have been conducted on ethnic identity and adolescent functioning, fewer studies have examined ethnic identity specifically among African American adolescent males.

Racial socialization (i.e., how African American parents socialize their children about what it means to be Black in their society) affects ethnic identity development (see Chap. 3). Parental racial socialization messages contribute to higher levels of ethnic and racial identity among youth. Fortunately, most African American adolescents are able to develop a positive ethnic/racial identity, although there is a continuum.

In an earlier study, Plummer (1995) investigated patterns of racial identity development among African American adolescent males and females. The four sequential stages of racial identity were used to identify the developmental stage of these adolescents (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990). These included the *pre-encounter* stage in which White culture is seen as superior to Black culture and White culture is the frame of reference used. In the *encounter* stage, the individual becomes aware of his/her race and how he/she might be perceived by others. This stage may be preceded by an incident of racism. During the *emersion-immersion* stage, the individual emerges him/herself in Black activities exclusively. The only acceptable values and standards of behavior are those that are predominately associated with being Black. In the *internalization* stage, the individual has internalized an identity about being Black and recognizes and appreciates all racial and ethnic groups.

Participants in the Plummer study included 174 African American adolescent females and 111 African American adolescent males (ages 14–18). Parham and Helms' (1981) Racial Identity Attitude Scale (RIAS) was used to measure racial identity. The author predicted that participants would most often endorse internalization attitudes and least often endorse pre-encounter attitudes. This prediction was based on the assumption that adolescents would have negotiated some of the identity struggles in childhood and come to a resolution of identity. They further expected that there would be a difference in stages of racial identity for males and females given gender differences between males and females in social, personality, and moral development. The findings revealed that participants widely endorsed internalization attitudes. Internalization attitudes represent a healthy and positive view of racial identity in which the person is accepting of both self and others. The study further found that females endorsed pre-encounter attitudes significantly less than males. It was not clear why this was the case, but the author discussed that pre-encounter attitudes depict a pre-discovery of self as a racial being. Perhaps, adolescent males are not as far along in their social and intrapersonal development as females are at the same age.

In a more recent study of gender and developmental differences in racial identity, Smith, Levine, Smith, Dumas, and Prinz (2009) examined racial identity development among children in grades kindergarten through third grade. Similar to

Plummer (1995), Smith et al. found that racial identity, as measured by own-group preferences, increased with age. Although, in kindergarten, boys had higher levels of own-group preference than girls, girls' own-group preference increased as they matured.

The Protective Role of Ethnic Identity

Higher levels of ethnic identity are a protective factor and serve as a buffer under stressful and adverse conditions. Several studies have explored how a strong ethnic identity buffers against racial discrimination (Wakefield & Hudley, 2005; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). African American males are more likely to experience discrimination than African American females (Cogburn, Chavous, & Griffin, 2011) and males from other racial and ethnic groups (Cokley, Hall-Clark, & Hicks, 2011).

Wakefield and Hudley (2005) examined the responses of African American adolescent males to discrimination and how these responses varied according to the stages of racial identity. Responses to discrimination could include being passive, active, or using aggression. African American adolescent males were presented with discrimination scenarios (e.g., discrimination at a job interview, mall, basketball game, and prom) and asked how they would respond to it. The three stages of ethnic identity among participants were also assessed. These included *unexamined*, *exploration*, and *achieved*. The *unexamined* stage is similar to the *pre-encounter* stage in which there are internalized beliefs and attitudes of a White reference group. The *exploration* stage occurs when individuals begin to explore the meaning of their ethnic group membership in relation to the dominant culture. The *achieved* stage is one in which participants have heightened awareness of being African American and have achieved their identity and are comfortable with it.

The results of the Wakefield and Hudley study revealed that males with more passive responses to discrimination were more likely to be in the *unexamined* status than in the *exploration* and *achieved* statuses. These findings suggest that African American males who are comfortable with their racial identity may be protected from some of the stressors resulting from racial discrimination. Males in the *achieved* status were less likely to internalize the negative beliefs about what it means to be an African American because they know what it means to be an African American. As discussed previously, African American males are more likely to encounter discrimination than African American females (and any other ethnic/racial group) so efforts to promote a healthy ethnic identity should be especially beneficial for this group.

