

Understanding the Impact of Negative Stereotypic Images on Identity Development in African American Children and Single Mothers: Implications for Educators, School Counselors, and Administrators

Alishea S. Rowley
Florida A&M University

Yarneccia D. Dyson
University of North Carolina Greensboro

Abstract

Historical oppression and stereotypes impact the way African American children from female-headed single-parent homes are viewed and perceived in today's society. Often, their families are judged as unstable, low income, and minimally educated. Stereotypes are impactful and can influence the way people in power interact with children and families. The examination of the role stereotypes play in the lives of Black women is a concept that has been explored and the research has broadened in the past 24 years. This research, however, seldom focuses on the impact of stereotypic images in conjunction with racial identity development in Single African American Mothers (SAAMs) and their children. An investigation of this topic is important because there is a need to highlight oppressive images that impact racial development and academic success in children of color. The outcomes are relevant to educators, counselors, and school leaders in Florida and beyond. This topic is vital to helping professionals and academic leaders to better understand the needs of the population and effective ways to help them. Further, the study highlighted relevant theories to explain racial identity development.

Keywords: African American mothers, African American children, single-parent homes, stereotypes

Introduction

Psychosocial development theory (Erikson, 1968) asserts that a child's formative years are critical in building identity, esteem, friendships, and trust. This time can be especially complex for African American children who are impacted by oppressive structures foundationalized by negative stereotypes. During this time, children seek to define their identity through personality development, cultural orientation, and other unique characteristics (Moshman, 1999). Much of this development occurs in the academic environment amongst peers and is rooted in other factors such as belief systems, goals, and self-purpose (Arnett, 2001). Individual exploration can be especially difficult for African American youth because of systemic issues of racism stemming from historic oppression and negative views of people of color.

Children develop their purview of the world, meaning making, as well as the manner in which they navigate society as a result of their family unit (Barr & Neville, 2008). Through the lens of the family unit, the concept of parental socialization describes the manner in which familial norms, culture, beliefs, and values, are shared across generations (Demo & Hughes, 1990;

Branche & Newcombe, 1986; Hughes & Chen, 1997). Socialization, in general, encompasses various social environments including the school setting, religious spaces, neighborhoods, and other entities. The parental figures in families are primarily responsible for the socialization of children. The home environment and parental figures shape identity development, teach strategies for conflict resolution, and teach children to manage responses to external stimuli, essentially impacting esteem and actualization of African American children (White-Johnson et al., 2010). African American mothers, because they are usually the primary caregivers, also bear the greatest responsibility of socializing their children about race (Parke et al., 2005). With the emersion of racial themes in mainstream media and death of people of color being televised, the conversation about race and stereotypes cannot be ignored. Equally important are the manner in which stereotypes influence micro-racial aggressions and the treatment of African American children in the academic environment. Negative stereotypes can be detrimental to the esteem of African American children by negatively impacting their achievement and deterring parental involvement. Parents that feel judged and do not feel supported could be less receptive to feedback in the academic environment. Moreover, the aforementioned images that dominate mainstream media are inundated with fearful videos of violent encounters with the police and instances of African American males being disproportionately targeted. These images are especially damaging in our current societal climate which has highlighted the impact of racism, striking fear and deterring trust.

Navigating the Effects of Racial Implicit Bias through Parental Socialization

Race-based traumatic experiences among the African American community are largely attributed to structural and environmental racism, discrimination, and implicit bias (Assari et al., 2010; Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005). Implicit bias relates to the attitudes and stereotypes that affect decision making, perceptions, and action through unconscious and covert behaviors. These actions pervasively affect the education, healthcare, employment, and other social determinant experiences for African American families (Moore, 2002; Range et al., 2018; Sellers et al., 2006). Instances of implicit bias that negatively impact the lives of African American children include disproportionate representation in special education services, delays in receiving medical services (pain medication intervention) as a result of perceived distrust by providers, and housing insecurity, among many other factors (Banks et al., 2005; Banks & Kohn-Wood, 2007; Barnes & Lightsey, 2005; Carter et al., 2017).

A study done by Martin Wasserberg (2014) concluded that African American children are acutely aware of negative stereotypes. As their views unfold, they become more vulnerable to stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is defined as a fear of confirming an already existing stereotype of negative performance associated with their racial group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). The study specifically investigated achievement on standardized testing in African American children who were aware of racial stereotypes and determined that stereotype threat hindered their performance on standardized tests.

