

"I Do But I Don't": The Search for Identity in Urban African American Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Achievement of a coherent and strong sense of self is critical to positive academic outcomes for urban minority youth. The present study utilized a mixed-methods approach to explore key aspects of identity development for African American adolescents living in a high-poverty, urban neighborhood. Results suggest that efforts to develop a sense of oneself as an individual and in relation to the world are impeded by mixed messages on African American culture and achievement. Findings are discussed in the context of teaching and working with urban African American adolescents in a way that promotes positive identity development.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a time of physical, educational, social, and psychological change (Finkenauer, Engels, Meeus & Oosterwegel, 2002). In his widely cited theory of psychosocial development, Erik Erikson (1968) defined adolescence as critical for identity development, arguing that a successful navigation of this period results in "identity achievement," whereas failing to develop a coherent sense of self leads to "role confusion." Ultimately, those who effectively develop their identity demonstrate commitment to societal standards and those who do not are likely to reject mainstream values and beliefs, potentially leading to destructive behaviors or negative affiliations. Recent research on adolescent identity development has linked a coherent sense of oneself and one's place in the world with school attendance, graduation, and academic achievement, particularly for youth who are members of non-dominant racial/ethnic groups (Grantham & Ford, 2003; Wakefield & Hudley, 2007; Wright, 2009).

While all young people face the challenges of adolescence, barriers to successfully navigating this life stage are particularly prevalent for minority youth, especially those living in inner-city, predominantly poor neighborhoods. Failing to develop an integrated sense of self can be dire for this population, leading to maladaptive coping responses such as gang membership, teen pregnancy, crime, and school drop-

out (Swanson, Spencer, Dell'Angelo, Hapalani, & Spencer, 2002). Indeed, a large number of minority adolescents fail to even graduate from high school, highlighting the critical need to understand how race and socioeconomic status relate to youth development (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). The present study addresses this need by exploring identity development in African American adolescents living and attending school in a predominantly poor, urban neighborhood.

To understand the role of urban, minority culture in identity development, research must examine how cultural context facilitates or prevents successful achievement of this important developmental stage (Hart & Yates, 1996). Articulating these important contextual influences on identity can inform appropriate and maximally effective work with adolescents from this traditionally disenfranchised population. For example, individual, group or community interventions based on a culturally-sensitive understanding of development can build on the strengths of vulnerable youth as well as help them overcome common barriers to achievement (Leff, Costigan, & Power, 2004). Understanding identity development in the cultural context also has the potential to inform the structure and management of institutions that serve youth from high risk communities.

To date, the role of culture in child development is typically considered at a secondary level: although factors

such as ethnicity, race and socioeconomic status are acknowledged, they tend to be viewed as conditions to be controlled or as predictors of variation, rather than as the foundation for a theoretical understanding of development and functioning (Tucker & Herman, 2002). Research tends to focus on one cultural factor while excluding other contextual influences, e.g., examining the influence of being an ethnic minority without taking into account socioeconomic status (Phinney, 1990). Yet a comprehensive understanding of developmental functioning requires understanding the unique cultural lens through which individuals or groups view the world, as well as working within this framework to address problems and promote positive outcomes (Salazar & Abrams, 2005).

The Present Study

The present study utilized a mixed-methods approach to examine identity development in inner-city, African American early adolescents. First, qualitative methodology was employed to compare the experiences of youth from a traditionally disenfranchised population with commonly accepted psychosocial development theory. Specifically, a series of focus groups was conducted with young adolescents from a predominantly African American, K-8 public school situated in a high poverty urban setting. Participating youth discussed key components of Erikson's

identity model as well as environmental and cultural circumstances that influence these factors. This methodology is consistent with a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) framework wherein established theory and research is combined with feedback from key community stakeholders in order to create a culturally-grounded understanding of critical constructs (Leff, Costigan, & Power, 2004). The following year, a new cohort of youth at the same school completed a series of surveys to provide quantitative data on the constructs articulated in the focus groups. The goal of this mixed-methods approach was to develop a greater understanding of critical developmental processes in urban, minority adolescents that would then inform how teachers, counselors, school psychologists, and others can work with these at-risk youth in a way that promotes positive psychological, social, behavioral, and academic outcomes.

