

# Adjustment and Developmental Patterns of African American Males: The Roles of Families, Communities, and Other Contexts

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African American males grow up in a society in which they are commonly stereotyped as “endangered, aggressive, angry, superhuman, subhuman, lazy, hyperactive, jailed, and paroled, on probation, lost, loveless, incorrigible, or just simply self-destructive” (Stevenson, 2003, p. 185). The relevance of these descriptors to African American males’ development is the potential that these characterizations will serve as a primary lens for the establishment of their “looking glass self” (Cooley, 1998). The challenge that many African American families face is how to buffer their sons to prevent these characterizations from having long lasting consequences for their development and adjustment. The plight of African American males has been a topic of discussion not only for their families but our entire nation. Reasons for concern are warranted.

According to national statistics, the mortality rate of young African American males is the highest among all racial/ethnic youth (Miniño, 2013). Further, they are overrepresented in low school performance. Across all educational levels, from grades K-12, African American males’ reading level is significantly lower than other males and females across every other racial and ethnic group. On average, 12th grade African American males read at the same level as White eight-graders. Further, they are 2.5 times more likely to be suspended from school, and slightly

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over half (54%) of African American males graduate high school, compared to 75% of Whites and Asian American students (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). African American males are disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice system, as one in nine African American males are incarcerated, in contrast to one in 27 Latino males, and one in 60 Caucasian males are incarcerated (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). We are reminded, however, that...

Behind every fact is a face. Behind every statistic is a story. Behind every catchy phrase is a young person [man] whose future will be lost if something is not done immediately to change his reality. And when it comes to young, African American men, the numbers are staggering and the reality is sobering. (Thompson, 2011, para. 1.)

Despite these risk and adversities, most African American boys are faring well and are so because of their “*Ordinary Magic*.” This magic, often referred to as resilience, emerges naturally when individuals identify ways to adapt and respond to adversity (Masten, 2014). The fact that the majority of children exposed to adversity fare well has stimulated a line of scientific inquiry into the ways in which African American families prepare their children to live in a society that frequently devalues them and their families (Coard, Wallace, Stevenson, & Brotman, 2004). It is this line of inquiry that served as the overarching framework for the current book chapter.

## Organization and Scope of this Chapter

This chapter synthesizes extant studies that have examined ways in which parenting, family processes, demographic characteristics, and geographic residence affect and influence both normative (e.g., identity development, social emotional well-being, academic aspiration, prosocial friendships) and non-normative (e.g., internalizing and externalizing behaviors, high risk behaviors, school disengagement) development of African American males from childhood to early adolescence. In addition, we provide a model to guide future preventive interventions targeting African American males and their families, present findings from our longitudinal study of pathways that forecast positive developmental outcomes of African American males as they transition from middle childhood to young adulthood. Finally, we offer recommendations of ways to advance the studies of African American males through the inclusion of families and other safe havens that have been shown to assist these males in adapting and responding to adversity.

To effectively enter an analysis of the extant literature, we selected empirical studies that targeted African American males and examined the roles that family, parents, parenting, and communities/neighborhoods play in their development and adjustment. To the extent possible, we identify ways in which these factors are interlocked with contextual processes to explain individual differences in academic outcomes, mental health, and other dimensions of adjustment, such as processes that protect youth from engaging in negative behaviors, including violence, substance/drug use, and early initiation of sexual practices. In the next section, we provide a brief description of theories and conceptual models selected to frame our chapter review.

## Selected Theoretical and Conceptual Models

We rely on several theories and conceptual frameworks that have advanced the study of human development, including systems theories and explanations that integrate and combine the multiple social–ecological systems within which an individual lives, as well as conceptual models that consider ways in which self-efficacy and motivation influence and affect individual behavior. Thus, we draw on Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory (1974, 1975, 1981, 2005) to explain ways in which African American males’ lives are inextricably linked with and infused into multiple interlocking contextual systems. Individuals are not passive but active agents in their environment with capacities to influence, as well as be influenced through social interactions that are embedded in their context. It is the capacity to interact within or evoke influence on one’s social environment that, according to Bronfenbrenner (2005), *makes human beings human*.

In addition, the Ecodevelopmental theory (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999) and relational development systems model (Lerner, 2002; Overton, 1998) are also useful in framing our review. Both frameworks assert that development is not only influenced by social relations but also affected by multiple systems that are structurally and functionally integrated and embedded in historical and sociocultural systems, including educational, public policy, government and economic systems. Moreover, according to the Ecodevelopmental theory, to provide a complete picture of human development, both risk and protective processes need to be examined simultaneously, as factors that predict development and behaviors. Risk and protective factors and processes are interrelated and multi-determined (Schwartz, Pantin, Coatsworth, & Szapocznik, 2007). Further, Spencer et al. (1997) proposed a comprehensive model, the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems theory (PVEST), to guide our understanding of African American males’ development. PVEST contends that consideration should be given to the contributions of both risk and protective factors which predispose youth to varying levels of vulnerability, such as gender, racial/ethnic group, socioeconomic status, and family composition. For example, the implications of how poverty, social isolation, and race related stressors affect African American males’ development may differ depending on resources available to youth. Such that, how youth respond to stressfully challenging situations may differ based on support systems and coping strategies.

Thus, there is the need to move beyond understanding the experiences of African American males from a deficit-oriented explanation to one that considers how and why African American males succeed despite adversity. Moreover, variability in African American males’ development and adjustment is attributed to experiences that occur across multiple contexts, the interplay of risk and protective factors, and relational interactions in their social environment.