Racial Identity Development

In the past, literature related to identity development focused on one dimension at a time, either race or gender. Theorists have since expanded their knowledge about African American women's issues and created theories that are multidimensional. Models of racial identity were primarily foundationalized in an attempt to raise awareness for the experiences of Black people in an oppressed society. Early work from W. E. Cross (1971, 1978) highlighted this phenomenon with the development of the Nigrescence Theory. "Nigrescence" is a term that derived from a French word meaning negritude, or the state of being black (Howard-Hamilton, 1997). The model is

characterized as a developmental process by which Blacks become more familiar with their race through lived experiences. Cross (1995) formalized his model into five stages (see Table 1). The stages represent the redefining of an African American's racial identity as they encounter what it means to be Black in our society.

Table 1. Nigrescence Model (Cross, 1995)

Stage	Identities	Description
Pre-Encounter	1. Miseducation	1. Associate negative stereotypes with the Black community.
	2. Assimilation	2. Low race salience; pro-American racial group orientation.
	3. Self-Hatred	3. Rejection of African American group membership.
Encounter	-	-
Immersion-Emersion	1. Intense Black involvement	1. Overromanticizing of the "Black experience"
	2. Anti-White	2. Rejection of everything White
Internalization	1. Reject the view of others	1. Working through the challenges of a new identity and the problems that arise from it.
	2. Reject the view of themselves	2. Reconstruction of personality and cognitive style.
	3. Dissonance resolution	
Internalization-Commitment	1. Afrocentric	1. Focus on empowering the African American community.
	2. Bi-culturalist	2. Focus on African American community and one other salient cultural orientation
	3. Multiculturalist	3. Focus on the African American Community and many salient orientations

Stereotypes of African American Women

Stereotypes of African American women derive from historical images that were created during the period of enslavement. Namely, three of the most widespread stereotypes are that of the Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel. Images that parallel in comparison perpetuate racism and sexism and are still prevalent today (Nelson et al., 2016). The myths were created to mask the objectification and abuse of African American women and girls.

The Mammy is an image that derives from slavery and depicts a motherly figure who cares for others and neglects herself. Not much is expected from this type of woman aside from raising and rearing children. Achievement is taboo and discouraged. This image mirrors the discrimination and marginalization that many African American mothers in the workforce experience today. Further, the image of the Jezebel is personified as the oversexualized image of a woman whose sexuality is not celebrated or appreciated. Its purpose is to shift the focus on the African American woman as being too sexual instead of a victim of abuse and objectification. Finally, Sapphire is an image that was coined from a television character whose personality was boisterous and emasculating (Nelson et al., 2016; Collins, 2000; Jewell, 1993; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; West, 1995).

In addition, mothering while single and Black must be viewed through a complex lens of intersectional factors that comprise their identities. African American women have historically been impacted by a myriad of inaccurate views of their character and identities, impacting the formation of an accurate view of self. If she speaks up for herself or her children, she may be afraid of perpetuating a stereotype of a person with a low emotional IQ rather than an advocate. Society makes clear distinctions for exceptions for sexuality and what is deemed explicit rather than beautiful and liberated.

Single Parenthood

The examination of the various factors that affect single-parent African American families are framed to focus on factors that plague this population. Popular views of family structures are rooted in Eurocentric worldviews of middle-class families as a standard of what families should look like (Fine, 2001). Guided by family stress theory, Kotchick (2005) studied African American mothers in low-income areas focusing on the relationship amongst maternal psychological functioning, neighborhood stress, and environmental stressors as indicators for maternal functioning. Research concluded that these factors were greatly impactful in the impairment of parenting (Conger Rueter et al., 1998). Further, these factors contribute to increased anxiety, depression, and mistrust in single African American mothers.

Longstanding images of what society deems as the American dream, such as a two-parent home and white picket fence, negatively portrays single-parent African American homes as unstable and abnormal (Dickerson, 1995). Although, in recent years, societal definitions of family have expanded to become more inclusive of non-traditional families, the “isms” (sexism, racism, classism) still exist and are greatly impactful to the economic, psychosocial, and environmental wellbeing of single-parent homes in the African American community. Most research regarding single African American women focuses on the disadvantages rather than highlighting the strength and tenacity of a people who have and continue to overcome disparities in health, education, and economics. Few studies give credit to the resilience of single mothers and positive outcomes of their children (Cain & Combes-Orme, 2005). There are older studies that have highlighted cultural characteristics in African American families and account for cultural resilience as indicators of their ability to surmount adverse situations (Wilson, 1984).

