

Advancing Responsible Adolescent Development

Faye Z. Belgrave
Joshua K. Brevard

African American Boys

Identity, Culture, and Development



Springer

Advancing Responsible Adolescent Development

Series Editor

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Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, U.S.A

More information about this series at <http://www.springer.com/series/7284>

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ISSN 2195-089X

ISBN 978-1-4939-1716-7

DOI 10.1007/978-1-4939-1717-4

Springer New York Heidelberg Dordrecht London

ISSN 2195-0903 (electronic)

ISBN 978-1-4939-1717-4 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014948212

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Printed on acid-free paper

Springer is part of Springer Science+Business Media (www.springer.com)

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to several individuals who supported this project. Dr. Kevin Allison gave us invaluable advice on the conceptualization and organization of the book, Jennifer Valentine provided editorial assistance, and our Series Editor, Roger Levesque, and Springer editor, Judy Jones, encouraged and supported us throughout its development. Finally, we honor and appreciate all of the African American boys and adolescents who inspired us to write this book.

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Part I
Introduction and Aspects of the Self

Chapter 1

Introduction: Contextual and Theoretical Framework

Introduction

We have seen the headlines and read the statistics. Some are true. Some are not. What is true is that both scholarly and lay persons believe that African American boys are in crisis. A headline for the Black Voice News (among other media outlets) reads “The Crisis of Black Males is a National Problem” (Allen, 2013). USA Today ran an article titled “Nearly Half of Black Men Arrested by age 23” (Pearson, 2014). Another headline, “More Black boys are in Jail than in College” has been used, but is not necessarily true when compared against actual statistics (Cook, 2012). These glaring headlines have resulted in much recent attention devoted to the plight of African American boys and adolescents.

Although President Obama was criticized for not addressing the problems facing African American males earlier in his presidency, in February 2014 he addressed both the critics and problems by launching “My Brother’s Keeper” initiative. This initiative, aimed at empowering boys and young men of color, has garnered the support and resources of local and national leaders in philanthropy, business, government, faith communities, and the media. It remains to be seen if and how this initiative will impact education, vocational achievement, and other life outcomes for African American boys and adolescents.

Much has been written about African American boys and their many challenges, but it’s worth noting that there are also areas of hope, and it is important to point out that African American boys show strength and resiliency. Many are doing well in schools, in communities, and within their families. This book is also about these boys.

We have had the privilege of working with African American boys and adolescents who have been a part of our prevention interventions and programs and who have been involved as participants in research studies we have conducted. Additionally, we have had both formal and informal discussions with African American boys—those who would be considered successful and those who are

faced with challenges. We have also been informed from personal and informal interactions and experiences. The first author is a mother to an African American son, and an aunt to several nephews, all of whom are now young adults. The second author is an African American male in his mid-twenties. He has gone through some of the experiences and processes we have captured in this book. He has lived the life of an African American boy, adolescent, and now young adult in this country. This book is about all of our boys, who they are, their successes, their failures, and their challenges.

Five years ago, *African American Girls* was published (Belgrave, 2009). This book captured much of the first author's research on African American girls. Since the publication of *African American Girls*, there have been several requests for a similar book on African American boys. We were told that there is a need for a book that is grounded in both the empirical literature and practice that can be used by those who are conducting research, those who are implementing programs, and those who are advocates for African American boys. We hope this book meets this need.

A goal in writing this book was to bring together scholarly work on African American boys in a manner accessible to all, including researchers, program developers, social service and mental health professionals, and persons outside of the academic community. We identify some of the factors that contribute to his success (or lack of). With this goal in mind, we have also included a chapter on what works. In this volume, it is not possible to completely cover the complexity of and the interaction of the multiple systems that influence African American boys (and that are, in turn, influenced by African American boys). We instead cover some core and fundamental topics such as self and identity, health, achievement, and delinquency.

Universal and Divergent Perspectives

African American boys are both similar to and unique from other cultural groups. They share experiences, attitudes, and values with African American girls. For example, African American boys, along with girls, may be socialized with more equalitarian gender roles that do not prescribe specific masculine or feminine gender roles about how to behave when compared to other racial/ethnic groups. Like African American girls, the family is the most influential unit in his life. He may be guided by communal and relational values more so than White males. African American boys and girls tend to have a high self-concept and feelings of self-worth. However, African American boys and girls differ in a number of ways, including expectations, achievement, and peer relations, to name a few.

Like boys from all ethnic groups, there are commonalities that differentiate them from girls biologically, physically, socially, and psychologically. For example, boys mature and reach puberty at a later age than girls. They are more physically active, likely to have fewer friends, and their communication skills may not be as well-developed. These and other universal and divergent perspectives will be presented and discussed in each chapter.

An African American boy's socioeconomic context also influences his life trajectory. One in three will grow up in poverty and the majority will grow up in a household without a male figure. Many will reside in low-resource urban communities which may have limited social and economic support. However, potential adverse outcomes can be buffered by several factors including: high parental monitoring and racial socialization, strong racial identity, and communities and schools that provide prosocial and positive activities. African American boys, more so than any racial or ethnic group, are faced with racism and discrimination. How he copes with these challenges will affect his well-being and life trajectory.

Who Is This book About?

Although not exclusively, this book focuses on African American males primarily in early and middle adolescence between the ages of 11–16. During the period of early to mid-adolescence, there are many social, psychological, and biological changes. During this developmental period, he is transitioning from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school. His academic expectations and performance become more important during this period and whether or not he meets expectations for high achievement can have a profound effect on his future education and vocational success.

