

Advancing Responsible Adolescent Development

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African American Girls

Reframing Perceptions
and Changing Experiences



Springer

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Preface

Over the past 15 years, I have had the opportunity to conduct research and intervention programming with African American girls. Several of my graduate students, mostly African American women, pursuing their doctorates in psychology worked closely with me in this work. We have conducted hundreds of literature reviews, read many journal articles and reports, published many papers, and engaged over a thousand African American adolescent girls in a cultural curriculum specifically designed for them. This book was written to summarize this work and was conceived to be an educational resource for diverse audiences who work with African American girls including: (1) researchers who conduct research and intervention programming; (2) professionals who work with African American adolescent girls such as teachers, social workers, prevention specialists, therapists and counselors, and mental health workers; and (3) a general audience of persons with an interest in African American adolescent female's well-being and development such as parents, community leaders, girl's group leaders (i.e., Girl Scout leaders), and church and spiritual leaders.

This book is both descriptive and practical. Each chapter covers the most current literature on African American adolescent girls, and reviews and discusses ways in which they are similar to and unique from girls in other ethnic groups and from African American boys. An understanding of who they are and how they function allows us to make recommendations about ways to support these girls and to refocus and/or strengthen already positive attributes. A related purpose is to begin to address some of the disparities African American girls face (i.e., teen pregnancy, HIV infection, obesity, etc.).

There are three parts to this book. The first part, "Who Am I" provides an introduction to the remainder of the text (Chap. 1) and how African American females view themselves (Chap. 2). The second part on "How Did I Come to Be" includes both proximal and distal influences on African American girls' behavior and well-being. This part discusses her family and kin (Chap. 3), friends and peers (Chap. 4), and community (Chap. 5). Community peers and families have a great influence on her expectations and achievement, and a chapter on achievement and expectations is also included in this part (Chap. 6). The third part 'Who Will I Become' discusses contemporary issues facing African American girls that impact her health, social, and overall well-being. Chapters on health and wellness (Chap. 7), sexuality

(Chap. 8), and pro-social behavior and aggression (Chap. 9) are addressed in this part. Chapter 9 is followed by concluding comments.

My hope is that the reader will be inspired to attend to African American girls with a sharper focus on her strengths, her talents, and other assets.

Richmond, VA

Faye Z. Belgrave

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Part I

Chapter 1

Description and Demographics

Over the past 15 years, I have had the privilege of working with thousands of African American adolescent girls who have participated in our prevention interventions and who have been involved as participants in research studies we have conducted. Additionally, colleagues and I have had both formal and informal discussions and interviews with many African American girls. Sometimes, I have simply observed them in their daily activities while they were in school, attending after school programming, and in community and religious activities. My learning has also come from personal interactions and experiences. I have 1 daughter, 12 nieces, and 2 god-daughters whose lives I have been a part of. This book is about these girls, who they are, their achievements, their dreams, their hopes, and to some degree their failures.

I wrote this book with two goals in mind. The first goal is to highlight the resiliency and strengths found among African American adolescent girls. Although there is variability, African American girls generally possess high self-worth, confidence, and assertiveness. They assume responsibilities within their families and are guided by spiritual and religious beliefs and behaviors. African American girls engage in prosocial behaviors, including kindness and charity to others. They hold high expectations regarding academic achievement and most believe they can do well.

At the same time there are many problems our girls face. While their academic achievement is higher than that of African American males, it is lower than that of girls from most other ethnic groups. Early and unprotected sexual activity among many of our girls results in teen pregnancy, parenting, and sexually transmitted infections. Additionally, there have been recent increases in use of certain drugs and in aggressive acts. Childhood obesity and other poor health outcomes are also of concern as these health outcomes establish a trajectory for poor health as adults. Therefore, my second goal of writing this book is to present the research and data regarding these problem areas to bring attention to them.