Similarly, Seaton (2010) found a protective benefit of ethnic identity against racial discrimination on depression. Seaton conducted a study on perceived racial discrimination, racial identity, and depression. Three identity profiles were created using data from 322 African American adolescents. The identity profiles were *Buffering/Defensive*, *Alienated*, and *Idealized*. The *Buffering/Defensive* group believed race was essential to their identity, felt positively about being African

American, and believed that others held more negative beliefs about African Americans. The *Alienated* group did not believe race was central to their identity, felt less positive about being African American and believed that others felt negative about African Americans. The *Idealized* group believed race was key to their identity, felt positive about being African American, and believed others held positive beliefs about African Americans. The relationship between perceptions of racial discrimination and depression was moderated by these identity profiles. Perceptions of racial discrimination were linked to higher levels of depressive symptoms for adolescents with alienated identity profiles but not those who had *Buffering/Defensive* or *Idealized* identity profiles.

Mandara, Gaylord-Harden, Richards, and Ragsdale (2009) found support for the protective role of racial identity in producing positive developmental outcomes among African American adolescent males. These authors were interested in whether self-esteem, along with racial identity, affected depression and anxiety among African Americans boys and girls as they transitioned from seventh to eighth grade. For the male sample, they found that self-esteem and racial identity (feelings of belongingness based on racial group membership) were strongly correlated. This significant correlation was not found for females. Because boys may be more influenced by their peers than girls, affiliation with and feeling connected to similar peer group members may enhance feeling good about the self. Of significance was the finding that the higher males' racial identity were in the seventh grade, the less likely they were to report depression over the school year. This finding held true even after controlling for self-esteem, suggesting that racial identity may be more protective than self-esteem. They also found that racial identity among girls was a buffer against depression, but this relationship was not as strong as for males.

The school is an environment in which African Americans face discrimination. Discrimination comes from peers, teachers, and other school staff discrimination is stressful and contributes to lower academic achievement. Even students in predominantly African American schools encounter teachers that have internalized negative stereotypes about African American males. Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, and Cogburn (2008) examined the impact of one aspect of racial identity, centrality, as a positive factor against school discrimination in a sample of 410 African American students in the 8th and 11th grades. Racial centrality is the extent to which a person views his/her racial group as a part of his/her self-concept (Sellers, Shelton, Cooke, Chavous, Rowley, & Smith, 1998). The authors were also interested in examining gender differences in reported experiences of discrimination and whether or not the relationship between school racial discrimination and academic engagement differed for boys and girls. They found, as expected, that boys reported more peer and classroom discrimination than girls. Among boys, higher levels of peer discrimination were associated with lower levels of academic performance and more negative academic attitudes. However, there was a protective effect for racial centrality identity among boys. Boys with higher (versus lower) racial centrality were at lower risk for the negative impact of classroom discrimination on academic outcomes (e.g., GPA, feeling that school was important). The authors note that a stronger identification with being African American may support boys in maintaining a positive academic outlook even when they encounter negatively based experiences.

While most research suggests a positive influence of ethnic identity on well-being and functioning across several life domains, this is not unequivocal. Some studies have shown negative effects of having a high racial or ethnic identity. For example, Hood, Brevard, Nguyen, and Belgrave (2013) found that high ethnic identity was associated with more rather than less stress among African American young adults. The authors suggested that a plausible reason for finding an association between ethnic identity and stress is that African American youth who are high in ethnic identity might be more salient to others and it is this increased salience that increases discrimination. Marsiglia, Kulis, and Hecht (2001) found that ethnic minority students who viewed their behavior, speech, and looks as consistent with their ethnic group reported more drug use and exposure. A plausible explanation for this finding is that ethnic minority students with these attitudes may have internalized stereotypical portrayals of ethnic minorities as “drug users” and subsequently behaved in ways consistent with these negative messages.

Overall, having a strong ethnic/racial identity is beneficial across several life domains for African American males. Strong ethnic and racial identity especially buffers against stress and other unfavorable outcomes in situations with actual or perceived discrimination. Recommendations for how ethnic/racial identity can be strengthened are provided in Chap. 8.

Gender Roles

Gender roles are an individual’s beliefs and expectations for how males and females should think and act in any given society (Bem, 1993). Gender role beliefs are acquired through socialization. Boys learn from several agents of socialization, including parents, kin, the media, and the larger society, about the appropriate roles and behaviors for males. The gender socialization process for African American boys differs from girls and that of other racial/ethnic minorities in several ways.

What Does It Mean to Be a Man?

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines masculine as having qualities appropriate to or usually associated with a man. According to Davis (2006), masculinity is evident through social interaction and, as such, masculinity comprises the social and culturally constructed meanings about being a man.