## Context Matters

*African American males do not grow up in a vacuum.* They are sons who resided in families, with varied backgrounds and beliefs, in neighborhoods that are homogeneous and diverse, and in families with resources of varying education and economic levels and social capital. While they are not monolithic, regardless of this diversity, all African American males' lives are more likely to be affected and influenced by the experiences associated with growing up in a racialized society (Garcia Coll & Garrido, 2000; Noguera, 2003). That is, historical, social/environmental, and eco-political contexts shape and influence their development, as the vestiges of slavery and Jim Crow laws continue to affect their families' daily life experiences. In fact, racism remains a major challenge confronting African American families and constitutes a primary source of family stress (Murry, Bynum, Brody, Willert, & Stephens, 2001; Peters & Massey, 1983) as such experiences continue to stifle the life opportunities and advancements of African Americans (Murry & Liu, 2014).

Approximately one in four African Americans live in poverty (Kaiser Family Foundation, n.d.). The consequences of poverty, including deprivations of survival, health and nutrition, education, and protection from harm, can directly or indirectly affect risk vulnerability for African American males. Poverty, often described as a state, is dynamic and cascades through families to directly and indirectly impact youth development, through the emergence of poverty-related environmental stressors that are both physical (e.g., substandard housing, noise, crowding) and psychosocial (e.g., increased family conflicts, parental stress, and community violence). How do families create "ordinary magic," or resilience, (Masten, 2014) in their efforts to overcome adversities and raise healthy sons? Addressing this question will necessitate a dramatic shift in underlying theories, methodological approaches, preventive interventions, and policies.

## A Paradigm Shift

Customary approaches to studying African American families have been guided by questions about dysfunction or deficits, comparing African American families unfavorably to White families. This comparative model is often based on an assumption that *all* White families, regardless of life circumstances and socio-demographic characteristics, fare better than *all* African American families. These approaches have been criticized for producing a narrow viewpoint about African American families and restricting consideration of important issues that affect them (Berkel et al., 2009; Dilworth-Anderson, Burton, & Johnson, 1993; Murry, McNair, Myers, Chen, & Brody, 2014; Sudarkasa, 2007). Furthermore, this perspective treats all non-mainstream behaviors and their consequences as results of shortcomings in persons or families, rather than manifestations of what families do in their efforts to overcome and master circumstances that emerge as they attempt to navigate and manage their lives in challenging environments (Garcia Coll et al., 1996). One has to question the

logic of perpetuating an agenda that continues to raise questions about what is wrong with black families or black males? Rather than focusing *only* on why African American males are in crisis, there also is a need to identify factors and processes that foster and promote their success. Doing so will require a paradigm shift in the research and policy agenda, as well as public dialogue about African American males.

To jumpstart this paradigm shift, we synthesize empirical studies that have focused on major areas of risk concerning African American males, namely, academic disparities, mental health, delinquency and risky behaviors. For each of these topics, we also consider protective processes, to the extent available, with specific consideration given to ways in which the individual, as well as parents/caregivers, families, and communities facilitate positive developmental outcomes. The first area of focus is an overview of studies examining academic outcomes for African American boys.

## Academic Outcomes

Research studies have consistently shown severe discrepancies in the experiences and outcomes of African American males in the public education system compared to other demographic subgroups. As early as pre-K, African American males are at risk of being “labeled” as having learning disabilities, diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, screened for serious emotional and behavioral disorders, and overrepresented in special education tracks. African American boys are significantly overrepresented in special education and classified as having an Emotional or Behavioral Disorder (EBD), and excluded from regular classrooms assignments, if they make up 13 % of the student population (Serpell, Hayling, Stevenson, & Kern, 2009). It is worth acknowledging that school professionals who conduct and make these screenings, diagnoses, and placement decisions, as a form of intervention, often facilitate the tracking pipeline of African American males, which have long-term consequences for these students’ future development.

A consequence of tracking and social labeling is being at greater risk to receive detentions, suspensions, expulsions, and to be assigned to alternative schools or special education classes (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Social labeling also spills over into student-teacher relations. According to Barbarin and Crawford (2006), teachers have lower expectations of African American males, treat them more harshly, and are more likely to single them out for bad behavior, compared to other male and female students. This emphasizes the importance of improving culturally sensitive teacher-student relationships, especially when there is racial discord between student and teacher. Further, identifying effective strategies and approaches for improving schools’ capacity to increase parent-teacher-school engagement, may promote parental involvement and encourage parents to advocate for their sons’ academic needs (Serpell et al., 2009).

Attention to these concerns have immediate relevance for African American males, as they are more likely to be exposed to race related hassles from teachers and school personnel (Wang & Hugley, 2012), and also report higher perceived

discrimination from White classmates than their same-race female peers and Asian American and Latino classmates (Bonner II, 2010). The potential detriment of racist stereotypes and racial micro-aggressions encounters can be manifested in African American males' self-concept, including undermining their sense of academic efficacy, and compromising their sense of school bonding (Bonner II, 2010; Harper, 2009; Singer, 2005).

Confronted with a sense of "otherness" from teachers and peers, African American males may cope by developing hyper-masculine attitudes (Cunningham, Swanson, & Hayes, 2013) and disengage cognitively and physically from schools to avoid negative encounters (Murry, Berkel, Brody, Miller, & Chen, 2009). Such behaviors, including absenteeism and feelings of social isolation, may compromise future aspiration and lead to academic deterioration, high school dropout delinquency, crime, and substance use (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012). Further, negative school experiences are thought to encourage other maladaptive coping, in which educationally competent youth may camouflage their academic ability, appearing to be educationally incompetent despite having abilities to do well and succeed in school (Ogbu, 1992). This maladaptive coping behavior, characterized as academic self-presentation (Murry et al., 2009; Ogbu, 1992), may be manifested in several ways, including reluctance to take notes in class, insufficient time allocated to studying and completing class assignments, low or non-participation in campus activities, which are often met with low or failing grades (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004). These troubling findings suggest the need to identify approaches and strategies to improve the educational experiences and academic outcomes of African American males.