This book presents the most recent research and literature on African American girls. It is about: (1) how we can refocus and strengthen the energizing force in our girls; (2) how positive behaviors can be encouraged and negative behaviors can be eliminated by drawing upon inner strengths and natural ways of being; (3) how we can work collectively through families, schools, communities, and other institutions to support positive development of our girls; and (4) what girls can do themselves

to strengthen their spirit and well-being. To accomplish these goals, a recommendation and resource section is included at the end of each chapter. This section provides examples of exercises and activities that can be used across diverse settings to promote well-being and positive functioning.

Universal and Divergent Perspectives

African American girls are both similar to and unique from other groups. There are traits, values, and behaviors that African American girls share with all girls and with African American boys. For example, she is relational as are most females. She is also likely to have a communal worldview which is found among most persons of African descent. A relational and communal worldview assumes that others are important to her sense of self and general well-being, and that her attitudes and behaviors are influenced by others. Her gender role beliefs tend to differ from those of girls in other ethnic groups in that she possesses both instrumental (e.g., masculine) and expressive/nurturing (feminine) gender role beliefs. These androgynous gender role beliefs may be shared by African American boys. While she shares many values and behaviors with African American boys, there are also differences. For example, her academic achievement and life-course expectations tend to be higher, and she is more likely to finish high school and graduate from college. These and other universal and divergent perspectives will be presented and discussed throughout this book.

African American girls' socioenvironmental context also influences who she is and who she will become. Her family, the closest and most immediate influence, has a profound impact on her current and future actions. Many African American girls grow up in low-resource urban communities, and these settings may contribute to lower expectations and achievement and sometimes deleterious outcomes, such as early parenting. Gender, race, and class discrimination also exist within this country and have adverse effects on her well-being.

Who this Book is About

This book focuses on African American adolescent girls primarily those in early and middle adolescence between the ages of 10 and 14. During this period, there are many biological, social, and psychological transitions. Puberty begins during this period; there is transition from elementary to middle school; and girls begin to develop friendships and interests outside the home. Interests in romantic relationships begin as does sexual identity. During this developmental period, girls have an increased desire for independence in decision making as they begin to think abstractly and reason logically. This can be an exciting time in her life and also a period of problems and turbulence. Whether or not her transition is successful has long-term consequences for her life-course trajectory. Decisions made during this

vulnerable period can have both positive and negative consequences for the rest of her life. For example, girls who do well academically during this period are likely to continue to do well in high school and beyond. Those who begin to struggle academically may establish a cycle of failures that erodes academic persistence. Girls who become teen parents face many challenges, economically, socially, and personally later in life. Research and literature on her well-being, behaviors, and functioning across several domains are examined along with literature on factors that promote and attenuate behaviors and well-being.

Heterogeneity Among African American Girls

African American girls are not all the same and to represent them that way would be to stereotype. Like all Americans, they live in rural, suburban, and urban communities; are members of families of varying socioeconomic levels; and engage in different levels and types of prosocial and problem behaviors. In reviewing literature and research, the majority has been written and published on urban girls, probably because the majority of African Americans live in urban areas. Research and literature on girls from diverse environments and circumstances is presented in this book to the extent possible. Each chapter summarizes and discusses current research and literature on African American adolescent girls highlighting issues that are most salient and relevant to their well-being and ways of functioning. Many of the chapters reference work I have done with graduate students and colleagues. A discussion of African American girls begins with a discussion of African Americans in the United States.

African Americans and Blacks in the United States

Where African American girls live and the socioeconomic conditions of their families (i.e., income education, poverty, etc.) are sociocultural factors that contribute to their well-being. An overview of some relevant demographics among African Americans in the United States is provided next.

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. In this book, the term “African American” is generally used. In some cases, the term “Black” is used to retain the intent of the author cited.