Masculinity ideology is defined as beliefs about the importance of men adhering to culturally defined standards of male behavior (Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993). Much of the research on masculinity ideology has focused on what has been called “traditional” masculinity ideology. Masculinity, in these terms, not only restricts men from exhibiting signs of behavior or attitudes attributed to the female role, but also entails a wide array of specific behaviors and self-perceptions to which men

closely adhere. For example, traditional masculinity entails such characteristics as homophobia, competitiveness, physical and sexual violence, restricted emotionality, and restricted affectionate behavior between men (O'Neil, 2002; O'Neil, Helms, Gable, Laurence, & Wrightsman, 1986).

Ethnic Difference in Gender Role Beliefs

Research suggests that there may be ethnic differences in gender role beliefs (Harris, 1996). These differences are not genetic but due to differences in socialization. The gender role beliefs of African American males are likely to be more androgynous than males from other racial/ethnic groups. Correspondently, scholars have noted that masculinity and femininity may coexist among African Americans (Dale & Sloan, 2000). For example, findings from one study showed that African American boys and adolescent males hold gender role beliefs that endorse both traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine attributes (Harris, 1996). Other studies have shown that African American men are more accepting of housekeeping and child care responsibilities than White men (Willinger, 1993) and that they differ with regard to their perception of the provider role (Diemer, 2002).

Androgynous gender role beliefs found among African American children and adolescents is also suggested by studies that show that African American boys and adolescent males score similar to African American girls on attributes traditionally thought of as feminine. For example, one study found that African American boys engaged in more prosocial behavior than African American girls, although typically prosocial behavior is higher among girls than boys (McMahon, Wernsman, & Parnes, 2006). Sullivan, Helms, Kliever, and Goodman (2010) found among a predominantly African American sample no difference in relational aggression between boys and girls in fifth and eighth grade, although in the general population, girls engage in more relational aggression and boys engage in more physical aggression. Esposito (2008) found among African American children no gender differences in overt aggression, while also finding that boys were more relationally aggressive than girls. These studies suggest that at least in the domains of prosocial behavior and aggression, African American boys and girls may not differ on attributes that differ for boys and girls in the general population.

The fact that African American boys may have similar gender role beliefs as African American girls than is the case with gender differences in other ethnic groups may be due to parental influences, primarily mothers who socialize boys to engage in behaviors that are both feminine and masculine simultaneously. For example, African American boys may have to assume household responsibilities such as caring for a sibling, preparing a meal, helping an elderly relative, all behaviors that may contribute to gender role beliefs that emphasize nurturance, caring, and responsibility to others. African American parents at the same time are likely to insist that boys stand up for themselves, not let anyone take advantage of them, and assert themselves on the playground. These behaviors convey to boys the importance of being independent, assertive, and in control, attributes that contribute to masculine gender role beliefs.

Factors Affecting Gender Role Beliefs

In general, African American boys are less likely to be raised in a household with a paternal figure compared to African American girls who are likely to be raised in households with a maternal figure. The absence of a primary male figure may affect certain aspects of the socialization process for African American boys (Parke, 1996).

Whether or not a father is present in the home affects the gender role development of boys. Research suggests that boys raised in households with fathers present might have more traditional masculine gender role orientations than those raised in households in which fathers are absent. Mandara, Murray, and Joyner (2005) studied this topic using a sample of 106 African American 15-year-olds in California. The authors found that even after demographic and psychosocial factors such as self-esteem, family income, and family functioning were controlled, boys in father-present households reported higher levels of current masculinity than did boys in father-absent households.

Findings from another study showed that boys raised in father-present households showed higher levels of testosterone. Testosterone affects differences in physical characteristics such as voice changes, physical strength, and other signs of masculinity. Flinn, Quinlan, Turner, Decker, and England (1996) studied hormone differences of men and women in a rural Caribbean town and found that adult men who had experienced father absence during childhood had lower levels of testosterone than those with their father present. The research linking testosterone to father absence is still preliminary and speculative and more research in this area is indicated.

Father absence or presence may also be linked to gender roles among girls. In the same study discussed previously, Mandara et al. (2005) found that girls in father-absent household displayed more masculine traits than those in father-present households. The authors discuss that the reason for this might be because mothers have a tendency to socialize their daughters to be independent and to model independence for their daughters when they are in male-absent households.