Although there are numerous theories of identity development (Schwartz, 2001), we chose Erikson's psychosocial theory as the basis for the present study for several reasons. First, Erikson's theory is widely used in the field (McKinney, 2001). While the research on identity development and academic success is not limited to Erikson's model, those based on more contemporary, modified or specific theories are often grounded in Erikson's theoretical roots. Further, the relative simplicity of the model provided a logical starting point for examining the context in which high risk youth develop a sense of themselves and their place in the world. Together, this made Erikson's work an obvious choice. With this in mind, our goal was to examine how inner-city minority youth experienced two fundamental aspects of identity development, based on Erikson's theory: (1) a sense of oneself as an individual (e.g., efficacy, leadership competence, autonomy), and (2) a sense of oneself in relation to the world (e.g., sense of community, engagement, racial/ethnic identity).

METHODS

Year 1: Focus Groups

Focus group participants. In

Year 1, a series of four focus groups were conducted with four separate groups of sixth and seventh grade boys and girls during their lunch-recess. Specifically, the following four groups participated in separate 45 minute interviews on four occasions each: three 6th grade girls, four 6th grade boys, five 7th grade girls, and four 7th grade boys. All participants were Black/African American and attended a K-8 school situated in a low-income section of a large U.S. city. Participants ranged in age from 12-14 years old and were identified by their teachers for participation based on the following criteria: good school attendance (i.e. average attendance of 80% or higher), ability to speak openly in groups with adults and peers, ability to think critically, and ability to remain on-task during group discussions. Of 18 students identified, 17 (95%) returned signed parent consent forms and provided student assent, one student did not return the parent consent form, and one student returned a signed consent/assent, but decided not to participate prior to starting the groups, resulting in 16 total participants.

All focus groups were led by the primary author, a White/European American female who had worked as a psychologist and applied researcher in the school and surrounding community for several years. Student participants were encouraged to be open and honest, and were assured that there were no right or wrong answers. The race and background of the facilitator was also discussed, with students indicating that they felt comfortable expressing their opinions honestly.

Focus group questions. Each group was asked a series of open-ended questions to explore their thoughts on key components of Erikson's theory of psychosocial identity development and race/ethnicity. Questions were developed in the framework of analytic induction (Patton, 2002). Thus, the objective of the questions was not to create a new theory of adolescent identity development, but rather to examine how accepted developmental theory presents itself in the experiences of African American, inner-city youth. As such, key tenets of Erikson's

developmental theory were used to frame questions and to interpret findings, with data analysis focused on identifying common themes, terminology, and emphasis in participant responses. Youth were also asked to directly reflect on the role of contextual factors (e.g., neighborhood, race/ethnicity) in their identity development. Focus group questions related to Erikson's two main components of identity development (self and self in relation to others) are outlined in Table 1.

Qualitative data analyses.

All focus group data were recorded, transcribed, content-coded, and analyzed following procedures outlined by Nastasi and colleagues (Nastasi & Berg, 1999; Nastasi, Varjas, Sarkar, & Jayasena, 1998). First, focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed by a research assistant who also observed the session live. Each transcript was then independently reviewed by two researchers who developed initial lists of response codes for each question.

After independently coding all responses for a specific focus group question, coders then cross-checked their code lists and created a final code list for the responses to that specific question. For example, participants were asked to talk about their feelings of power and control over the future, and one response was "you get caught up in the situation...you're not focusing." One coder identified this as "distraction" and the other as "lack of focus." Subsequent discussion and review of the transcript led to the decision to code the response as "interference with focus," as the coders felt this best captured the essence of the response.

After establishing the final codes for each question, the coders independently re-coded each transcript based on these codes. When called for, cross-codes were also utilized. After independent completion of re-coding the transcripts, all codes were compared for a second time across coders. In the rare circumstance where this step identified coding disagreements (less than 5% of the time), coders discussed their rationale for the coding decision and came to consensus. Finally, the researchers collectively re-

Table 1: Theoretical Tenets and Data Collection

| Theoretical Tenet | Qualitative measurement: Major themes of focus group questions | Quantitative measurement: Self-report surveys |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| Self as individual | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tell about yourself (values, what important). 2. Does who you are change depending on situation or who with? If yes, how? 3. Who do you want to be? 4. Do you have the knowledge, power, resources to be who want to be? 5. What are barriers to being who want to be? | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Self-efficacy 2. Community efficacy 3. Leadership competence 4. Clarity in self-concept |
| Relationships with others | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tell about your neighborhood (like/dislike). 2. Do you feel like you belong/fit in? 3. Do you take part? How? 4. Describe any civic/political involvement. 5. What does your race/ethnicity mean to you and how does it affect you? | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Trust 2. Ethnic identity 3. Civic responsibility 4. Sense of community |

viewed the coded data and wrote memos on recurrent or notable response themes. These response themes are presented as the results of the study.