African Americans comprise 12.8% of the United States population. When Black is considered with another racial or ethnic group, African Americans comprise 13.4% of the US population. According to the United States Census (2007), in 2006 there were approximately 40,000,000 persons who were Black/African American singularly and/or in combination with other racial/ethnic groups. This represents a percentage increase of 8.5% since 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

Where do African Americans Live?

In 2004, almost 60% of African Americans lived in ten states: New York, Florida, Georgia, Texas, California, Illinois, North Carolina, Maryland, Louisiana, and Virginia. African Americans are more likely to live in the South than in any other region of the country. Approximately, fifty-four percent lives in the South, 19% in the Midwest, 18% in the Northeast, and 10% in the West. Geographically, African Americans are concentrated in urban areas or cities. The ten cities with populations greater than 100,000 with the highest percentages of Blacks are: Gary, Indiana; Detroit, Michigan; Birmingham, Alabama; Jackson, Mississippi; New Orleans, Louisiana; Baltimore, Maryland; Atlanta, Georgia; Memphis, Tennessee; Washington, D.C.; and Richmond, Virginia.

Family Structure

African American girls live in extended and intergenerational families that often include grandparents. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 35.2% of African American girls live in married-couple households, 54.4% live in mother-headed households with no husband present, 7.5% live in mate-headed households with no wife present, and 2.9% live in nonfamily households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey Reports). About 20% live in households with grandparents.

Socioeconomic Indicators

About 80% of African Americans aged 25 and older are high school graduates, and about 17% have a bachelor's degree or a higher level of education (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). In terms of occupations, about 27% of African Americans are employed in management/professional occupations or in sales and office occupations. About 23.5% of African Americans are in service occupations. The remainder is employed in occupations, such as construction, transportation, and farming. About 54% of African Americans own the homes they live in compared to the total population percentage of about 76%.

The April 2009 unemployment rate for African Americans over the age of 20 was 15% compared to a rate of 8% for Whites and 3.2 for Asians (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). The ethnic differential in the rate of unemployment is substantial for individuals between 16 and 19 years of age with an unemployment rate of 34.7 for African Americans and 19.7 for Whites. About 24.9% of African Americans live poverty compared to the national percentage of 12.5. In African American female-headed households, close to 27% live below the poverty line (Devanas-WaH Proctor, & Smith, 2008).

African American Children and Teens

In 2006, there were approximately 3,246,000 African American teens between the ages of 10 and 14 and 3,359,000 teens between the ages of 15 and 19 (U.S. Census, 2007). These numbers represent 16% of all US teens in the 10 to 14-year-old age group. Similarly, African American teens between the ages of 15 and 19 represent 16% of all teens in this age range. African American children are overrepresented among those who live in poverty. Close to 35% of African American children live in poverty. These statistics show that about 1 out of three African American girls live in poverty.

Overview of Chapters

This book is organized in three parts. The first part “Who am I” is an introduction to the book and how African American females view themselves. The second part “How did I come to be” covers both proximal and distal influences on African American girls’ behavior and well-being. This part covers her family, her friends and peers, and her community. Her community, peers and families have a great influence on her expectations and achievement, and a chapter on achievement and expectations is also included in this part. The third part “Who will I become” covers contemporary issues facing African American girls that impact her health, social, and overall well-being. Chapters on health and wellness, sexuality, and prosocial behavior and aggression are addressed in this section.

Part 1: Who am I?

African American girls’ view of the self and her identity are discussed in Chapter 2. Several aspects of her identity are covered, including self-worth, self-complexity, ethnic or racial identity along with relational values, gender roles, and sexual identity. Research suggests that African American girls have fairly high feelings of self-worth and confidence, and androgynous gender roles that comprise both high masculine and feminine beliefs. Along with androgynous gender role beliefs, cultural attributes such as ethnic identity protect girls, especially those who may encounter stressors due to community disadvantage.

Part 2: How did I Come to Be?

Chapter 3 covers several topics relevant to African American families, including who is in her family, what her family looks like, her roles within the family, family