## **Protective Influence of Parents on Academic Success**

Studies of early childhood development have shown that parent-child interactions involving informal numeracy learning, such as counting and number games, improve mathematic achievement for African American boys (Baker, 2015). African American boys who have access to books at home and whose parents read to them on a regular basis demonstrate greater school readiness, as evinced by higher reading scores and successful approaches to learning (Baker, Cameron, Rimm-Kaufman, & Grissmer, 2012) when they enter first grade, compared to those without these academic socialization experiences. Moreover, other studies have found positive association between early exposure to culturally appropriate books, toys, and discussions in the home to higher levels of academic achievement among African American boys (Caughy, O'Campo, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002).

Having positive racial identity has also been associated with academic success. Murry and colleagues (2009), for example, found positive linkages among racial identity, elevated self-esteem and academic proficiency among rural African American males. Youth, who viewed academic success as part of their ancestors'

accomplishments had high academic aspirations, did better in school, and their teachers viewed them as academically competent. These positive associations were directly linked with exposure to adaptive racial/ethnic socialization. A key component of this socialization was parent's encouraging youth to be strong and to work hard, which in turn fostered a sense of empowerment as well as confidence and pride among youth (Sanders, 1997).

In addition, being raised in families where future education orientation and academic success are emphasized contributes to improved academic outcomes. Specifically, parental support, including high educational expectation and access to successful academic role models, fostered stronger school bonding and increased future orientation toward education among African American males (Kerpelman, Eryigit, & Stephens, 2008). It has been suggested that exposure to positive academic modeling affords youth with opportunities to visualize the possibilities. Further, when parents provide norms and expectations about academic performance, youth are more likely to mirror and internalize their parents' beliefs, which may reduce school truancy (Li, Feigelman, & Stanton, 2000), encourage the development of personal academic goals and expectations, and in turn, foster positive academic outcomes.

In sum, although the academic condition of African American boys has been empirically studied for many years, based on our review, a major methodological gap is the lack of rigorous theoretically grounded studies. Further, much of what is known is based on cross sectional studies, as little is known about factors that predict academic success of African American males from preschool through secondary education. The fact that the majority of studies are based on convenience samples, using self-reports from youth and teachers, may not only introduce selection and social desirability biases, but also compromise generalizability of study results.

Though it may be easier said than done, models utilized in studies focusing on African American boys should be based upon culturally relevant theories that encompass the everyday lived experiences of African American families with sons (Kerpelman & White, 2006). Doing so will allow for the identification of malleable individual and family-level factors and processes in the promotion of African American males' school performance. Finally, given the stark evidence of the importance of family in their lives, it is surprising that so few studies have included family level variables as potential mediators or moderators to understand and explain African American males' academic outcomes. It has been well documented that parents are the most proximal influencers of their children; this void leaves the field without insights about the processes through which African American males' families foster future orientation, school bonding, and academic aspiration, and more importantly may be a major missed opportunity to effectively reduce and eventually eliminate the overrepresentation of African American males in academic disparities. In addition, there is a need to develop and refine measures to capture the nuances of academic achievement, as most existing studies rely solely on teachers' and youths' self-reports. In that regard, objective measures of academic achieve-

ment such as school reported grades, standardized test scores, and measures of cognitive capacity are needed. Finally, models of family-based preventive interventions that have been shown to facilitate academic success among African American males are greatly needed. In the following section, we offer an example to guide this endeavor.

The Strong African American Families (SAAF) and Pathways to African American Success (PAAS) programs, universal family-based programs, are designed to empower parents and youth to become active agents in facilitating positive youth development. These programs have been shown to not only deter early sexual onset and the initiation and escalation of substance use but have also been efficacious in the enhancement of academic competence among youth. Specifically, Murry et al. (2009) reported that SAAF evoked increases in intervention-targeted parenting processes that fostered positive change in youth protective processes (e.g., racial pride, resistance efficacy, future orientation, self-regulation), which in turn averted conduct problems in school and increased academic aspirations among youth. These findings were further replicated in a technology-delivered program, PAAS, with more immediate programmatic effects on youth academic performance (Murry et al., 2014).

Findings from the SAAF and PAAS program illustrate the important roles that families can play in the academic success of African American males. There is a need for future research, preventive interventions, and school policies that give greater consideration to youth's and parent's/caregiver's perception of academic success and the extent to which school environment, teachers, and administrators affect their son's academic performance.

## **Mental Health Functioning**

Studies of African American males' mental health functioning are sparse. While anxiety symptoms and disorders have been identified as salient health issues for African American youth, research on internalizing behaviors of African American males is considered a relatively new line of inquiry (Neal-Barnett, 2004). The few available research studies have focused on the prevalence of internalizing symptoms, such as depressive disorders and anxiety disorders. Data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (CDC, 2010) revealed that approximately 28% of African American adolescents reported having felt sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 or more weeks in a row. Results from studies of depression across ethnic groups are equivocal with some studies reporting higher rates among African American teens, while other studies indicate that African American youth experience less depression than their non-African American counterparts (Schraedley, Gotlib, & Hayward, 1999; Wight, Aneshensel, Botticello, & Sepúlveda, 2005). What is apparent is that racial discrimination has been implicated as an underlying cause of the variety of health and social disparities affecting African Americans.