Mandara et al. (2005) also addressed this question: Would there be greater differences in gender roles among boys and girls in father-present or father-absent households? They found that boys and girls in father-absent households were more similar in gender roles than boys and girls in father-present households on measures of masculinity and femininity. These findings suggest that girls and boys in father-absent households are more likely to have similar gender roles. Since the majority of African American children grow up in father-absent households, this finding helps to explain the fewer differences between African American males and females in gender role beliefs.

The finding of more masculine gender role beliefs in father-present households holds true also in peer ratings. Beaty (1995) found that peers rated boys who were from father-present households as more masculine than those who lived in households without fathers present. The African American family is an extended family and African American youth are likely to have some involvement from significant males in their lives. However, the day-to-day relationship with one central male paternal figure is absent for many African American boys.

Masculine Gender-Role Beliefs

Masculine gender role beliefs of African American boys and adolescents both converge and diverge from gender role beliefs of other racial/ethnic groups. Research suggests that African American youth hold traditional gender role beliefs found among all men. Such beliefs include being masculine means to be a provider as well as beliefs that may be culturally unique, such as masculinity means to be a “player.”

Roberts-Douglass and Curtis-Boles (2013) conducted a retrospective qualitative study of 15 African American men (age 18–22 years) who lived in California. Participants were from diverse socioeconomic groups and lived in lower, middle, and upper-middle-class communities. Participants were asked to recall their images of masculinity for African American males during their adolescence and what influenced images of what is masculine? Participants indicated that they were exposed to multiple images of Black masculinity. These images came from a variety of sources including family members and kin, peers, neighborhoods, institutions of learning, media, and music. Seven images of masculinity emerged. They included: (1) tough guy; (2) gangsters/thug; (3) players of women; (4) flashy/flamboyant; (5) athletes; (6) providers; and (7) role models. Participants constructed both positive and negative images of masculinity. Positive images were informed by positive role model images from father and grandfather. Negative images of being a thug and a player mostly came from the media.

Kerrigan et al. (2007) found similar themes in interviews with African American male and female adolescents about what it means to be a man or woman. They interviewed 50 adolescents (ages 16–21) living in an inner city. Several themes emerged from these interviews. One theme males most frequently reported was that being a male meant being financially stable and having the ability to provide for others. Money was necessary for social status and for attracting women. However, jobs and employment may be lacking in inner cities where many African American adolescents live and this may lead to seeking money through illegal means such as drug sales or hustling. A second theme was that being a male meant being tough and having sexual prowess. Being tough led to drug sales and exaggerated sexual prowess.

Being perceived as tough may be crucial to an African American males’ definition of manhood. As African American boys transition into adolescence, they may feel that they have to present themselves to the world as tough and aggressive in order to be respected. Subsequently, they may carry themselves in a manner that may be perceived as intimidating and even menacing to their peers so that they are not preyed upon. Unfortunately, academic success does not go along with this tough image (Davis, 2006).

Hypermasculinity

The social context of the urban inner-city environment may also play a prominent role in the development of unique sex-role behaviors of African American male youth. In comparison to White youth or adolescents in suburban or rural settings,

young Black males in urban environments generally show higher levels of hypermasculine behavior (Mosher & Serkin, 1984; Zaitchik & Mosher, 1993).

Hypermasculinity is an exaggerated form of masculinity. This form of masculinity is characterized by physical and emotional toughness, aggressiveness, thrill seeking, and an emphasis on wealth (Hunter & Davis, 1994; Perkins, 1975; Staples, 1982). An emphasis on physical and emotional toughness may be linked to survival within urban environments where many African Americans reside. African American boys and adolescents who reside in inner-city communities may believe they cannot be perceived as “soft” or “weak” as this image will create problems. In fact, they may be picked on and subject to both physical and psychological abuse if seen as soft.

Thus, hypermasculinity develops as a coping mechanism for dealing with threats due to living in low-resource neighborhoods where there are elevated levels of crime and violence exposure. Over time these coping mechanisms become part of one’s identity (Seaton, 2007). Seaton describes how neighborhood risk creates a type of coping strategy that is eventually internalized as hypermasculinity. According to Seaton, fighting and weapon carrying among urban African American males may be due to school and neighborhood disorganization which result in both actual and perceived threats to manhood. Under these circumstances, some males choose to fight in the face of unbeatable odds rather than attempt to escape from a dangerous situation.