Phenomenological Study of Single African American Mothers (SAAMs)

Rowley (2011) conducted a phenomenological study with 10 African American women in North Carolina to investigate whether their status as single African American mothers was impacted by stereotypes and if so, how these images impacted their racial and feminist identity development. The study concluded that single African American mothers were acutely aware of historical images of the Mammy, Jezebel and Sapphire, the three highlighted images in the study. Participants were given an explanation of the historical view of these images and a juxtaposition of the modern-day image of that stereotype. The outcomes demonstrated that they felt the strain of formulating their identities against the backdrop of misinterpretations and damaging views of their character and behaviors. Participants explained that at times, they felt that they were portrayed as the “welfare queens” or “damsels in distress” when their feelings were actually quite the contrary. The mothers in the study were single, however, they had attained some level of postsecondary training, with one participant attaining a doctoral degree. Two overarching themes emerged from this study:

1. Depictions of SAAMs are generalized by inaccurate assumptions created from societal images and stereotypes. Some images depict SAAMs as struggling and stressed when

they feel empowered and accomplished as single mothers.

2. Single parenthood is one of several intersectional factors that impact racial and feminist identity development in SAAMs.

Conclusion 1

In exploring the experiences of SAAMs, several reported on the role of the participant's support systems. While in the past some researchers have found that African Americans are more likely to be closely linked and associated with extended family or "kin" (Hayes & Mendel, 1973), the participants reported some family relationships to be toxic and of little help to their situations. The participants were acutely aware of the manner which society viewed them and were searching for refuge in their support system, which was not always found in biological kin. It seemed that those who had family members who were willing to assist in a more positive manner felt much more emotional support. Many expressed experiences that would have been much more emotionally taxing without their support system.

Specifically, some participants reported that being a single mother was not generational. In many cases, their parents were married or one parent was deceased, and only one participant's parents actually divorced. Otherwise, if their mothers raised them as a single parent, they chose to do so without a partner. The stigma that African American mothers overwhelmingly experience financial and/or food security was also a stereotype that was rejected and unfounded. Amongst the group were business owners, a professor, and the others employed in a long-term profession. Some participants reported being supported by their child(ren)'s father(s), family, and other kinships within the community.

Conclusion 2

African American people are often depicted as a monolithic culture and not respected for their ethnic variances (Phelps et al., 2001). Such depictions contribute to stereotypes that group all single African American mothers into a singular identity. The data from this study provided evidence that not all households headed by SAAMs are the same. This is evident in the lived experiences of the participants. The participants ranged in age, educational attainment, socioeconomic status, and number of children, with distinctive, as well as similar experiences related to single parenthood and coping mechanisms. Some experiences were generalized, having more to do with just being a parent and not specifically a single African American mother.

Similarly, much like Maslow's (1943) model for a hierarchy of need, the participants in this study reported various levels of motivation to meet the demands in their lives. For participants not receiving financial support from a child's father, they reported frustration as a reason for striving for a better life.

The mothers in the study also reported feeling stigmatized by societal standards of family and gender roles. Some participants were concerned about raising African American males who fall prey to gang activity and incarceration. Other stereotypes reported were that African American males who are raised by SAAMs are influenced in their sexuality, have low academic performance, and are irresponsible. Pipes-McAdoo (2007) asserted that single parenthood is not the cause of instability in single-parent homes and that stereotypes of single parents producing children who are criminals as a result of being raised in a single-parent home are inaccurate.

Conclusion 3

Single parenthood is one of several intersectional factors that impact racial and feminist identity development in SAAMs. As Patricia Hill-Collins asserts in *Black Feminist Thought* (1991),

several intersectional factors such as gender, race, and political issues impact identity development in African American women. Thomas et al. (2004) highlighted the “multi-dimensional” factors that impact individuals and the racial groups to which they belong. The data supports theoretical underpinnings of racial and feminist identity development as an intersectional process, rather than an independent one, especially in SAAMs. While the semi-structured interview probed about racial and feminist identity separately, the findings demonstrated the difficulty in identifying singular aspects of the participant’s identity when it is, in fact, several factors that encompass their view of their identity. The participants reported feeling that the responsibilities of parenthood had more of an impact on the way they viewed and developed their identities than race and/or gender alone. As many participants stated, there were several factors related to gender duties and being head of household that warranted attention. Because race has always been a part of their lives, little attention had been given to the racial and/or gender inequalities until it interfered with their ability to care for their children.

