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Adolescents and Young Adults

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Abstract

The function of role models in the lives of adolescents has been linked to many positive outcomes, including academic success and enhanced physical activity (Assibey-Mensah, 1997; Babey, Wolstein, & Diamant, 2016); however, it remains unclear who adolescents and young adults are seeking and identifying as role models. This two-part interdisciplinary project started with literary analyses of a memoir and semi-autobiographical novel that depicted the experience of two African American male adolescents and their exploration of identity; during this time, each male developed the desire for a role model whose behavior he could imitate. The second part of this project included psychological life-story interviews with ten self-identified African American male college students in order to further examine the presence and/or absence of role models and stereotypes. A qualitative thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that African American male participants described six types of role models: explicit, implicit, direct, indirect, positive, and negative. Choosing celebrities, father, and teachers, the participants identified role models who helped each male view himself outside of social constructs and/or stereotypes. Overall, the goal of this study is to suggest ways in which researchers can continue to investigate the function of role models in African American male identity development in order to provide a better service to young Black males who are exploring their identity.

The Function of Role Models in the Identity Development of African American Male

Adolescents

According to the social learning theory, it is human nature for individuals to look at the behaviors of those around themselves when trying to understand how to behave in a particular context (Bandura, 1977); the same can be said of adolescents who imitate the behaviors of others when attempting to establish their identity. This question of who we are, and which qualities and involvements can be used to define our identity, is a question that many of us strive to answer on a day-to-day basis (Erikson, 1968). According to Erikson (1968), identity is continuously being reconstructed and is heavily influenced by the social context in which an individual is being raised; therefore, this process looks very different for each individual. Furthermore, societal expectations vary for each community depending on different aspects of identity including race and gender, and therefore generalizations must be avoided. It is important to highlight these differences in experience and explore how individuals respond to these expectations, particularly by identifying role models in one's community. This study aims to investigate the experiences of African American males in particular, and the function of role models in their identity development.

Most known for his theories on identity is developmental psychologist Erik Erikson (1968), who believed that identity was highly dependent upon cultural and historical context. In his theories, Erikson emphasized the biological and social pressures that individuals began to recognize in their adolescence and/or young adulthood, while also acknowledging that identity is continuously being structured by previous experiences and is an ongoing process throughout the entire lifespan. He claimed that identity is innate and that it is displayed by a consistency in behavior, which can be recognized by individuals when they behave in a way that reassures

them. Erikson also argued that individuals tends to evaluate themselves by the measure that they believes others are doing so. For example, a male is going to view himself as masculine as he believes others are viewing him. Overall, identity is a broad concept and Erikson (1968) himself recognized that the experience was different for each person. He alluded to the particular challenges faced by African Americans in the process of identity development, as he claimed that they were confronted by a negative image imposed on this minority group by the "compact majority" (Erikson, 1968, p. 25).

Informed by Erikson (1968), Way and Rogers (2015) argued that identity is split between the personal and the social identity, emphasizing that the social is heavily influenced by the culture in which the adolescent (or young adult) is developing. Way and Rogers (2015) agree that the adolescent/young adult may begin to pick and choose which aspects of group membership they want to adopt into their identity, while also choosing which ones they would like to avoid. As a part of this process, many adolescents explore stereotypes placed on their group. In a review of their qualitative interview-studies, Way and Rogers (2015) were interested in investigating the patterns and effects of stereotypes on racial and ethnic identity development. For many of the participating adolescents, stereotypes and expectations were viewed as confining, forcing them to feel as if they could only become the option that was presented to them. This proves to be harmful for those adolescents who do not participate in thoughts or behavior that is reflective of their social group as a whole. Way and Rogers (2015) identify the many effects of stereotypes; however, there is little research addressing the ways that these individuals confront these stereotypes. The goal of this project is to examine whether or not African American males select particular role models as a way of confronting societal pressures and racial and gender stereotypes. While identity can be understood in universalist terms that

apply to all humans, racial/ethnic identity must be investigated by first understanding the different kinds of social pressures and expectations placed on a particular social group.

African American males often experience difficulty in their individual identity development because they are competing with the presentation of Black men as a whole. While societal expectations and stereotypes are issues for any individual, young Black males have a particularly difficult time navigating their identity through a set of expectations regarding both their gender and their race. Since an adolescent cannot avoid the question of race and gender identity, it is equally important for psychologists to determine how these two aspects of identity interact with each other during this stage of development. Shields (2008) argues that in order to perform empirical research that best captures social identity construction, a psychologist must first understand how two or more social categories connect with one another. She continues to say that one aspect of identity, such as gender, is often informing another aspect, such as race, and that this intersection of identity either produces oppression or creates an opportunity for the individual. In his review of the critical essays written by James Baldwin, literary scholar Kenneth Kinnamon captures this mixed experience of race and gender when he refers to Baldwin and says, "His role is that of the man whose complexion constitutes his fate, and not only in a society poisoned by prejudice but, it sometimes seems, in general" (Kinnamon, 1974, p. 11). Kinnamon argues that the experience of Baldwin (and likewise, any African American male) is pre-determined by the color of his skin due to the societal expectations that are associated with it. While Kinnamon solely focuses on the oppression that is created for African American males by societal pressure, this study aims to find the ways that young Black males resist these confinements by identifying role models in their communities as an alternative.