## *Cascading Effects of Racism on African American Males' Daily Lives*

Discriminatory experiences are common in African American adolescents' daily lives (e.g., Brody et al., 2014; Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers, & Jackson, 2008). Results from a nationally representative sample of African American adolescents revealed that 87% reported experiencing at least one discriminatory incident in the past year (Seaton et al., 2008). Further, Simons, Chen, Stewart, and Brody (2003) reported that 46% of their sample of 900 African American early adolescents residing in rural communities had experienced racial slurs; 33% had been excluded from an activity due to race; and 18% indicated that they had been threatened with physical harm because they are African American. Berkel et al. (2009) noted in their interviews with African American youth that the majority had encountered devaluation incidences from peers and teachers, and males reported being frequently harassed by the police in their neighborhoods. Racial discrimination has been consistently associated with elevated levels of internalizing problems (i.e., anxiety and depression) and acting out in response to distress, including substance use problems, and affiliation with delinquent peers (Berkel et al., 2009; Brody et al., 2006; Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006).

Results from cross-lag analyses documented the detrimental effects of racial discrimination on African American males over time. Race related stress amplifies maladaptive coping responses, such as anger and hostility, that can not only compromise psychosocial processes but also increase one's vulnerability to early onset of chronic diseases, such as elevated blood pressure (Fredrickson et al., 2000) and fasting glucose (Shen, Countryman, Spiro, & Niaura, 2008), as well as heightened plasma lipid levels (Weidner, Sexton, McLellarn, Connor, & Matarazzo, 1987), all of which have been associated with health disparities among African Americans. In fact, Brody and colleagues (2014) found that exposure to racial discrimination was associated with elevated allostatic loads among youth as they transitioned into young adulthood. A noteworthy finding was that this path was less pronounced among males who were in emotionally supportive families.

Findings from Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, Zapert, and Maton (2000) offer support for the protective nature of parents for African American boys. Testing the application of the stress-buffering hypothesis on the mental health functioning of 173 urban African American adolescent males, these scholars found that parental support mediated the association between social stress and anxiety and depression. Specifically, parental support insulated their sons from the negative consequences of stress by lowering symptoms of anxiety and depression. The authors concluded that parental support is a powerful resource to neutralize the cascading effects of stress on their son's mental health functioning. Further, these findings confirm what is apparent, that parents matter. Both instrumental and emotional support from parents have been shown to buffer adolescents from stressful life events by fostering positive self-perceptions (McCreary, Slavin, & Berry, 1996).

Such support also has been shown to protect youth from internalizing negative race-related messages that have the potential to derail their sense of self (Murry, Simons, Simons, & Gibbons, 2013). These protective parenting processes are commonly referred to as adaptive racial socialization.

### ***Protective Effects of Racial Socialization***

What are the mechanisms through which racial socialization buffers African Americans from the negative consequences of racial discrimination and fosters positive development and adjustment? Optimally, African American parents' messages about race prepare children for encounters with discrimination while emphasizing pride in being African American (Coard et al., 2004; Hughes & Chen, 1997; Hughes et al., 2006). Messages designed to prepare youth for racism and discrimination may include more instructions regarding coping strategies for reducing racism-related stress, resisting power structures that create barriers, and overcoming barriers to succeed (Murry et al., 2009). African American adolescent males, for example, have reported that a major source of protection from stress related to discrimination was their mothers, who helped them problem solve and provided examples of ways to deal with the persistent harassment by the police (Berkel et al., 2009). For example, a most common socialization approach is for parents to role play with their sons on how to respond when stopped by the police, as in the following quote, "My son knows how to take a neutral stance, put hands in the air, and say, 'Yes sir', 'No sir'" (Coard et al., 2004, p. 288). This form of proactive racial socialization prepares children for the possibility of future racial discriminatory encounters with authority figures, while showing youth that parents are trustworthy and care about their futures and well-being.

McHale and colleagues (2006) contend that African American mothers and fathers employ different strategies in socializing their children about race related issues. Through the process of disaggregating mothers and fathers' *approaches to racial socialization*, these authors found that mothers were more likely to engage in conversations about African American culture and cultural heritage, in addition to discussions about preparation for racial bias with their sons, whereas fathers were more likely to focus on culture specific messages but not racial bias with their sons. The authors noted that paternal racial socialization practices were associated with reduced depression among their sons, whereas the socialization practices of their mothers evinced increased depression and reduced internal locus of control in their sons. The authors offered several plausible reasons for their findings. First, the authors conferred that because mothers have increased access, and therefore more opportunities to interact with their sons, mothers may have greater awareness of developmental issues and concerns confronting their sons. The finding that mothers were more likely to discuss racism issues with their sons, compared to fathers, may be attributed to their son's disclosing race related interactions with others, and also to mothers' grave concerns about the potential risks for their sons. African American

parents, particularly those raising sons in poor urban communities, struggle every day with the reality that when their sons leave home, it is possible that they may never return (Richardson Jr, Van Brakle, & St. Vil, 2014).

While the intent of parents may be to prepare their sons to “fit into mainstream culture”, African American boys are more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors if they receive racial socialization messages from their parents that emphasize mistrust and racism (Caughy, Nettles, O’Campo, & Lohrfink, 2006). A plausible explanation for this counteractive response has been offered by Davis and Stevenson (2006). Elevated depressive symptoms, irritability, and anger among African American males, in response to racial socialization, may be manifestations of their attempt to cope. As they become aware of various obstacles that may interfere with their ability to live the American Dream, African American males may respond through the use of antagonistic and aggressive behaviors (Davis & Stevenson, 2006).

Yet, there is growing consensus that having a sense of connection to one’s heritage fosters cultural assets for African Americans (Gaylord-Harden, Burrow, & Cunningham, 2012) and may serve to protect them from the negative consequences of racial discrimination. Strong racial identity has been associated with positive self-concept (Murry et al., 2005) and well-being (Seaton, Scottham, & Sellers, 2006), while negatively associated with antisocial behaviors (Brook, Zhang, Finch, & Brook, 2010). While some scholars have shown that racial identity attenuates the effects of racial discrimination on mental health outcomes (Greene & Mickelson, 2006), others have shown having high levels of ethnic identity achievement appears to escalate the negative effects of discrimination on both internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Youth who demonstrate high levels of achievement actively engaged in exploring their group membership. In that regard, as race becomes more salient, African American youth may exhibit more anger when exposed to racial discriminatory incidences.