The impact of stereotypic images was especially difficult on the racial and feminist identity development of the participants. The participants attributed many of the stereotypes to historical images that were brought on by years of racial injustice. The mothers reported feeling the need to appear “harder” and less feminine to be taken more seriously as a mother and a professional. Feeling the need to combat these stereotypes impacted their identity as a gendered being because they were intentional about developing “tough skin” and appearing not to be sensitive for fear of someone taking advantage of them. Arguably, the need for an African American woman to appear to have everything under control has been theorized by several Black feminists in the past (Hill-Collins, 2000; hooks, 1993) as what has been termed the “Superwoman” concept. This concept describes an external character that an African American woman feels that she needs to display to appear strong and capable in an effort to increase status and combat negative stereotypes.

Implications for Educators, School Counselors and Administrators

Our society is currently experiencing high levels of racial tension amidst a critical health crisis which are both disproportionately impacting the African American community and can be deemed as a double pandemic. Historical enslavement and another 150 years of systemic oppression (Noonan et al., 2016) are all factors that contribute to the negative view of African American children and their families. Further, it is possible that historic oppression and racial implicit bias have also contributed to the make-up of the Black family, with single-parent homes being more prevalent as a result of structural racism, mass incarceration, and other social justice issues. In the Rowley study (2011), positive relationships maintained with family, friends, community support systems, and/or a shared partnership with the child’s father provided a higher level of support for single mothers and lessened the negative financial and emotional impacts of single parenthood. The importance of understanding how identity development in children is shaped based on their phenomenological view along with the implications of stereotypic images of single mothers is necessary to understand for educators, school counselors, and administrators who may be tasked with program development to support holistic family growth.

This topic is especially relevant because it raises important questions about the impact of negative stereotypes on the academic achievement and emotional wellbeing of African American children and their families. Now, more than ever, teachers, administrators, and counselors must heighten their level of awareness to the contributions of the learning environment and its potential influence on the outcomes of achievement. Research suggests that schools are designed to mirror diagnostic test environments. As identity develops and children become more aware of how they are viewed and how their families are viewed, their performance is adversely impacted, therefore

possibly contributing to the achievement gap which has resulted in outcomes such as low educational attainment or no employment (Meir & Wood, 2004).

Perceptions are impactful. It is an inherent need for educators, administrators, and counselors to commit themselves to diversity and inclusion through awareness and advocacy. Lehmann and Meldrum (2019) conducted a study in Florida examining school suspensions and the balance of racial biases. African American males were far more likely to receive harsh punishment like suspensions or expulsions that negatively affected their academic achievement and increased the likelihood that they would experience the criminal justice system in their adult life. Research is limited on the stereotypic implications this may have on the judgment of teachers and administrators. Striving for empathy, diversity, and multicultural awareness requires an examination of our own biases and acceptance of the multicultural families we work with. School educators and officials are uniquely positioned to impact the healthy identity development of African American children by creating nurturing environments that are conducive for growth and the internalization of a positive sense of self, rather than digesting and confirming the negative messages in the world. Harper (2007) asserted that the adoption of Black racial identity through a lens of “ignorance and inflexibility” (p. 236) can impede the academic process of teaching and learning, thus adding to the importance of this study.

While this phenomenological study occurred in North Carolina, there are salient findings related to racism and approaches to social justice that can also be generalized to children and families residing in Florida. The influence of racial socialization and the subsequent experiences of racism, microaggressions, and trauma, all deeply affect the overall wellbeing and experiences of distress among Black children. The findings from the study suggest that school counselors, administrators, and teachers in Florida must consider how racial implicit bias, stereotypes, and unconscious prejudices regarding African American children in their schools and classrooms affects the ways in which they support and interact with African-American families, especially those with the identity status as SAAM. From a social justice perspective, growing bodies of literature highlight the need to examine and explore how SAAMs interpret their own lived experiences, socializations, and unconscious internal bias which can influence their own stereotypic thoughts and ideologies regarding the African American family unit and roles/responsibilities of parenting children (Lesane-Brown et al., 2006; Stokes et al., 2020). Children spend many hours in the school setting and are constructing their identities in the classroom. As they form friendships, define their personalities, and focus on achievement, they learn ways of constructing and reconstructing the way that they see themselves in the world.

Finally, SAAMs who encourage and validate positive self-image and perceptions regarding the African American culture, experiences, and interactions with other SAAMs can expect to see positive identity development and racial socialization among their children. Historically, systemic oppression encourages a view of SAAMs as being incapable of raising high achieving African American children. To counter this perspective, teachers and administrators should instead focus energy on identifying strengths in families of color in an effort to encourage successful matriculation and achievement, improving the probability of success among African American children.

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Corresponding Author: Alishea S. Rowley

Author Contact Information: Alishea.Rowley@famuedu

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