There is plenty of psychological research that explores the link between role models and the personal development of African American males. In his study, researcher Assibey-Mensah (1997) was interested in finding preventative measures that could stop behavioral problems in African American youth. By mailing out a questionnaire to 4,500 Black male youth students between the ages of 10-and-18-years-old, his goal was to study the effect of role models on a Black male's perception of himself. Assibey-Mensah found that role models were particularly useful in motivating African American males academically. Assibey-Mensah's finding is supported by a more recent study conducted by Bryant and Zimmerman (2003) who found that role models were linked to progressive choices in academics, as well as positive choices related to substance use, delinquency, and psychological well-being. In a more recent study, researchers were interested in identifying motivating factors for youth who met physical activity standards (Babey, Wolstein, & Diamant, 2016). After retrieving and calculating data from the adolescent sample of the 2011-2012 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS), they found that engagement in physical activity was linked to role models.

In addition to investigating the positive outcomes linked with having role models, many have dedicated their time to investigating the kind of role models chosen by adolescents and emerging adults and these studies indicate that parents, teachers, and peers are amongst those identified as role models by adolescents (Ruggeri, Luan, Keller, & Gummerman, 2018). The role models listed above are also individuals that are known personally by the adolescents, leading to this question of how and why these connections are being made. One recent study, focused on African American students attending a predominantly white university, found that one way in which these students coped with race-related stressors was by speaking to people who shared similar experiences (Griffith, Hurd, & Hussain, 2019). This study also reveals that there are

different stressors or expectations that are experienced by each social group. By investigating who adolescent and young adult Black males are identifying as role models and why these connections are being made, researchers are led to understand that there are indeed different factors that influence this decision.

In other words, if an African American male desires to be a musician, how does this career choice conflict with the expectations placed on him as a Black male, and how does having a role model in this field help him envision this career for himself? What are the expectations placed upon Black males? Who are the role models being identified by African American males and why? Are they choosing role models based on career aspirations, personal values, or other factors? How does this help an African American male view himself? These aspects of identity development may contribute to their future choices in careers, relationships, or other aspects of self. By identifying the kind of role models that college students have desired or selected, and demonstrating a connection to the choices made later in life, my goal is to encourage more communal outreach in the earlier stages of development of African American males, in order to encourage them to identify role models for themselves.

While many of these expectations of gender and race have remained consistent over a long period of time, there are some aspects that are contingent on the social culture within a specific time period. The occupations of African American males in particular have evolved tremendously since the beginning of the 20th century, shifting the way that African American males may have been viewed across the different time periods, while also affecting the type of role models that young Black males may have identified with during a given time. During the early to mid-20th century, the majority of African Americans were reported as having jobs within the service field, such as servants, hotel waiters, barbers, hotel cooks/chefs, bootblacks,

farmers/farm workers, hairdressers, and dressmakers (Watt & Zinkowicz, 2007). At the time, a small number of African Americans held jobs which would have been considered professional by today's standards; these skilled jobs included the occupations of preacher, dentist, music teacher, massage physician, and teacher. More recently, however, Black Demographics (n.d.) reports that 42% of African American males had "white-collar" (or professional) occupations in 2017. Recent studies have focused on Black teachers in the classroom as potential role models for Black male students (Brown, 2012). Other studies have suggested that previous U.S. president Barack Obama could possibly be viewed as a role model figure for young Black males (Aymer, 2010). Both studies suggest that there is a connection between the expansion of professions held by African American men and the identity development of young Black males; not only does it provide this group of males with more potential role models but it also expands their sense of possibilities. By reflecting on the narrative of individuals developing in the past, we are better able to understand how the social culture may have influenced the identity development of African American males during that particular time.

One way that researchers can unlock the perspective of African Americans during a particular time period is through literature. In order to further my insight into the experience of African American male adolescents, I chose to read a memoir and a semi-autobiographical novel set in two different sociohistorical contexts—*Bad Boy* by Walter Dean Myers (2011; set in the 1940's and 1950's) and *Sag Harbor* by Colson Whitehead (2010; set in the summer of 1985). A memoir is a form of a narrative describing the lived experience of an individual during a particular time-frame in his or her life. Often grouped with other forms of writing such as the essay, the memoir may focus on a particular subject or experience in a person's development. Many scholars agree that a memoir can be used as a tool of accountability (or as supporting

evidence) for the claims that historians make about a particular historical time period (Struever, 2016). Similar to the memoir, the autobiography is also a narrative account of an individual's life that is categorized as non-fiction writing (Freadman, 2005). Novels are narratives, but fictitious ones that merge together truth and invented elements. Therefore the semi-autobiographical novel is a hybrid in the sense that it contains both fact and fiction. In their book review of *Sag Harbor*, *The Washington Post* reviewer commented: "*Sag Harbor* is a kind of black 'Brighton Beach memoirs.'… The novel's eight chapters are, in effect, masterful short stories [that] riff on the essential quests of teenage boys: BB guns, nude beaches, beer and, above all, the elusive secret to fitting in" (Whitehead, 2010). Due to the fact that this semi-autobiographical novel follows a similar structure to that of a memoir, the terms are used interchangeably, revealing that this novel is closely connected to the author's experience despite its use of fiction. In his interviews, Colson Whitehead confirms that his personal experience mirrors the events described in the book, claiming that before publishing this novel, "[he] had avoided using stuff in [his] life" (Seaborn, 2009). It is important to recognize that these two books are not included in this project in order for me to make any broad claims about the experience of African American males; instead, the memoir and semi-autobiographical novel in this project were used as a starting point in order to formulate the kind of questions that could be answered through a social scientific study.