## **Behavioral Outcomes**

### ***Conduct Problems and Delinquency***

African American males are overrepresented in delinquency and crime statistics (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009). In 2008, African American youth accounted for 52% of all juvenile arrests for violent crime. Self-report questionnaires indicate that African American males are more likely to endorse conduct problems and aggressive behavior. While the prevalence of overall weapon carrying was higher among Caucasian adolescents, African American males were more likely to carry a gun and affiliate with peers who have access to weapons. Weapon carrying has been associated with engagement in other risky behaviors. For example, African American males who have access to guns are more likely to use marijuana, sell drugs, and engage in physical fighting (Steinman & Zimmerman, 2003). These experiences have also been identified as potential gateways to increased risk

vulnerability and behaviors that lead to exposure to criminal justice systems. Minority youth make up 39% of the juvenile population but are 60% of committed juveniles. The consequences of these incidences are manifested in the over representativeness of minority youth in the prison system. In fact, African American male youth are twice as likely to go to prison in their lifetime than Latino youth and four times more likely than their Caucasian male counterparts (Wagner, 2012).

### ***Risky Sexual Practices, Substance and Drug Use***

Several studies revealed that being raised in families with low parental control and high warmth increased risk-engaging behaviors among African American boys. While the association between low behavioral control and risk engagement has been well-documented, parental involvement and supervision, as well as the development of standards for conduct and internalized norms that guide behavior in the absence of parental or adult supervision, have been associated with delayed sexual onset among African American males and females (Murry et al., 2009; Romer et al., 1999) and in the prevention of alcohol and substance use (Brody, Stoneman, Flor, & McCrary, 1994; Kotchick, Shaffer, Miller, & Forehand, 2001). One study reported a positive association between parental warmth and early sexual initiation among African American males (Kapungu, Holmbeck, & Paikoff, 2006). While reasons for this occurrence are unclear, one plausible explanation was the need to identify more salient measures that reflect warmth in African American families, such as parental connectedness and family cohesion (Kapungu et al., 2006).

Parental support (e.g., encouragement, warmth, and reinforcement for actions) that co-occurs with behavioral control (e.g., monitoring a child's actions and whereabouts, establishing limits for a child's activities) has been associated with multiple domains of African American males development, including averting delinquent behavior, early sexual onset, and initiation and escalation of alcohol/substance use (Bean, Barber, & Crane, 2006). According to Harris, Sutherland, and Hutchinson (2013) parents' influence on African American males' sexual practices (e.g., condom use, self-efficacy, less permissive sexual attitudes, fewer sexual partners, and less unprotected sex) had greater affect when there was evidence of parent-child closeness and frequent discussion about sexual issues. While youth reported that their mothers were the primary socializers with regard to sexual communication, fathers' influence was mediated through their sons' condom use, self-efficacy, attitudes, and beliefs. This suggests the need for more insight on differential impact of mothers and fathers' on their son's development, including decisions about risk avoidance behaviors.

It has been suggested that parental involvement buffers youth from risk, including academic underperformance and sexual initiation. For example, youth whose fathers or father figures were available and involved were more likely to do well in school and more likely to delay early sexual onset and substance use, compared to youth with disengaged fathers (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003). Having a father or father figure who offers guidance and is actively engaged in monitoring one's whereabouts

increases the likelihood that boys will model desired behaviors, which dissuades them from getting sexually involved and encourages them to do well in school and to actively engage in career planning (Ramirez-Valles, Zimmerman, & Juarez, 2002).

Further, growing up in a supportive, communicative family environment, in which expectations regarding risk are clearly articulated, encourages adolescents to internalize their parents' values and norms, and avoid risky behaviors (Murry, Berkel, Brody, Gerrard, & Gibbons, 2007). Such a family climate may also create an atmosphere of trust that encourages adolescents to disclose feelings, beliefs, and experiences that have implications for positive identity development. Importantly, open communication with parents appears to reduce the likelihood that adolescents will turn to peers for information and to rely on them as role models. For example, African American youth who reported having conversations with their parents about sexually related issues were less influenced by their peers' actions and perceptions for sexual behavior, and consequently less likely to engage in sexual risk behaviors (Murry et al., 2007).

## **Raising Healthy Sons in a Toxic Environment**

While the majority of studies have been cross-sectional in nature, there is some evidence that neighborhood disorder and lack of social controls, that often characterize low resource communities (Ross & Mirowsky, 1999), can undermine the capacity for residents to monitor and control youth activities. Therefore, youth who live in such environments are particularly vulnerable to the influence of deviant peers (e.g., Sampson & Groves, 1989; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Shaw & McKay, 1942), providing avenues for delinquent behavior. Thus, affiliating with peers who engage in violent behaviors may serve as a gateway to community violence and, eventually, serve as a pipeline to prison or increase risk for early death. While all youth in the U.S. are exposed to violence, low income African Americans are particularly vulnerable, experiencing a disproportionate amount of violence compared to other racial minority youth (Gaylord-Harden, Cunningham, & Zelencik, 2011).

The detriment of growing up in violent, socially isolated neighborhoods has been vividly described by Roche, Ensminger, and Cherlin (2007) who note that these males are at increased risk of engaging in delinquent behavior, experiencing school related problems, and elevated risk for depression. The authors offer suggestions for ways to buffer youth from these harmful consequences, recognizing the powerful effect of parents. The capacity to perform this task can be challenging for parents, especially for African American parents and particularly for those raising sons.