Year 2: Youth Surveys

In the school year following the completion of the focus groups, 32 students from a new cohort of sixth graders in the same elementary school completed a series of surveys related to key themes identified in Year 1 focus groups. Participants self-identified as Black/African American (91%), or Biracial (9%) and ranged in age from 11-14 years old. The response rate for parent consent/student assent was somewhat low (47%), primarily due to students in one of the classrooms not returning parent consent forms. The low-consent classroom experienced frequent teacher turnover during the time of the study, making it difficult to ensure students brought forms home and returned them in a timely manner. Only one parent returned the form explicitly indicating that they did not want their child to participate.

Measures assessing sense of self as individual. Surveys were constructed to reflect key components of identity development as they were articulated by the target youth in the previous year’s focus groups. Four measures were identified to evaluate one’s sense of themselves as autonomous individuals able to effectively navigate the world, including: self-efficacy, leadership competence, community efficacy, and clarity in self-concept.

Self-efficacy was measured with the *Cowen et al. Self-Efficacy Scale* (1991), a 19 item, five point Likert scale that assesses children’s feelings that they will be able to successfully manage challenges across different domains. Previous studies with this scale have found high internal consistency (e.g., Cowen et al., 1991). Scores on this measure also correlate with multiple child outcomes (Hoeltje, Zubrick, Silburn, & Garton, 1996) and are able to detect intervention impact (Lakin & Mahoney, 2006). Internal consistency in the present study was acceptable ($\alpha = .72$).

Roets Rating Scale for Leadership (RRSL) was used to evaluate leadership competence and skills. The RRSL is a 125-item self-report measure with

a 4-point response scale where respondents indicate the extent to which they possess a broad range of leadership skills, including speech and communication, group dynamics, problem solving, planning, writing, and decision-making. The measure has demonstrated adequate validity and reliability with a normative sample of over a thousand children ages 10-18 (Roets, 1997) and has been adapted and validated for cross-cultural use (Chan, 2000; Lee & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006). Internal consistency in the present sample was moderate ($\alpha = .82$).

A 10-item, 4 point Likert scale measure of *community efficacy* was used to measure the extent to which youth feel that they are able to effectively address community issues or problems. Sample questions include: “I can do something about problems with gun violence” and “I can do something about litter, graffiti or dirtiness.” This measure has been used in previous research with the target population (Gullan, et al. 2008). Internal consistency in the present study was acceptable ($\alpha = .72$).

Campbell et al.’s (1996) *Self-Concept Clarity Scale* is a 12-item Likert scale used to evaluate the extent to

which respondents have a clear and stable sense of their own identity. This measure has been widely used across a range of ages and populations, and has demonstrated validity and reliability (Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavallee, & Lehman, 1996). Internal consistency in the present study was acceptable ($\alpha = .72$).

Measures assessing self in relation to others. Four measures were identified to evaluate youth sense of themselves in relation to others. Specifically, the following constructs were assessed: sense of community, ethnic identity, trust and civic responsibility.

The *Brief Sense of Community Index* was used to assess youth feeling of connection, influence, and belonging to others in their neighborhood or community. This 8 item, 5 point Likert scale measure has been used across numerous populations with demonstrated reliability and validity (Peterson, Speer, & McMillan, 2008). Internal consistent for this measure was high in the present study ($\alpha = .91$).

Ethnic identity was measured with the *Phinney Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM)*. The MEIM is a 12-item, 4 point Likert scale measure that assesses youth engagement and pride in their ethnic identity (e.g., "I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means to me" and "I am happy that I am a member of the group I belong to"). The scale has been widely used across numerous studies and populations (Phinney, 1992). Internal consistency in the present study was acceptable ($\alpha = .77$).