In fact, despite the controversy regarding the reliability of memoir, it is a genre that is well-respected as a source of evidence across multiple disciplines including history. Historian Paula S. Fass (2006) argues the following: "historians are accustomed to viewing the memoir as a source. Indeed, for historians the memoir is an important historical tool, and for social historians especially, it provides the appealing voice too often otherwise missing as we try to reconstruct the lives of ordinary people" (pp. 107-108). Therefore, when we begin to consider

the kind of jobs held by African Americans during specific time periods, we can validate the historical record by reading personal narratives that reveal the experience of males developing during that time. Furthermore, narratives about adolescence are revealing in the sense that they are considering all of the social influences around them as they begin to question their identity during this significant stage in development (Erikson, 1968). The two literary texts that I read provided me with preliminary data and informed the interview questions for the second portion of this project. In the memoir *Bad Boy* (Myers, 2011), the author Walter Dean Myers struggles to identify his passion for reading and writing, as he is developing in the 1950's during a time in which society did not view Black males as intellectual. In contrast, the main character of the novel *Sag Harbor* (Whitehead, 2010), Benji, is an African American male adolescent interested in both the Black and White cultures of the 1980's, during a time in which society tells him he can only embrace one culture or the other. Each central character is struggling to view himself as the person he wants to become, so he starts searching for role models in the community and in the media that he can imitate in order to develop into who he desires to be. Historians may use memoirs in order to provide them with context for understanding a specific historical period, and psychologists can also use memoir or other forms of life-writing as a means to explore common patterns in human experience and how they might change across time.

The goal of this project is to investigate the presence (or absence) of role models in the formation of identity for African American males. How does the experience of participants in my study compare to the memoir and novel that I read? How does it differ? How can professionals use this information in order to equip this group with the proper tools for a positive experience in identity development?

Method

Procedure

Phase 1: Close-reading of Literary Texts. This study began with a close-reading of a memoir, *Bad Boy* (Myers, 2011), and a semi-autobiographical novel, *Sag Harbor* (Whitehead, 2010). Prior to reading these two stories, I conducted preliminary research on the genres listed above, as well as on the construction of identity within the five areas of development defined by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2002): emotional, cognitive, physical, behavioral, and social. While at first I focused on the combination of these areas during development, my focus eventually shifted towards the social aspect (i.e., the individuals' relationships with others). The social aspect of APA's (2002) theory echoes that of Erikson's (1968) model of identity, which is composed of the way that individuals views themselves and the way they are viewed by others. Using these two theories, I read both texts through a psychological lens, searching for the moments in which each character discussed his personal views of himself and how other people viewed him. My procedure focused on the social context for the identity development of two African American males with a focus on race and gender in two different historical eras: Walter who is developing in the 1950's (Myers, 2011) and Benji who is growing up in the 1980's (Whitehead, 2010).

Based on these two understandings of identity, I used the following two methods of analysis while reading: close-reading and discourse analysis. In order to accomplish a close-reading of the text, I read the novels carefully, taking detailed notes on the events taking place in each character's life, and the ways that they used their words to describe this. Close-reading is a method that evolved from "New Criticism" which solely focuses on the words within a text, removed from any outside context (Parker, 2015). However, in order to fully understand the

social context in which each character was developing his identity, I focused on the patterns in his language, using a method called discourse analysis; this method involves an investigation of the particular language usage and how it connects to the socio-culture of the given time and the communities to which participants belong (Griffin, 2013). Through discourse analysis I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of each character, and I was able to decode the way that language reflected each character's ideas about masculinity and race. Using these two literary methods, I was able to reflect on the contrasts in these two characters' experiences, such as the factors caused by the difference in historical time period between the settings of the two texts. I was also able to identify commonalities, such as the interaction with stereotypes and the desire for and the selection of role models. An analysis of these texts led to my interest in comparing and contrasting the experience of these two characters to that of African American males developing in the 21st century. The data retrieved from these two novels was used to inform the interview questions for the second phase of this study. An interview-study protocol was chosen in order to investigate whether the themes that emerged in the texts compare and/or contrast to the experience of the African American young adults who were interviewed for this study in 2018-2019. The connection between the texts and the interview questions will be discussed in more detail in the results section of this manuscript.

Phase 2: Life-Story Interviews. The second phase of this study included life-story interviews with 10 participants. In order to recruit participants for this study, I created a flyer (see Appendix A) containing the inclusion criteria (self-identified African American males, born and raised in the U.S., and enrolled at Bridgewater State University [BSU]), which also listed my contact information at the bottom. These flyers were hung around in the psychology department and in the residence halls. My main strategy of recruiting participants for this study was word-of-

mouth. I told my peers that I was seeking and compensating participants to partake in an interview study centered on their life experience and role models, and if they expressed interest I would send them a recruitment email (see Appendix B). This recruitment email contained a brief explanation of the interview protocol, the inclusion criteria, the time commitment, and the compensation rate ($10); once participants responded to this email, either I or my research mentor scheduled the interview.

Once a date and time was confirmed between the researcher and the participant, the researcher reserved a laboratory room in the Psychology Department at BSU. On the day of the interview study the researcher (either I or my research mentor) greeted the participant and introduce our self. Following a brief explanation of the study, the researcher handed the participant a consent form explaining the procedure in more detail (see Appendix C). Next, the participant was given a demographic survey (see Appendix D). Once these forms were administered and completed, the audio recorder was turned on and the researcher started asking the participant questions using the loosely-structured interview protocol explained below (see also, Appendix E). At the end of the session, the researcher conducting the interview restated the contact information of the investigators; the researcher also mentioned campus resources, such as the wellness center, that students could seek if they wanted to continue talking about their experience. The researcher then explained that the audio for the interview was to be kept confidential and gave the participant a final opportunity to express any concern or ask any questions. Last, the researcher paid the participant $10 and thanked him for his contribution to the study.