All parents ultimately realize that they cannot protect their children. Black parents confront a world almost eager with violent intent toward their offspring. They [black parents] parent while burdened with the knowledge that for a black child the price of error—real or imagined—is higher than it is for white children. (Murphy, 2015, p. 2.)

Despite having the desire to do so, how can African American parents garner the skills and capacities to protect their sons from this devastation? Recognizing that a major role of parents and families is to protect, support, and promote positive

developmental outcomes for children, many African American parents are taking actions when there are potential or actual threats to their child's wellbeing and use strategies and approaches to prevent or abate situations that could forestall growth and development of their child.

Roche and colleagues (2007) found that effective strategies for parenting in toxic environments are those characterized as highly restrictive behavioral control, including punitive punishment, which facilitated positive development and adjustment. Further, when neighborhood youth were not fortunate to have engaged parents but lived in a community where other adults were available to assist them, they too were less likely to engage in antisocial behaviors.

In their investigation of urban African American families, Gorman-Smith, Henry, and Tolan (2004) found that despite growing up in violent communities, the likelihood that an African American male would engage in such behaviors was moderated by particular characteristics of their home environment. The scholars identified *exceptionally functioning families as ones* who engaged in practices that protected their sons from succumbing to gang activity. These families were viewed as exceptional because, despite raising their sons in challenging environments, they were able to foster strong emotional cohesion, create a sense of family orientation, and establish routinized family management practices that dissuaded their sons from succumbing to violence and delinquent behaviors. A critical aspect of these families' protectiveness for their sons was establishing a home environment in which family members feel emotionally close and supported (Gorman-Smith, Tolan, & Henry, 2000). This type of family environment, in combination with parents being involved, vigilant, and disciplinarians with high monitoring approaches, has the potential to affect risk protection sustainability, even when their sons are bombarded with high rates of violence (Gaylord-Harden, Zakaryan, Bernard, & Pekoc, 2015). According to Nobles (2007) being in a family where one's sense of being is legitimized through connections, attachment, validation, sense of worth, and respect, fosters a sense of security in youth that empowers them to address and respond to stressful circumstances outside of their home.

There are, in some instances, situations in which parents who are raising their children in high crime communities undertake drastic measures to protect their sons. Results from a longitudinal qualitative study of parents raising their sons in high risk, low-resource, urban communities revealed that many families use "exile parenting strategies," relocating their sons to safer spaces to improve their life chances and opportunities (Richardson Jr et al., 2014). Exile parenting strategies included temporary exile, when sons are sent away for weekends or summers to stay with relatives who live in safer locations. Families, with limited social capital (i.e., informal networks to rely on to protect their sons) use permanent exile strategies, and often resort to sending their child to juvenile justice systems to protect them from neighborhood violence. African American parents, historically, have sent their children to live with grandparents, older siblings, and fictive kin (Jarrett, 1999). This suggests the need to expand our traditional way of conceptualizing and operationalizing effective parenting. As Richardson and colleagues (2014) discovered, African American families are creating adaptive approaches and strategies to protect their sons from threats of physical violence, to save them from the streets, and more

importantly to extend their life. Our current theoretical models of parenting are being challenged, and research suggests the need for new paradigms for studying families who are raising sons and daughters in toxic environments.

### ***Buffering Effects of Caring Communities and Institutions***

It has been well documented that growing up in close-knit communities in which the adults use strategies to support each other (e.g. monitoring neighborhood children) has implications for encouraging positive developmental pathways for African American males (Berkel et al., 2009; Burton & Jarrett, 2000; Roche et al., 2007; Sampson et al., 1997). The experience of residing in caring communities has been conceptualized as *collective socialization*. In such communities, residents influence youths' behavior by establishing norms, expectations, values, standards, protocols, and procedures for acceptable youth behavior (Simons, Simons, Conger, & Brody, 2004). Having neighbors who are invested in the wellbeing of youth also influences the youths' own parents' behaviors. Specifically, parents who are nested in cohesive communities exhibit more positive parenting than those residing in low cohesive communities. These parental and neighborhood support systems are associated with reduced academic underachievement, aggressive tendencies, and delinquency, and encourage prosocial peer affiliation (Berkel et al., 2009).

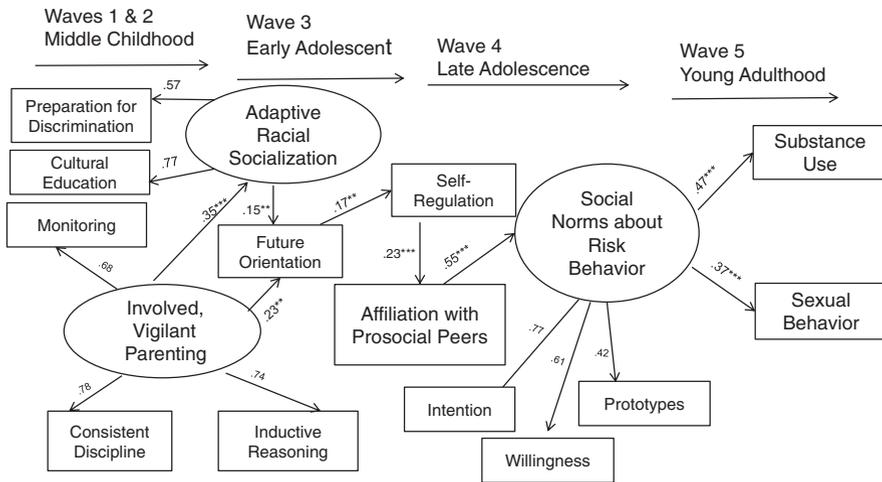
Further, churches, an influential institution in the African American community, also have been shown to foster positive youth outcomes. Asset-based studies have shown that church involvement facilitates moral development, racial pride, healthy self-esteem, and self-efficacy and in turn increases prosocial competence, including academic success and civic engagement, among African American youth (Brody et al., 1994; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Williams, 2003a). That black churches have a pivotal role in the development of youth is not surprising given that this institution has historically served as a place of refuge and support for African Americans. For African American males, the church also increases their connections to other adults with whom they can build supportive relationships. Williams (2003) characterizes the black church as "a village opportunity" to provide positive experiences for youth" (p. 27) and support for their parents. In addition, religiosity and family connectedness were identified as strong protective factors for dissuading substance use among African Americans during adolescence, with continued protection from later binge drinking during young and community residents adulthood (Stevens-Watkins & Rostosky, 2010).