Trust was measured with a 20-item, 4 point Likert scale that asked about the level of trust and confidence respondents have in different social and governmental agencies. The measure was created for the present study, where it demonstrated moderate internal consistency ($\alpha = .87$).

Civic responsibility was measured with a 10-item scale asking respondents to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale their feelings of personal responsibility for helping those in need or working for worthy causes. This scale has demonstrated validity and reliability with inner-city, minority youth (Gullan et al., 2008; Lakin & Mahoney,

2006). Internal consistency in the present study was moderate ($\alpha = .82$).

RESULTS

Overall, response themes were consistent with two distinct components of identity: the self as an individual and the self in relation to others. First, focus group and survey data provided insight on how youth see themselves (what they value, how they behave), their life goals, and the extent to which they feel they have the skills, knowledge and power to achieve their goals (i.e., the individual self component of Erikson's identity model). Second, findings highlighted the extent to which participants felt connected to others in their family, school, and neighborhood and the nature of their involvement, interactions and role in broader society (i.e., relationship with others component of Erikson's identity model).

Individual Self

Focus group themes related to individual self component.

Focus group response themes indicated that participants felt they possessed the skills and drive to be successful in school and future careers, but there were two primary barriers to personal success: (1) difficulty remaining focused and undeterred while surrounded by peers who often seem to lack the motivation to achieve, and (2) the need to balance the expectations and norms of two cultures, i.e., "acting Black" vs. "acting White."

In terms of peer influence, youth felt that many of their classmates did not consider long-term goals or outcomes of their actions, with several participants indicating that their peers "play too much." One seventh grade girl stated:

...when I look at the people that's around me and the people I know, like mostly half of them, I don't know what they gonna be doing with their life. How they act now, it don't look like they gonna have a good future...I don't think they will be able to make it where they wanna be.

Another seventh grade girl described a class assignment where students were asked to write about their

career aspirations:

[The teacher] asked my friend: "Why you only got two sentences on your paper? What you wanna be? Whatcha wanna do when you get older?" He was like, "Nothing." She was like, "You're not going to high school, college?" He was like, "Nope, I'm just gonna sit on the couch."

The observation of peers' apparent disinterest in future achievements was shared by the majority of participants. While they appeared frustrated with this pervasive attitude among their peers, the focus group participants also reported their greatest struggle was keeping focused on the future and remaining vigilant against the distractions around them. In other words, participants' criticism of their peers was tempered by the recognition that without constant effort they might be vulnerable to the same mindset. When asked to explain the struggle for focus, students described a need to balance two disparate cultural expectations. For example, one seventh grade student reported:

I got some cousins, how they act the fool, how they saying, yeah, yeah, this, that, and stuff. As I look at it, one time they may be fooling around, and another time they actually doing something. I guess they don't want to look like you really are smart, like you really know how to do this. That's how some people are. Like they might act a fool, but they really got some knowledge in them.

This point was further articulated by a sixth grade girl who stated, "I think it's because with their friends they act all ghetto, but then when they get in school they act all proper and nice." When the facilitator asked the girl why she felt this happened, she said, "I think it's because they don't want their friends to think they are goody-goody-two-shoes." Asked if this was stressful, she replied, "Yeah, 'cause it's hard to be a different person when it's not you."

The need to change behavior across contexts was articulated by several youth, many of whom indicated that

it was a difficult task that resulted in them feeling inauthentic in one or both settings. Several youth identified the difference in expectations and resulting stress as directly linked to race:

Sometimes I act Black, sometimes I act White. 'Cause when I'm around a lot of people I don't know, I talk properly, but when I am around people I know, I don't. I don't know...I act nerdy. (7th grade boy)

I was at this [all White summer camp] and I wanted to be like every other kid, but when I do that stuff, like when I was at the camp, I did this fun stuff with my friends, but they said they didn't think it was funny, so I had to act differently. Usually at the end I would be quiet and not act the way I wanted to, but act like them...If I'm with White kids, I [act differently to fit in]. (6th grade boy)

While the concept of "acting White" versus "acting Black" largely reflected changing expectations from the outside world, several participants reported that the conflict occurred within themselves as well:

I feel like some day I will get out of here because of all the stuff that do go on around here. And a lot of people don't take pride or clean up after themselves or they try to plant trees and pick up stuff, but sooner or later it just goes back to the way it was. I am not saying I like White people and I'm not saying I don't like White people, because I'm not racist, but I would want to live in a White neighborhood because they care what goes on their street and stuff. And I noticed that White people—well, I'm not gonna say White people—but *people* clean up and keep their stuff clean. It is like a good community, because they tight. Around here, we still tight, but it's dirty and all contaminated. (7th grade girl)

Further complicating matters are the images of race in popular culture. Thus, the following exchange among the seventh grade boys highlights how conflicting expectations

based on race are presented by music, movies and television programming that both reveres and reviles aspects of African American culture:

"White people try to act like us."