Participants

The participants for these interviews were 10 self-identified African American male students from BSU, ranging between the ages of 19 and 24 years old ($M = 21.5$, $SD = 1.58$). The participants for this study fluctuated between the grade levels of sophomore and senior year; 1 participant identified as a sophomore, 3 as juniors, and 6 as seniors. In order to confirm a similar (although not identical) cultural experience between participants, the criteria for this study included that participants be born and raised in the U.S. All participants were raised in different parts of the U.S., including Massachusetts (8 participants), Washington D.C. (1 participant), and Rhode Island (1 participant). In order to estimate the socioeconomic status of the participants, they were also asked to indicate the highest level of education obtained by their mother and father (or female/male guardians). The highest level of parental education varied between less than high school degrees and a graduate school degree. Two mothers obtained less than their high school degrees, 1 mother obtained her high school degree, 1 mother completed some college or vocational school, 2 mothers obtained their vocational school degree, 2 mothers obtained their college degree, and 2 mothers obtained their graduate school degree. One father obtained less than his high school degree, 1 father obtained his high school degree, 3 fathers completed some college or vocational school, 4 fathers obtained their college degree, and 1 participant left this question blank. All ethics were followed, and participants signed a written consent before the interview began.

Interview Protocol

The interview portion of this study was meant to investigate the themes present in the two novels, such as the selection/desire for role models and the experience with stereotypes pertaining to race and gender, in order to investigate how those factors contributed to the participant's way of viewing himself as an African American male. Following a loosely-

structured interview template, participants were asked a series of questions regarding their experience in order to encourage their personal reflection and understanding of the events that have shaped them (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

Attending to the first part of the interview protocol (see Appendix E), the researcher explained the life-story interview structure that was to be used (McAdams, 2013): questions beginning in childhood and leading up to the present day, in order to understand the experiences that shaped the participant's life story, or identity, especially in connection to role models or stereotypes. Following this model, part 2 of this protocol focused on experiences in childhood, part 3 focused on adolescence, and part 4 focused on the present-day events and frame-of-thinking (i.e., in connection to relationship with parents, friendships, school involvement, etc.), in order to grasp a general understanding of the participant's development. Part 5 of the interview template then focused specifically on role models, stereotypes, and the combination of different aspects of identity (i.e., race and gender), in order to expand the researcher's understanding of the participant's general experience with each theme and how it may have connected to his earlier experiences. In part 6, the researcher then asked questions pertaining to the participant's future, (i.e., vision for himself and message for future generations) in order to understand the way that present-day role models and experiences with stereotypes shapes or constrains the way that he views himself in the future. In the final portion of the interview protocol (part 7), the researcher wrapped up the study and asked the participant if he had any final thoughts or questions, in order to see if any important details or experiences were overlooked during his reflection.

Thematic Analysis

Each life-story interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim with the exclusion of any identifying information, such as names of people, places, or things. All of the data was then qualitatively analyzed using a thematic analysis, which included identifying and coding any patterns that were revealed through the participants' speech (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Four undergraduate researchers, my research mentor, and I read and analyzed each transcript and identified patterns in connection to the following themes: role models, stereotypes, and the construction of race and gender. The group of researchers, my mentor, and I then gathered together in order to discuss the transcript and the themes that were either directly or indirectly revealed through the participants' responses. During an additional round of analysis, I read through each transcript and identified patterns once more in order to compare and contrast the identified themes across interviews.

Results

The researchers for this study de-identified participants by providing pseudonyms in place of their names during analyses. This was completed in order to protect the identity of the participants when discussing their personal experience growing up. The first portion of the results compares the gender and race constructions that inform the identity development of the adolescents in the two books to that of the participants in this study in order to understand what societal pressures were shaping the identity of these men. The second portion of the results focuses on the types of role models that aided the identity development of the participants. The goal of the results is to identify the expectations that this group of males faced during their identity development in order to understand the function that particular role models served in this process.

Gender and Race

Both gender and race are always informing the way that an individual deals with identity development; however, there are times that the issues of masculinity are perceived as a separate influence on this process by the individual experiencing it. In his memoir, *Bad Boy*, Walter Dean Myers (2011) retells his childhood and adolescent experiences as an African American male growing up in Harlem, New York during the 1940's and 1950's. Walter describes his later childhood and adolescence as a stage in which he is clearly divided by two major interests—playing basketball and reading. He says, "By this time [middle adolescence] there were two very distinct voices going on in my head, and I moved easily between them. One had to do with sports, street life, and establishing myself as a male" (p. 92). He continues, "The other voice, the one I hid from my street friends and teammates, was increasingly dealing with the vocabulary of literature" (p. 92). In this particular moment, Walter is not considering the intersection of his gender and race, but he is making a clear distinction between what behaviors are acceptable for him as he is developing into his identity as a male. Walter also reveals that at some point in his development, he made the decision that he must suppress any behaviors that fall outside of this masculine construct, rather than simply assuming his identity as both a male and as a person who is interested in reading/writing.

During the interviews, participants described their understanding of masculinity in a way that was parallel to Walter's understanding. For example, when asked if he believed that gender influenced the constant comparison to his brother, 21-year-old Noah responded, "Umm, but I guess like a part of that like with the dynamic of, having like me and him living with each other, and being such close age, and like, definitely like being boys to an extent." Noah continues, "like, you know, uhm… kind've like fighting a lot… there'd be like physical competition of … him picking on me, and me kind've like wanting to like out-do in certain ways, so like…uhm, I

definitely think there is like a masculine aspect." In this example, Noah is revealing that his

understanding of masculinity consists of physical competition and fighting. In another instance, I

asked Noah if he himself enjoyed sports, and he responded, "I was just interested in like Legos

and like Pokémon and like, like, like anime, and Yu-Gi-Oh, and stuff like that, and like play my

cards, you know like I really wasn't like… I was very like uh… non-athletic. Kind've nerdy."