Seaton studied school context, threat, fear, and hypermasculinity in a sample of African American males attending public schools in a large city. Males in this study were able to assess danger in both distal and more immediate environments. The level of disorganization and chaos in their larger neighborhood significantly predicted neighborhood fear. Males who attended schools in disorderly neighborhoods characterized by high crime rates, high residential mobility, and high levels of drug use had higher levels of hypermasculinity. According to Seaton, adopting a hypermasculine attitude may help to show manhood when school and neighborhood context prevent traditional routes for accomplishing developmental tasks. Thus, hypermasculinity is best understood as a coping response to perceived threat than as a culturally maladapted identity.

Consequences of Hypermasculinity

Traditional gender role beliefs about the role of men are linked to risky behaviors for African American adolescent males. Pleck et al. (1993) used data from a national survey of 15–19-year-old males and found that participants who held more traditional masculine attitudes were more likely to have more sexual partners and use condoms less consistently. Hypermasculine attitudes lead to even more sexual behaviors especially of an exploitative nature (Lapollo, Bond, & Lauby, 2013). Wolfe (2003) provides a thoughtful discussion of how hypermasculinity contributes to exploitative and manipulative attitudes toward women, citing studies that show

that a small but substantial percentage of African American male adolescents engage in such exploitative behavior (e.g., it is ok to deceive a girl to have sex). Consistent with this is the fact that African American males have a higher number of sexual partners than males from other racial/ethnic group. Wolfe speculates that African American males may be overcompensating with regard to masculinity given that more traditional routes to masculinity are unattainable.

Hypervulnerability

Hypervulnerability is another aspect of identity that has been studied among African American adolescent males. Hypervulnerability is defined as the intense experience of feeling vulnerable (Stevenson, 2004). According to Cassidy and Stevenson (2005) some African American males may act hypermasculine to mask the hypervulnerability that arises from living in a chaotic and uncontrolled environment. Hypervulnerability is linked to depression, feelings of rejection, and aggressive behavior. Some of the other consequences of hypervulnerability include acceptance of abusive relationships, failure to expect care or love from others, and engaging in behaviors that hurt others emotionally or physically as a form of self-protection.

Cassidy and Stevenson studied hypervulnerability and mental health among 179 African American males recruited from a remedial disciplinary school. They found that depression and rejection sensitivity contributed to anger expression and aggression among these boys. This finding suggests that aggressive behavior among these youth may underlie a reactive coping strategy to hide feelings of hypervulnerability.

In summary, gender role beliefs of African American boys and girls are more likely to be similar than those of other racial/ethnic groups. Gender similarities in gender role beliefs are due to socialization processes of African American mothers, especially when boys grow up in a father-absent household. Hypermasculinity, an exaggerated form of masculinity, is believed to be a coping mechanism African American adolescent males use to be safe in tough environments. However, hypermasculine attitudes contribute to sexual risk and other problem behaviors including increased risk of delinquency.

Sexual Identity

Sexual identity is how one defines and views one's self as a sexual being, including sexual orientation (Diamond, 2002). One's sexual identity becomes salient during adolescence when sexuality is another self-defining attribute. As discussed, masculinity and especially hypermasculinity contribute to sexual prowess and over-identification with sexual conquest, including beliefs and behaviors that objectify women.

Froyum (2007) conducted an ethnographic study in a summer camp of low-income youth who were 12–17 years of age. As a participant observer, Froyum observed the process through which poor Black boys monitor their sexuality as a way to construct their identities. According to Froyum, boys gain power and symbolic dominance through sexualized profanity, the flaunting of girlfriends, and homophobia. Within these contexts, homophobia, heterosexism, and antigay behaviors are perceived by these boys as masculine behaviors that allow them to be seen as “real men.” The findings from this ethnographic qualitative study are consistent with other studies that show positive relationships between hypermasculinity and sexual prowess.

Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning Sexual Identity

Another aspect of sexual identity is sexual orientation. Because fitting in and belonging is so dominant during adolescence, being gay, bisexual, or questioning can be challenging. Negotiating sexual identity is challenging for all adolescents but it may be especially so for African American males who do not have a heterosexual identity.

According to Wilson, Harper, Hidalgo, Jamil, and Torres (2010) the constant challenges gay males face to being an authentic male results in a struggle to develop strategies to negotiate dominant messages about masculinity while also trying to resist those dominant messages. Wilson et al. conducted a qualitative investigation of 39 male adolescents from diverse ethnic groups with regard to how they construct their masculinity. About a third of the sample was African American. Participants were gay, bisexual, or questioning. Interviews were used to explore four aspects of identity development: masculine identity, ethnic identity, sexual identity, and integrated identity.