[Group spends several minutes discussing ways Whites talk, dress and try to emulate Blacks, particularly as it relates to pop culture and style.]

"Monkey see, monkey do."

"Don't see White people out there shooting, though."

"Chinese people don't use guns"

"I don't see a lot of White violence, though. I see a lot of Black violence."

Survey results. Quantitative survey results from Year 2 reflected many of the themes articulated in the Year 1 focus groups. First, youth reported a relatively high self-efficacy ($M = 63.7$, $SD = 8.7$) out of a possible 79; modal response = 4 on a 1-5 Likert scale; Table 2). Thus, they tended to feel that things would work out well for them across various life challenges and activities, e.g., meeting a person for the first time, working out a problem with a teacher or parent, doing a new activity, or having trouble solving a problem. Respondents also reported a range of leadership competencies, including written and verbal communication, decision-making, and planning ($M = 108.6$ (10.4) out of a possible 130; modal response 5 on 1-5 Likert scale). In terms of their self-perceived ability to solve community problems (e.g., graffiti, violence, gangs, pollution, and racism), youth seemed to feel they could do some things to address these issues ($M = 25.9$ (5.6) out of a possible 37, modal response 3 on a 1-4 Likert scale). However, these responses varied depending on the types of issues, with students indicating minimal or no control over problems such as racism, gangs, and violence. Responses for self-concept clarity (stability in one's sense of self) were also in the mid- to high range, with a mean of 37.8

(7.1) out of a possible 56 and a modal response of 4 on a 1-5 Likert scale.

Correlations between measures suggested several critical points (Table 3). First, as expected, individuals who reported greater efficacy in community problems also indicated having more trust in others (e.g., friends, adults, political and community leaders, institutions; $r = .39$, $p < .05$), a stronger sense of community ($r = .42$, $p < .05$), and a great feeling of civic responsibility ($r = .63$, $p < .001$). In contrast to expectations, individuals high in self-reported leadership competence had lower self-concept clarity ($r = -.38$, $p < .05$) and less of a connection to their race/ethnicity (ethnic identity; $r = -.37$, $p < .05$). In other words, youth who felt that they had strong communication, problem-solving, decision-making, and other related skills indicated that they felt less stable in their self-identity and behaved with less consistency across time or situations. These youth also reported feeling less connected and involved with their ethnic group or activities related to their ethnicity.

Relationships with Others

Focus group themes. Primary focus group response themes suggested that youth had conflicted feelings about themselves in relation to others. This conflict was most clearly articulated by the response "I do but I don't." When asked if they felt that they belonged or fit in with their community, neighborhood and peers, youth tended to report a strong connection, but indicated that this sense of community was often limited by situations or circumstances beyond their control. For example, when asked if she felt she belonged in her neighborhood, one seventh grade girl stated:

I do because we stick together, but I don't because the violence that is going on and I say I belong to my community they may take me to jail. If I belong to my community and someone got shot, that's like me taking up for something that somebody else did.

Another student reported, "[There

Table 2: Response Scale, Number of Items, Mean, Standard Deviation, Response Range, and Modal Item Level Response of Quantitative Measures

| Measure | Response Scale* | # of Items | Response Range | Mean (SD) | Modal Response |
|----------------------|-----------------|------------|----------------|--------------|----------------|
| Self-Efficacy | 1-5 | 19 | 44-79 | 63.7 (8.7) | 4 |
| Community Efficacy | 1-4 | 10 | 16-37 | 25.9 (5.6) | 3 |
| Leadership | 1-5 | 26 | 74-130 | 108.6 (10.4) | 5 |
| Self-Concept Clarity | 1-5 | 12 | 26-56 | 37.8 (7.1) | 4 |
| Trust | 1-4 | 20 | 26-70 | 48.8 (11.3) | 1 |
| Ethnic Identity | 1-4 | 12 | 26-48 | 37.5 (5.0) | 3 |
| Civic Responsibility | 1-5 | 10 | 25-50 | 40.1 (6.7) | 5 |
| Sense of Community | 1-5 | 8 | 9-40 | 24.2 (8.4) | ** |