Similar to Walter, Noah is able to make a clear distinction between the behaviors that are

categorized as masculine and the actions that fall short of this construct, indicating that these

understandings of masculinity influence the way that they view themselves in terms of their

personal identity.

While there are times that African American men may solely focus on the role that

gender plays in their identity development, at other times they express circumstances that are

particularly shaped by their race. In the semi-autobiographical novel, *Sag Harbor,* a fictional 15-

year-old adolescent named Benji shares his mixed experience as a wealthy African American

male developing in Manhattan, New York during the academic year, and Sag Harbor, Long

Island, during the summer. While this novel is primarily centered on the summer of 1985, Benji

also revisits memories from his childhood and early adolescence throughout the book. He

explains however that it is not until the summer of 1985 that he truly begins to wrestle with this

question of racial identity; he experiences a split between his appearance as an African American

male and his experience as a wealthy individual. He says:

> Black boys with beach houses. It could mess with your head sometimes, if you were the
>
> susceptible sort. And if it messed with your head, got under your brown skin, there were
>
> some typical well-known remedies. You could embrace the beach part—revel in the
>
> luxury, the perception of status, wallow without care in what it meant to be born in

America with money, or the appearance of money, as the case may be. No apologies. You could embrace the black part—take some idea that you had about what real blackness was, and make theater of it, your 24-7 one-man show (Whitehead, 2010, p. 72).

In this text, Benji reveals that his skin color and his socioeconomic status are main contributors to his experience growing up, which he says leads to two different experiences. He says that in order to combat this crisis, there were two extremities: embrace the wealth and dismiss the race or vice versa—play the role of a Black person and dismiss everything else. During the academic year (in Manhattan), Benji simply embraces his wealth without being informed on Black culture, and during the summer time in Sag Harbor, he tries to catch cues from his peers on how to behave as a Black male, which leads to rejection from both communities. His academic peers exclude him on the basis of his brown skin, while the Sag Harbor community dismisses him because he is too absorbed by white culture. This creates conflict for Benji, who simply wants to embrace both aspects of his identity—a crisis he suggests could have been avoided with an adequate role model; he says, "Or you could embrace the contradiction, say, what you call paradox, I call *myself.* In theory. Those inclined to this remedy didn't have many obvious models" (Whitehead, 2010, p. 72). Throughout the novel Benji revisits the social cues that he has received from his community in Manhattan and Sag Harbor in order to embark on this quest to merge both aspects of his identity—race and socioeconomic status—during the summer of 1985.

It is clear that throughout his development, Benji is bouncing between two cultures, and this is an experience that many of the participants in this study can relate to. For example, when asked about his childhood memories, 19-year-old Alexander says, "I feel like I had a good amount of friends growing up, I just think a part of it was like, I was still being told like, you know around my friends like, 'those are your parents? You don't look anything like them.'" He

continues, "it would make me uncomfortable cause I didn't want to get the whole black-white thing cuz that's not—my parents you know never made that a thing that mattered. And it shouldn't matter. But yeah, it was kind of like hard making friends sometimes, because I didn't know like who I should gravitate towards cuz everyone wants everything to be so this and that." Alexander later explains that his parents are an integrated couple (African American and white) which led to his mixed experience growing up. Similar to Benji, Alexander feels as if he has to pick and choose between friend groups rather than embracing both sides. When I asked Alexander about his experience in middle school, he says that this is when race became more difficult for him: "It was uncomfortable just because I was trying to find my niche, and you know, being the educated mixed kid, you know it's kinda like, where do I go to?" In Alexander's experience, he shares that others made it seem paradoxical for him to be both educated and African American. However, in contrast to Benji's experience, Alexander shares that he did have a teacher that he could relate to: "there was one teacher that like helped me out… he was really funny. Very relatable. He was kind of like me… like educated, uh… not…not white-guy." In this moment Alexander is expressing the usefulness of having had a teacher (or role model) that shared a similar experience and that looked like him. It is important to recognize that Benji desired a role model during his development that could have portrayed a mixed-race identity during a time in which he felt that he was being told that he could only be one or the other, but the failure to find one led to an internal struggle.

Similar to Benji, Walter demonstrates the importance of having a role model figure during identity development. During his adolescence, Walter's decisions are heavily influenced by his desire to be viewed as masculine by those around him. At first, Walter entertains the idea of wanting to become a professional basketball player, which he suggests aligns with his

masculine ideals. Additionally, Walter recalls having a mentor to support his interest in the sport: "In ball I was helped briefly by a thin black man called Fatty who was the coach of a team called the Comanches, one of the best teams in the city. He talked to me about the possibility of playing ball in college, and I was encouraged" (Myers, 2011, p. 93). It is clear that when Walter's desired career path aligns with his developing identity and is supported by a mentor (or role model), he feels less conflicted during this process. Walter explains that as he got older, his interest in reading and writing grew stronger which led to his desire to become a poet (rather than a basketball player); and as this desire grew within Walter, he became more critical of those around him and how he believed that he was perceived by others as an African American male. He says that in his middle adolescence, people only viewed him as one of three options: a person who was big, athletically gifted, and a fighter, while displaying no intellect; or someone who was stereotypically Black; or third, a reader, but certainly not Black. Later in life, Walter is able to reflect on the rich literature of Harlem that is highly recognized in present day, but he says that he lacked this knowledge during his adolescence; he says that none of the black writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance, (such as, "Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, and Countee Cullen") were taught to him in school and there were "few black librarians" (Myers, 2011, p. 92). This aspect of Walter's experience (as well as Benji's desire for a role model) led to my interest in investigating the function of role models in the identity development of African American males. Would Walter's identity development have gone more smoothly if he was able to find the support from a role model while following the path to become a writer? Would Benji have experienced less uncertainty during his development if he had a role model that displayed a mixed-race identity?