In sum, parents/caregivers are significant socializing agents, transmitting attitudes, values, and norms regarding appropriate behavior and consequences for misbehavior (Jaccard, Dittus, & Gordon, 2000). However, the mechanism through which parents, or other significant adults in African American males' lives, are able to influence their behavior by promoting positive development and adjustment as they transition from childhood to young adulthood needs further exploration. In the next section, we provide a model to guide future research studies of African American males, which emphasizes the buffering effects of parents as their sons' transition from middle childhood to young adulthood.

## Longitudinal Study of Normative Positive Developmental Trajectories of African American Males'

The positive youth development model is a framework that explains the internal resources necessary for young African American males to be resilient in resource-poor settings (Lerner et al., 2005; Phelps et al., 2009). We present an example of ways to document the developmental patterns of African American males, demonstrating the cascading effects of early life experiences on later development. The overall purpose of this study was to identify and explain how salient resilient factors in African American males' environmental context contribute to the promotion of positive development. In addition, analyses of these data were used to examine the association between positive youth development and risk avoidance behaviors, as the males transitioned from middle childhood to young adulthood. Data was obtained from parents and their sons, who participated in the Family and Community Health Study (FACHS), a multisite, multiple panel study of neighborhood and family effects on health and development. Participants in this large-scale study of African American youth and their caregivers included over 889 families in Iowa and Georgia, of which only the 411 families with male youth were included in the current study. Each family included a child who was in the 5th grade at the time of recruitment ( $M=10.5$  years), with additional waves collected when youth were 12–13 (Wave 2), 17–18 (Wave 4), and 20–21 (Wave 5) years of age (See Murry et al., 2014 for a detailed description of study design).

Results presented in Fig. 1, illustrate that the developmental pathway to low sexual and substance use risk-engaging behaviors among rural African American males from middle childhood through young adulthood is mediated through the influence of both involved, vigilant parenting and adaptive racial socialization (race-specific parenting) on youth's future orientation ( $\beta=0.23$ ,  $p<0.01$ ;  $\beta=0.15$ ,  $p<0.05$ , respectively). Future orientation was positively associated with self-regulation ( $\beta=0.17$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) during early adolescence, which in turn increased the likelihood that these males would affiliate with prosocial peers ( $\beta=0.23$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) as they transitioned from early to late adolescence. Murry and colleagues (2014) also conducted profile analyses to determine the extent to which these study factors were effective in identifying high and low risk groups, and which factors differentiate low and high risk African American males (See Table 1). Findings from these analyses revealed that high risk males were more likely to be exposed to harsh and inconsistent parenting, evinced lower self-regulation and future orientation, and were more likely to affiliate with deviant peers. Low risk boys did engage in "normative functional experimentation" but these behaviors were short-term, and the stabilization of their behavior was associated with having connections with parents who instilled in them the importance of being planful and thoughtful about their behavior (e.g., emotion management), setting goals, and forming relationships with like-minded prosocial peers. Thus, the combined influence of these two parenting strategies offers support to confirm the protective nature of African Americans parents' ability to influence the development and behavior of their sons in ways that have



Note. Low risk males ( $N = 331$ );  $\chi^2(121) = 209.69, p < .000$ ; comparative fit index (CFI) = .91; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .047 (.036, .058).  
 †Measure in previous wave controlled.  
 \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Fig. 1 Standardized direct and indirect effects on behavior and adjustment

long-lasting positive effects. What these males learned from their parents during middle childhood and early adolescence continued to influence their friendship systems, norms, and values to govern and guide decision-making processes as they transitioned into young adulthood. Finally, results from our study offer support for Kassel, Wardle, and Roberts (2007) argument, which contends that, while many of the theories about African American males may make sense intuitively, most have not been empirically validated. We urge other scholars to challenge the existing scientific literatures that portray African American males as monolithic “pathological idioms tied to criminal justice systems, violence, unemployment, and disinterested in education, social mobility” (Burton & Stack, 2014, p. 178).

### Closing Remarks

African American families face major challenges raising healthy well-functioning sons. African American males are more likely to grow up in a society laced with limited prospects to achieve goals through traditional career paths, such as academics, employment, and/or family success. They may be more vulnerable to becoming involved in potentially lucrative, yet dangerous activities to compensate and overcome barriers due to lack of opportunity structures.