Wilson et al. found that these males had been exposed to traditional messages consistent with hegemonic masculine ideology which included heterosexuality, physical strength, athleticism, being the head of the household, and not showing emotion. Male family members, peers, and the media were the sources of these messages. In terms of the interaction of race and ethnicity, some of the African American males reported that Black men were negatively viewed by others.

Participants were also asked how they negotiated their own gender identity in their day-to-day lives and participants provided their own criteria for what it means to be a man. Primary to being a male for some participants was genitalia. Another theme was balancing the feminine and the masculine. These adolescents spoke about how they managed their masculinity in their day-to-day activities in order to convey more masculine approaches and behaviors. This was especially important to maintain in places that were not gay friendly.

Jamil, Harper, and Fernandez (2009) conducted a qualitative study on the development of sexual and ethnic identity among gay, bisexual, and questioning African

American and Latino male adolescents. Interviews were conducted with 22 participants between the ages of 16 and 22. Four themes emerged from this interview data. These included: (a) timing and contexts of identity awareness, (b) process of identity development, (c) different experiences of oppression, and (d) connection to the community. With regard to timing and context of identity awareness, participants reported that they became aware of their ethnic and sexual identities during the period between elementary and high school. They became aware of being ethnically different when they were discriminated against and when there were racist interactions within their environments. Participants became aware of sexual identity through romantic or sexual fantasies about other men and sometimes through sexual experiences with other young men. With regard to the process of ethnic identity development, youth identified cultural resources within their immediate environmental context including family members and peers. Many lived in neighborhoods with ethnically similar peers.

Regarding experiences of oppression, participants experienced oppression from the White community with regard to racial oppression and also oppression from the heterosexual community from both the larger White heterosexual community and from their own ethnic community. Ethnic discrimination was felt in the form of not being able to obtain gainful legal employment and also by harassment from the police. Participants reported experiencing heterosexism (e.g., losing their job after disclosing sexual orientation) and also being verbally harassed and physically assaulted.

With regard to connecting to the community, participants were able to connect through a variety of spaces and places within their communities. For example, some neighborhoods were ethnically homogeneous, as well as organizations and clubs at school. Connection with the LGBT community was made through friends who were LGBT and also through bars and clubs. The Internet was also a viable way for these youth to connect to the LGBT community.

In overview, Jamil et al. found that the ethnic and sexual identity process occurred simultaneously, somewhere in early to late adolescence. There did not seem to be any delays in either of the processes. However, identity development occurred along different pathways. Racial identity was developed through interactions with others, including both positive interactions that promoted cultural pride and negative racial interaction which were triggers for the development of ethnic identity. On the other hand, sexual identity processes were triggered by internal mechanics that involved romantic or sexual feelings toward members of the same sex.

In summary, sexual identity especially among gay, bisexual, and questioning African American adolescent males can be challenging due to negotiating aspects of sexuality while sometimes receiving conflicting messages from the dominant culture about what it means to be a man. The process of developing a sexual identity is informed by relationships including romantic relationships with other men.

Conclusions

One's sense of self and identity are tied to well-being (or lack of) across several life domains. A positive sense of worth during childhood follows the child into later life. Both African American girls and boys score higher on most measures of self-esteem than other racial/ethnic groups. Family structure is linked to self-esteem among African American boys with those from two-parent households showing higher self-esteem than those from one-parent households.

African American boys are more likely to experience racial discrimination than African American girls and boys from other ethnic minority groups. Racial/ethnic identity is associated with several positive behaviors and can buffer African American males against stressors associated with discrimination. Gender roles are another aspect of identity for African American boys who may be socialized to be more androgynous than boys in other ethnic groups. Traditional gender role beliefs (emphasizing masculinity) are linked to risky behaviors including risky sexual behaviors, and delinquency among African American youth.

As some African American boys transition into adolescence, they believe they have to present themselves to the world as tough and aggressive in order to be respected. The socio-context of inner cities encourages the expression of hypermasculinity, an exaggerated form of masculinity among African American adolescent males. Sexual identity, another aspect of identity, develops from early to late adolescence. Gay, bisexual, and questioning identity among African American adolescent males can be challenging but can be resolved through identification and connecting with ethnically and sexually similar supportive networks.

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