Note. *higher=stronger/greater; **no overall modal response, all at item-level

Table 3: Bivariate Correlations Between Quantitative Measures

| | Self efficacy | Community efficacy | Leadership | Self-concept clarity | Trust | Ethnic identity | Civic responsibility | Sense of community |
|----------------------|---------------|--------------------|------------|----------------------|-------|-----------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| Self efficacy | -- | .13 | -.07 | -.06 | .16 | .09 | .26 | .09 |
| Community efficacy | -- | -- | -.14 | -.01 | .39* | .18 | .63*** | .42* |
| Leadership | -- | -- | -- | -.38* | -.38† | -.37* | -.16 | -.09 |
| Self-concept clarity | -- | -- | -- | -- | .12 | -.06 | .02 | .09 |
| Trust | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | .39* | .25 | .47** |
| Ethnic Identity | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | .41* | .23 |
| Civic responsibility | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | .33† |
| Sense of community | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |

†p<.10. *p<.05. **p<.01.

are] a lot of Black people on my block and we get along, but sometimes they turn on each other for no reason and just start fighting. We should be sticking together." A 7th grade boy agreed: "People who are the same should stick together."

Yet further exchange highlighted the conflict inherent in this desire for connection to their community.

"We always playing basketball and stuff and someone wants to fight someone for no reason...Another race probably doesn't argue with each other."

"They just say 'Do your best.'"

"They wish people luck. It's so different from us."

While belonging in one's own neighborhood was a source of conflict for these youth, the outside world was not seen as the solution. Thus, several of the participants reported a sense of racism directed at Blacks/African Americans. Indeed, one young participant repeated the sentiment a prominent African American performer had stated about the President of the United States at the time: "George Bush hates Black people."

Survey results. The conflict articulated by youth in the focus groups was also reflected in the Year 2 survey results. Youth reported a low sense of community overall ($M = 24.2$ (8.4) out of a possible 40) and examination of modal responses across items revealed that participants tended to feel a sense of connection and bonding with members of their community or neighborhood (modal response of 5, or "strongly agree," on a 1-5 Likert scale for items assessing this construct), but they did not feel that community members were a good influence on each other (modal response of 2, or "disagree," on these items) or that they belonged or had a say in what went on in their community (modal response of 1, or "strongly disagree," on these items).

On the measure of ethnic identity, youth reported a moderate sense of connection and affiliation with their ethnic or racial group ($M = 37.5$ (5) out

of a total of 48; modal response of 3 on a 1-4 Likert scale). In terms of trust, respondents indicated very low trust for most of the people and institutions in their lives ($M = 48.8$ (11.3) out of a possible 70), with a modal response of 1 ("very little") on a 1-4 Likert response scale. Indeed, with the exception of the military, their block captain and their family (modal response of 4 for these items) youth indicated that they had very little trust in any of the people or institutions affecting their lives (e.g., president, state or city government, people running their school, people in their neighborhood, other youth their age). Finally, in terms of their sense of civic responsibility, youth tended to report a sense of ownership in contributing to their community ($M = 40.1$ (6.7) of a possible 50, modal response of 5 on a 1-5 Likert scale).

Correlations between measures indicated several youth characteristics related to their connection to others and overall place in the world that tended to co-occur. First, participants who reported greater ethnic identity also reported higher trust in people and institutions ($r = .39, p < .05$) and civic responsibility ($r = .41, p < .05$). Further, the more individuals tended to trust those around the more they also reported a stronger sense of community ($r = .47, p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

Adolescence is a critical time for developing a sense of oneself both as an individual and in relation to others (Erikson, 1968). Results from the present study highlight the critical importance of culture in understanding the process of identity formation for urban, minority adolescents. In particular, findings support prior theory and research indicating that developing an integrated sense of oneself and one's place in the world is challenging for young African American adolescents due to mixed-messages about how they should think, feel, and behave to be successful. This struggle to balance expectations across settings was articulated by several youth who described a feeling of "I do but I don't" when asked about their sense of belonging across contexts. Participants

described a connection and shared identity with their neighbors and peers, but expressed an acute awareness that identifying too much with their ethnic community would put them at odds with mainstream achievement.