Ultimately, the identity development of African American males is constantly being influenced by both race and gender even if these males choose to focus on only one aspect at a time in their narratives. Walter and Benji's experience further suggests that the desire for a role model is enhanced during adolescence when they are negotiating multiple aspects of their identity. While the difference in historical time period and environmental setting leads to different questions and experiences, both of these males express their desire to have a role model whose behavior they can imitate in order to become who they envision themselves to be; for Walter this means becoming a black poet, while for Benji it means embracing a mixed-race identity.

Due to the fact that cultural expectations, stereotypes, and discrimination is largely present in the identity development of African American males, I wanted to investigate whether other black males also seek role models during this process in adolescence and emerging adulthood. Furthermore, I wanted to understand how these role models were being chosen and if they related to an aspect of their identity such as gender, race, or career goals. Additionally, as a result of the expansion in jobs held by African American males and the continuous development of media, I wanted to examine the historical difference across time which led to my interviewing males in the present day in order to compare the similarities and differences in themes that emerged in the texts.

Role Models

The following six types of role models were identified based on the responses from the participants during the interview portion of this study: explicit or implicit, direct or indirect, and positive or negative. Each role model that was referenced by the participant either fit into one of the categories mentioned above or multiple. Our goal with the following results is to understand

the type of role models that were identified by these participants, to identify the qualities that resonate with the participant when choosing these role models, and to consider how these role models may have enhanced the identity development of these African American males.

Explicit Role Models

An explicit role model is one that is clearly identified as a role model by the participant. For example, 22-year-old Liam says, "And then, my biggest, biggest, biggest, biggest, biggest, inspiration and role model in life… is Donald Glover, Childish Gambino." This is a standard example of an explicit role model because he verbally identifies this person as a role model. Liam continues, "Cause me and him; it's crazy! It's so crazy! Me and him actually kind of have like the same background… that's pretty crazy that someone kind of has like the same story as me." In this example, Liam does not hesitate to identify Donald Glover as a role model and he clearly articulates that this selection is based on his ability to relate to the experiences of this celebrity. Participants often expressed that it was important for them to be able to see themselves in and to relate to the role models that they selected.

In other circumstances, the participants expressed that accomplishments or success was a key influencer in their selection of role models. For example, 21-year-old Elijah says, "I want to develop a relationship with [my uncle] now because I wanna like get knowledge out of his brain into my brain, cause I'm young, I'm trying to learn, but I looked up to him mainly—I recently read his book, he has a book about like how he got up there... I consider him a role model because he made it." In this example, Elijah is clearly identifying his uncle as a role model and he is also emphasizing that his uncle's knowledge and accomplishments are the reasons for this selection. While there were times that the participant directly identified their role models,

participants often hesitated and instead implied that a particular person was a role model without actually saying it.

Implicit Role Models

An implicit role model is one that is referenced by the participant as having taught him something or influenced him in a certain way, suggesting that this person is a role model, without saying it directly. This includes when the participant struggled to articulate the kind of influence that a particular person had on his development, or why the participant had chosen this person in particular as a role model. For example, 21-year-old Noah says, "he's always kind of like at the meetings and for like, very present as an advisor, which I really respect, like a lot, umm, so there are definitely people now, who like, um, who's presence like—I don't always think about I guess, but like, um, when I do, it's definitely like, like when I respect and appreciate." This is an example of an implicit role model because Noah highlights the positive qualities that are characteristic of this individual and describes the ways in which he admires this person, implying that his advisor is his role model without explicitly identifying him as such.

Another example includes 24-year-old Benjamin who suggests that his mother is his role model without actually expressing it. In this interview, I asked Benjamin if his mother influenced his decision to enroll back into college and he says, "YEAH, her voice was the only reason I came back to school cause if it was up to me I woulda just kept working." In response, I ask, "so would you consider your mother a role model?" and Benjamin responds, "of course." In this, example, Benjamin reveals that his mother is a primary influencer on his decision-making without verbally expressing that she is his role model; however when he is asked, he responds with no hesitation, demonstrating the different ways that participants may suggest that a person is a role model without explicitly saying it. In another example, Benjamin shares the impression

that his African American teachers have had on him, he says: "I had a couple classes where the teachers were black males and those were my favorite classes because instead of you know…speaking to us condescendingly like as a teacher who is…like of a different race, they know what we're going through so they try to help as much as possible." Again, Benjamin has suggested that he has learned from these African American teachers and that they have influenced his overall experience. Because he does not explicitly say that they are his role models, they are an implicit role model. The participants of this study often reflected on previous teachers and other figures in their physical environment as role models which leads to the next category: direct role models.

Direct Role Models

During these interviews, participants suggested that physical proximity to a role model was also important in their selection. A direct role model is one that the participants describe having had a personal relationship with. This includes immediate and distant family members, peers/friends, coaches, and teachers. For example, 20-year-old William says, "I played soccer for like my whole life and that was a huge thing cause like my dad was like really into soccer, and I was like, 'oh I got you' you know and I kind of like followed in his footsteps, or at least I tried to." This is an example of a direct role model because the participant is expressing his desire to follow the modeled behavior of his father, with whom he has a personal relationship. This is also another example of an implicit role model because William does not clearly address his father as a role model in this statement but he says that he emulated his father's behavior especially in his decision to play soccer, displaying how role models may reflect more than one of the types of role models identified in this study.