**Table 1** Mean scores of males self-report for risk engagement patterns by group classification

	Class 1 High risky sex and high substance use (N=47; 12.4%)		Class 2 Low risky sex and low substance use (N=331; 87.6%)		t/F (p)
	Means	SD	Means	SD	
<b>Involved-vigilant parenting</b>					
Monitoring <sup>a</sup>	13.41	3.87	15.89	3.30	-4.41 (<0.001)
Consistent discipline <sup>a</sup>	10.78	2.67	12.69	2.23	-5.01 (<0.001)
Inductive reasoning <sup>a</sup>	12.05	3.97	13.50	3.79	-2.29 (0.023)
<b>Adaptive racial socialization</b>					
Preparation for discrimination <sup>a</sup>	15.24	6.22	14.00	6.21	1.21 (0.228)
Cultural education <sup>a</sup>	11.63	4.78	12.51	4.52	-1.16 (0.248)
Future orientation <sup>a</sup>	25.12	3.07	25.77	3.37	-1.17 (0.244)
Self-control <sup>b</sup>	30.65	4.75	33.16	3.75	12.46 (<0.001)
Affiliation with prosocial peers <sup>b</sup>	23.32	2.87	25.64	3.11	2.96 (0.086)
Social norms about risk behavior	2.41	2.70	-0.32	2.05	5.94 (<0.001)
Intention <sup>b</sup>	-2.95	4.52	0.59	3.56	6.24 (0.013)
Willingness <sup>b</sup>	-3.09	5.31	0.18	3.16	14.19 (<0.001)
Prototypes <sup>b</sup>	-7.22	9.89	0.81	10.07	9.79 (0.002)
Substance use <sup>a</sup>	9.18	7.13	6.00	4.70	3.42 (<0.001)
Sexual behavior <sup>a</sup>	3.61	2.65	1.87	1.74	3.67 (0.001)

<sup>a</sup>Independent *t*-test was used

<sup>b</sup>ANCOVA was used with scores of previous wave controlled

Despite the challenges associated with raising African American sons in a racialized society, many African American males fare well. They do well in school, avoid delinquent behaviors, and are not engaging in high-risk behaviors. Their ability to overcome the odds can be attributed to the protective nature of families and community, in particular, the functionality of positive social relations, and the extent to which the relational processes are reciprocal and mutually influential (Lerner, 2002; Spencer et al., 1997). We end our chapter by acknowledging that much work is needed in the field to adequately understand how African American families successfully navigate their ecological systems to raise healthy sons, whose lives are bombarded with negative messages about “who they are” and “how others think they are.” There remains much to be known about African American males residing in the United States.

## Recommendations

An obvious limitation is a paucity of research studies on African American males and their families. The literature is replete with investigations of these individuals in public settings and spaces but not as members of families. Whereas there is a plethora of studies of non-African American males as members of families, the epistemological discord between studies of African American males in families creates potential difficulties in documenting how families matter to their development and adjustment. As documented in this comprehensive review, studies of African American males reflect their experiences and life patterns primarily in schools, juvenile detention centers, and as members and victims of violent communities.

Moreover, future studies of African American males *must* give greater consideration to the influence of where these males live, their family/kinship, and social and community experiences. Further, similar to the void in scientific studies of African American males, preventive intervention designed to address academic disparities and socio-emotional, behavior problems, and risky behaviors among African American males also needs to be family-based (Murry, Liu, & Bethune, 2016). Specifically, there is a need to expand the unit of analysis to include African American males and their family members. That the settings of most studies of African American males are within public institutions is puzzling. This omission, whether deliberate or unintentional, has created a perception of African American males as being “irrelevant and almost invisible in families” (cited in Burton & Stack, 2014, p. 185).

Lastly, we offer several challenges confronting researchers whose work focuses on African American males. Foremost, there is a need for more longitudinal studies to identify protective processes that forecast successful development among African American males as they transition through various developmental stages. Further, there is a need to include representative samples of African American males in order to offer a more accurate portrayal of their developmental trajectories, allowing for the disentanglement of factors that explain within group differences, such as potential mediating and moderating effects of social class, contextual factors and processes, and environmental factors. Such designs will allow for advanced studies that move beyond a social deficit racial comparison framework, wherein White males are viewed as the model that African American males should emulate.

To fully capture the “nuanced and sometimes covert rules and courses of action in families’ daily lives” (Burton & Stack, 2014, p. 180) of African American males, we urge the use of mixed methods and ethnographic approaches. More longitudinal research designs are needed to identify and explore patterns of development that peak and begin to decrease as African American males transition across various developmental stages. Longitudinal designs will also make it possible to identify malleable processes and factors that can be targeted in preventive interventions designed to promote positive developmental trajectories of these youth.

Based on our review, there is urgency for the scientific community and policymakers to question what is currently known about African American males. Given the primary source and context of studies of African American males, it is not surprising

that they are characterized as “endangered, aggressive, angry, superhuman, subhuman, lazy, hyperactive, jailed, and paroled, on probation, lost, loveless, incorrigible, or just simply self-destructive” (Stevenson, 2003, p. 185). The need for greater attention to social justice begs the question: Why is there so little attention to studying issues regarding normative, positive developmental patterns of African American males? Posing such a question will increase insights on realms of competencies for African American boys and adolescents growing up in diverse contexts, including adaptive coping strategies that they and their parents developed, which have yet to be identified in research. In fact, documenting adaptive processes that promote resilience in African American families may improve the effectiveness of family-based preventive interventions designed to foster positive outcomes among African American males. To do so will require a paradigm shift with greater consideration given to examining the multidimensional aspects of African American males’ lives. Further, inclusion of multiple contexts of family, community, schools, and socio-ecopolitical arenas is needed in the study of African American’s development and adjustment. Finally, investigations of failure must be replaced by investigations of *what promotes successful development and adjustment among African American males and why?* Such information can guide and inform education public policy, and governmental and economic systems, as well as the design of culturally tailored, gender-driven preventive interventions to foster positive change.

In closing, we charge the field to give greater consideration to refining the conceptualization of African American males and to move beyond documenting the sobering statistics to confer their fatalistic future. Taking on this challenge will require the development of a comprehensive research agenda that involves all systems that touch the lives of African American males, with a focus on identifying ways to ensure that these young men have opportunities to dream and live the American Dream.

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