During early to mid-adolescence, he has gained some independence and distance from his immediate family and spends much more time with peers. If positive and prosocial peers are chosen, he is likely to also engage in positive and prosocial behavior. The opposite is likely to occur when his peer group engages in negative and/or adverse behaviors. He is also changing physically during this age period. Puberty occurs and romantic and sexual interests begin. A discussion of African American boys begins with a larger discussion of African Americans in the United States.

African Americans in the United States

According to the United States Census, Black or African American refers to "A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa." It includes people who indicate their race as "Black, African American, or Negro," or provide written entries such as African American, Afro American, Kenyan, Nigerian, or Haitian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011a). We mostly use the term African American in this book. However, the term, "Black" is sometimes used to be consistent with the intent of the author or sources cited.

According to the 2010 United States Census, 38.9 million people (13.6 %) responded to the question on race by indicating only "Black, African American, or Negro." Individuals who chose more than one of the six race categories are referred

to as the *Black in combination* or *multiple-race Black* population: 3.1 million people reported Black in combination with one or more other races. When Black is considered with another combined racial or ethnic group, Blacks comprise 14 % of the US population.

Persons identified as Blacks have increased at a slightly higher rate than the total US population. The total US population grew by 9.7 %, from 281.4 million in 2000 to 308.7 million in 2010, while the Black alone population grew by 12 % from 34.7 million to 38.9 million from 2000 to 2010. The Black in combination population grew at a rate of 15 %. Both groups grew at a slower rate than other major racial and ethnic groups (e.g., Asians and Latino/Hispanics) in the country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011b).

Where Do African Americans Live?

In 2010, almost 60 % of African Americans lived in ten states: New York (3.3 million), Florida (3.2 million), Texas (3.2 million), Georgia (3.1 million), California (2.7 million), North Carolina (2.2 million), Illinois (2.0 million), Maryland (1.8 million), Virginia (1.7 million), and Ohio (1.5 million). African Americans are more likely to live in the South than in any other region of the country. Fifty-five percent live in the South; 18.1 % in the Midwest; 17.1 % in the Northeast; and 9.8 % in the West (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011b).

Geographically, African Americans are concentrated in urban areas or cities. The ten cities with populations greater than 100,000 with the highest percentages of African Americans are: Detroit, Michigan; Jackson, Mississippi; Miami Gardens, Florida; Birmingham, Alabama; Baltimore, Maryland; Memphis, Tennessee; New Orleans, Louisiana; Flint, Michigan; Montgomery, Alabama; and Savannah, Georgia (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011b).

While most African Americans live in cities, Frey (2011) points out that African Americans are currently experiencing a period of “black flight” from cities with large African American populations. This increasing minority suburbanization is shifting the racial dynamics of cities where African Americans have long been the dominant minority presence. The share of African Americans living in suburbs has increased consistently over the past few decades, moving from 37 % in 1990, 44 % in 2000, to 51 % in 2010.

Data from the Census Bureau (2011b) reflect this trend. Across the 20 largest metropolitan areas in the United States, the African American population declined in the largest principal cities and increased outside of these cities from 2000 to 2010. This decline in city residence follows the decline of the total population and increases in the persons living outside of principal cities. The proportion of the African American population that lives in the largest principal cities decreased by at least 10 % points in six metropolitan areas from 2000 to 2010. These were: Detroit (16 % points); Minneapolis-St. Paul (14 % points); Houston (14 % points); Dallas-Fort Worth (12 % points); Phoenix (11 % points); and Boston (11 % points).

These statistics show that African Americans are still residing in large metropolitan areas but fewer are in the cities. The current shift in moving from cities to suburbs is likely to have future implications for the life course trajectory of African American adolescent males.

African American Family Structure

According to Krieder and Ellis (2011), 36.6 % of African American children have both a mother and a father in the home; 50.4 % live in a single mother household; 4.3 % live in a single father household; and 8.7 % have neither parent present. African American boys also live in extended and intergenerational families that often include grandparents. Multigenerational households, consisting of three or more generations, made up 8 % of African American family households. Poverty is especially pronounced in these households (26 %).

Family and household structure have implications for well-being and life outcomes of African American males. Single parent families have fewer resources (McLanahan, Knab, & Meadows, 2009; Thomas & Sawhill, 2005), are poorer (Kalil & Ryan, 2010), and are more likely to live in poorer school districts and neighborhoods.

Socioeconomic Indicators

About 25.8 % of African Americans live below the poverty line, compared to the national average of 14.3 % (Macartney, Bishaw, & Fontenot, 2013). The African American child poverty figures are particularly disturbing: 38.8 % of children under age 18 and 42.7 % of children under age 5 live below the poverty line (Bread for the World, 2013). Another indicator of socioeconomic status is home ownership. About 44 % of African Americans own the homes they live in (Joint Center for Housing Studies, 2013).

About 82 % of African Americans aged 25 and older were high school graduates and about 18 % had a bachelor's degree or a higher level of education (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Only 47 % of African American male students graduated on time from US high schools in 2008, compared to 78 % of White male students (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010). The gender breakdown of African Americans with a Bachelor's degree is 34.1 % male and 65.9 % female (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). African American male college completion rates are lowest among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups in the US higher education (Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010).

Unemployment data from 2012 show that African Americans had the highest unemployment rates at 13.8 %, while Asians (5.9 %) and Whites (7.2 %) had the lowest (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). The Pew Research Center reports