When negotiating their identity as males, participants seem to have been specifically searching for male role models (especially father figures) during two stages: adolescence and when speaking in terms of future fatherhood. For example, when asked if he desired to have a role model teaching him things that he was learning from TV such as shaving and haircuts, 22-year-old Liam says:

> Yes. Um, I did have a bunch…of questions about…the person that I was becoming, um, well basically going through adolescence, and stuff, going through puberty, um it felt really awkward talking to my mom about it because I'm like, 'ah I don't want to go to my mom about something that's going on down here when I should be talking to someone who has the same thing', so, um, it was kind-of… it was hard in the sense that I didn't have a male role there all the time to look up to and to really ask questions and if I did have to ask questions it was over the phone and we all know, like, in person-contact is much better rather than over the phone.

In this example, Liam clearly indicates that for him, puberty and adolescence was a time that was paired with a lot of questions about his evolving maleness in particular. While in other cases Liam has described his mother as a role model, he says that it is difficult to do so during this time because he desires a role model that has the same physical features as him. Furthermore, Liam expresses that it is not the same to speak to someone over the phone; instead he emphasizes his desire to have a male figure present in his household to whom he could communicate these questions regarding his male identity. When William was asked about his experience in middle school, he gave a similar response to Liam, he says, "Yeah just 'cause like, the like puberty stages and like not having my dad around as much to help me out with that". In this example, William is also emphasizing that during puberty, he desired to have his father around in order to

help him understand his development. Both males signal that maleness and physical proximity are important aspects in role model selections during adolescence and puberty.

In addition to puberty, the participants brought up their relationships to their fathers when talking about future plans of being a father. For example, William says, "It was more like, 'I want to be just like my dad. I want to be a man. I want to like be there for my kids like he was for me and my brother." In this example William has made the connection between his father, his masculine identity, and his future fatherhood, suggesting that these concepts are all related to one another. It appears that for William, his masculine identity is under pressure specifically during these two stages (puberty and fatherhood) which influences his desire to identify and act like his father. Furthermore, by identifying someone he has a personal relationship to, William implicitly suggest that his father is his direct role model.

Aside from the father figure, another direct role model that was frequently described in the interview studies was an older sibling. For example, 21-year-old Noah says, "when I started actually getting into like more bands and like, was able to kinda like start wearing like normal people clothes…at least attempting to mold it after like… um… those bands, but also like I think like my brother too…I was definitely copying my brother a lot, um, more so than I thought I was. Wow." In this moment, it appears that Noah has a personal revelation about the amount of influence his older brother actually had on him; he says that as he was getting older, he started imitating the way that his favorite bands and his brother dressed, indicating that his brother is a direct model for him, as it is someone that he has a personal relationship to. In addition to the older brother, the participant expresses that he followed the modeled behavior of the band whom the participant does not have a personal relationship to; this leads to another type of role model-- the indirect role model.

Indirect Role Models

While some of the role models identified in this study were personally known by the participants, there were instances where the participant recognized a person as a role model that he did not have a direct relationship to, such as fictional characters and celebrities. For example, referring to a fictional character on the TV show *This Is Us,* 22-year-old Liam says, "Randall makes me want to be the greatest father that ever lived. Um, just watching him, and uh, so Randall was a character who is I kind of relate to a little bit". In this example, Liam is recognizing that this person is a (fictional) character and he is explicitly saying that this character is his role model despite the fact he has no personal relationship to him. Liam further explains that it is the capability of relating to this person which causes him to identify him as a role model and he further indicates that Randall encourages him to be a great father (in the future).

In another example, I asked 19-year-old Alexander who he looked up to when he was under the impression that he wanted to become a professional basketball player, and he identified a celebrity as a role model; he says, "So growing up, it was definitely Rondo when he was on the Celtics. …I like that Rondo was like short, and like he could still like compete with all like the trees that he's playing against and whatever, but like, and that's was kinda like how I tried to emulate when I played." In this example, Alexander reveals that one of his role models was a professional basketball player (a celebrity) during the time that he himself wanted to become a professional basketball player, indicating that participants may often choose their role models based on desired career paths.

Indirect role models can also be distant family members. For example, when asked if he considers anyone else a role model other than those he had already identified, 24-year-old Benjamin says, "all the women in my family… especially my—my grandmother, my great

grandmother, they came from a different country and they paved the way for the next four generations to live better." Benjamin continues, "I don't like have personal—they haven't personally helped me but you know they set the foundation for everything that I am today." In this example, Benjamin does not hesitate to identify the females in his family as role models, but he clearly says that there is no personal relationship between them; instead he recognizes the way that their actions had an influence on his overall experience. This is an example of an indirect role model because Benjamin views these females in his family as role models despite not having a direct relationship to them.

Positive Role Models

While at times the participants described having learned something from an individual, there were other times that participants explicitly said that they wanted to copy or imitate the behavior of this individual; in this case, the participant was describing a positive role model. For example, 20-year-old William says, "Honestly, my sister was my role model 'cause she was like the prodigy child. Perfect grades in school, went off to college, got her masters, got her PhD. So I was like 'Wow I want to do that too!' so I really looked up to her." Here, William is explicitly sharing that his sister is his role model and that he wants to imitate her behavior.

In another interview, 19-year-old Alexander shares that his father was a positive role model for him. When asked if his father had influenced his involvement in sports, he says, "He's actually a wrestling coach, so that's like a part of the reason why… I started to do wrestling, was because of him, and a lot of the…HE—HE'S the reason for why I do a lot of things I do. Like, he's… he's definitely, like my biggest uhh, influence in life. It's my father." In this example, Alexander is revealing that his father has had a strong influence on him, and that in many ways

his behavior has been modeled after his father's. This is another example of a positive role model because Alexander is explicitly saying that he has copied the behavior of his father.