Whaley (2003) described the discrepancy between mainstream and minority culture as occurring not only on the behavioral level, but also in terms of one's cognitive schemas. African American youth might feel that they are expressing their "true self" in one setting (often when their own cultural group) and a "false self" in another (i.e., with majority group). These contrasting demands might also manifest in a feeling that one does not belong in either group. For example, a youth might want to attend the college where she received a scholarship, but not feel entirely comfortable on the predominantly White/European American campus. She might be further burdened by stereotypes about how someone of her race is expected to perform (Owens & Massey, 2011). The cognitive conflict over in- vs. out-group behavior might explain an unexpected finding from the present study: youth who reported strong leadership skills (e.g., communication, organization, problem-solving, decision-making) reported less clarity and consistency in their self-concept. While consistency in one's character might be related to positive outcomes for Whites, it appears to be less functional for members of minority groups where the ability to be flexible across contexts is critical (Campbell et al. 1996).

Future Directions

Overall, results of the present study suggest that African American youth living and attending school in high poverty neighborhoods face considerable challenges to accomplishing a key task of adolescence: developing a coherent sense of themselves and their place in the world. Specifically, adolescents from vulnerable populations are expected to integrate sets of cultural expectations that are often in direct opposition to each other (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Neal-Barnett, Stadulis, Singer, Murray, & Dem-

mings, 2010). As such, two questions arise: (1) how do members of minority cultures resolve these issues?, and (2) how might individuals and institutions serving inner-city minority youth support adaptive and effective achievement of this key developmental task?

Options for resolution. Youth in the present study reported feeling pressure to actively reject mainstream (i.e., White) values. This is consistent with the “oppositional culture” model wherein marginalized groups respond to their lack of opportunity within the dominant culture by denigrating mainstream ideals and valuing alternative paths to success (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Choosing to dress, talk and act in ways de-valued or rejected by mainstream society might therefore be a logical choice for a youth who feels that mainstream paths to success are not open to him or her. Massey and Denton (1993) describe this cultural divide as a natural result of physical segregation. Unfortunately, finding legitimate means to achieve success outside of mainstream values and expectations can be challenging, particularly when the non-dominant group is economically or geographically marginalized.

An alternative to separation is for African American youth to reject attitudes and behaviors outside of the norms of the dominant European American culture, i.e., assimilate (Hamm & Coleman, 2001). While this might have clear benefits in terms of achievement in mainstream society (e.g., academic and vocational success), the concomitant rejection of one’s own culture can be damaging, particularly for adolescents in the midst of establishing a sense of themselves in relation to the world (Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001). Thus, youth who receive or internalize the message that members of their own ethnic/racial group feel, think and act in ways that are neither acceptable nor consistent with success are ultimately rejecting or being asked to reject a fundamental part of themselves (Owens & Massey, 2011).

An alternative to complete abandonment of one’s own ethnic or racial group is for individuals from minority cultures to develop a bicultural way of

interacting with the world (Bennett, 2007). This was repeatedly articulated by youth in the present study who described a need to act differently depending upon where they were or who was around. Yet they also expressed a discomfort with this way of life. This uneasiness might arise from feeling that their behavior within one group was authentic and their behavior with the other an “act” necessary for success or acceptance (Whaley, 2003). Discomfort might also arise when the characteristics of one’s culture of origin are predominantly perceived as negative, as was the case in the present study. Further, youth descriptions of what it means to be Black/African American were often tied to negative characteristics of low-income urban neighborhoods. In other words, these African American youth from a high poverty, inner-city neighborhood described negative attitudes (e.g., lack of focus or interest in school) and behaviors (e.g., violence, litter/graffiti, dropping out of school) as part of African American culture. The persistent intersection of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status in the experiences and self-perceptions of the youth from this study highlight the critical importance of considering multiple contextual factors when addressing developmental needs (Phinney, 1990; Spencer, 1999). In fact, Massey, Rothwell and Domina (2009) identified the combination of race and socioeconomic status as more important than either one alone when considering the nature and consequences of segregation in the United States.

Another option for coping with contrasting cultural expectations is for individuals to develop a multicultural perspective (Hamm & Coleman, 2001). In this approach, youth are taught to balance and integrate their cultural identities, such that they are not considered dichotomous and do not require a choice between one or the other (Whaley, 2003). While this might be optimal, promoting a feeling of efficacy, connection and belonging across cultural contexts is the most difficult to achieve, particularly given the predominant perception of inner-city African American culture as negative and undesirable.

Strategies for promoting a multicultural perspective of identity. Efforts to promote positive identity development in minority youth have typically centered on racial socialization targeted at the youth themselves (Bennett, 2007). Parents, teachers, counselors, and others working with African American youth are encouraged to teach and celebrate the myriad of positive factors associated with African American culture, such as a strong sense of community and familial support (Stevenson, Davis, & Abdul-Kabir, 2001) and to help youth explore their ethnic/racial heritage (French, Seidman, Allen & Aber, 2006). For example, some schools situated in predominantly African American neighborhoods have included African American history in their academic curriculum and a number of resources for teaching African American history can be found on the internet (e.g., the Department of Education website; www.free.ed.gov).

In his work with inner-city African American males, Howard Stevenson and his colleagues further suggest that youth must be taught to replace the predominant “either-or” view of the world with a “both-and” approach, wherein life is not viewed as dichotomous, but rather made up of dual realities that co-exist within individuals, groups and institutions (Stevenson, Best, Cassidy, & McCabe, 2003). Stevenson points out that the “both-and” approach is particularly relevant to African American children who are vulnerable to society’s view of Black/African American as “bad” and White/European American as “good.” In this way, young African Americans can begin to develop an integrated sense of themselves as powerful and successful individuals across contexts.

While teaching minority youth about their ethnic/racial history and encouraging an integrated sense of self that challenges racial dichotomies are important, efforts to promote positive identity development among ethnic minority youth must also extend beyond the target community. Thus, it is critical to include members of the majority culture in the dialogue about race/ethnicity (Spencer, 2005). For example, the need to engender Steven-

son's "both-and" approach into the perceptions of the dominant group is just as critical, if not more so, in preventing perpetuation of the idea that Black/African American, urban culture is "bad" and White/European American, suburban culture is "good." Further, many teachers, counselors, and other professionals working with inner-city African American youth are members of the dominant culture themselves and their explicit or implicit attitudes and beliefs about urban African American culture have a direct influence how these young people view themselves and the world around them. As such, promoting an integrated view of diverse cultural groups should be at the forefront of professional training, organization, and policies of schools and other facilities serving urban youth (Whalley, 2003; Grantham & Ford, 2003).

Limitations

While findings from this study are informative for those working with high risk youth, there are several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small. Future studies with

a larger population are necessary to extend and validate the present findings with a larger group of adolescents. Second, the consent rate for survey data in Year 2 was low (47%). While this appeared to be related to logistics of one of the classrooms (high teacher turnover), students who did not return consent forms might have been qualitatively different from those who did. Third, the focus of this research was on African American, inner-city youth. Although this population was specifically identified as the target of the present investigation, future research comparing these findings with information about youth from other minority populations or other high poverty settings (e.g., the rural poor) is needed to understand how barriers to identity development differ across a range of high risk youth. Finally, the present study focused on younger adolescents, with the expectation that the challenges faced by in early adolescence can be informative to interventions intended to prevent problems from occurring or escalating. However, critical aspects of identity development might manifest differently across

different ages (French et al., 2006).

CONCLUSION

Adolescence is a critical time in a young person's life, particularly as it relates to developing their identity as an individual and in relation to others in the community and broader society. Successful navigation of this key development stage is critical to academic achievement and associated attitudes and behaviors (Clements & Seidman, 2002). As such, it is an important time to intervene and structure institutions and organizations to maximally support positive development, particularly for vulnerable youth (Spencer, Noll, Stolfus, and Harpaliani, 2001). To ensure that these programs and services effectively address the needs of the population, they must reflect all aspects of the cultural context in which they live (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2003; Elias and Dilworth, 2003). Doing so will provide the greatest opportunity for long-term positive outcomes at the level of the individual and, ultimately, broader society.

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