In a different example of positive role model choice, 24-year-old Benjamin demonstrates the challenge in categorizing role models as one particular type. When asked if race and gender influenced his decision in identifying certain individuals as role models, Benjamin says, "yea… it was more like the mentor thing is- it's less about how much pedigree you have…but the fact that they—they're from my neighborhood you know they can see themselves in me and I can see like dang I could probably be somebody like that in the future." In this example, by expressing that his mentors are people that can see themselves in him (and vice versa) Benjamin suggests that race and gender are influential factors in his choice to view his mentors as role models; he says that it is less about a degree and more about the fact that he can see himself in these role models and he further suggests that he could see himself doing similar work in the future as a result, revealing that his mentors are positive role models.

However, there were times that the participant identified a role model and shared which behaviors they wanted to emulate in contrast to those they wanted to avoid. Referring to the same black male mentors, Benjamin says, "they told—like I could see like a lot of them they've been to jail or you know they've been shot or something so I know what that life holds so seeing them go through it is—I was able to just understand that and know that I don't want to make the same mistakes as them". In this context, Benjamin is saying that there are experiences that his role models have shared with him that he does not want to imitate even though there are other behaviors that he does want to copy; this example demonstrates the way that one individual (or multiple) can often be viewed as both positive and negative role models.

Negative Role Models

Although some of the participants described their desire to copy their role models, there were other participants that identified people as models that they did not want to imitate. For example, 20-year-old William says, "Yeah so I definitely want to have kids cause like I wanna like kind of do what my parents didn't do for me. Like kind of be there in ways my parents weren't." In this example, William is clearly expressing that he does not want to imitate his parents in their form of parenting which suggests that they are negative role models.

While there are times that the participant identified a particular person as a negative role model, there were other times that they expressed a particular behavior or concept, rather than a person that they did not want to imitate. For example, when 21-year-old Noah was asked if there were particular choices that he made based on the expectations others had of him, he says:

> My relationship with music… was definitely tied a lot to my relationship with like my race and stuff like that. In that like, umm… particularly in high school, and more so in middle school… kids weren't like racist or anything like that, but like… definitely liked words like ghetto and kind of like slight steps to like micro aggressions were definitely like there, and I didn't really know that they were like micro aggressions but like, I definitely didn't want like people thinking that I was like… like like ghetto or like hood! Or stuff like that. And so like, all the music I was listening to was like… you know, umm… stuff that I felt like… didn't represent that or like, was more positive than like… the rap music…

In this example, Noah indicates that his relationship with music was influenced by his understanding of race, and while he is not identifying a specific person that he does not want to imitate, he says that he did not want to fit the model of "ghetto" or "hood." Noah clearly

demonstrates how influential racial constructions can be to the identity development of African American males by basing his music choices on how he is being perceived as a Black male.

This coincides with research by Johnson-Ahorlu (2013), who aimed to find the potential causes for the low graduation and retention rates of African Americans and other diverse populations using a mixed method approach; she administered a survey and directed focus groups in seven postsecondary institutions. Johnson-Ahorlu (2013) says that from all the student participants in her study, African American students were the only group to identify a struggle with stereotypes (and stereotype threat) as a barrier for continuing their studies. She defines stereotypes as "gross generalizations applied to a group of people with some level of shared characteristics" (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013, p. 383) and defines stereotype threat as "anxiety or stress triggered by the fear that one might fulfill or be associated with a relevant stereotype" (p. 383). In the example that I have mentioned above with Noah, he says that his choice in music was influenced by stereotypes, and he says that in order to avoid fitting the stereotype of "ghetto" or "hood" (that is often associated with Black men) he chose to listen to other music—a clear example of stereotype threat. In Noah's case, he is not referring to a particular person that he wants to avoid; however, he is referring to a specific construct that is associated with African Americans as a whole (and men especially) that he wants to avoid fulfilling, like other negative role models.

Another example of this desire to avoid fitting a concept was found during my interview with 24-year-old Benjamin. I asked him general questions about his childhood, such as what his earliest memories consist of, what lessons he may have learned, and what his family life was like during his childhood. After spending a significant amount of time talking about his family being close and dominated by females, he says, "I grew up with my mother. I mean there was I ha— I

know my father and we talk all the time when I was younger I could see him whenever I wanted but this- it was you know the typical single mother, black father thing." Without being prompted about any specific circumstances of his childhood, Benjamin feels the need to address his relationship with his father. What stands out in this sentence is the fact that Benjamin says, "I know my father" as if he needs to dismiss a misconception that would state otherwise; furthermore, Benjamin titles this misconception the "single mother, black father thing" revealing that he is responding to a cultural stereotype placed on his racial group specifically.

Some participants were more likely than others to identify role models in the media. Those that struggled to do so expressed that the media enforced cultural stereotypes on their racial group rather than promoting positive presentations. For example, William says, "For the most part I didn't really have any role models in like the media, cause like on like Nickelodeon and all these shows they weren't like selling to any black kids and when they were it was the goofy black kid that was there to make people laugh so nothing really like assertive in authority… besides Denzel Washington." In this example, William does not say "*a* goofy black kid" he says, "*the* goofy black kid" indicating that it is common for Black males to be presented in this way in the media. In another example, I asked Benjamin where he had received his understanding of the Black male experience and whether it was from TV or his personal neighborhood, and he responds, "all you see is like black guys on *Cops*, blacks guys in music videos flashing money, umm people going to jail all the time on the news." In this example Benjamin suggests that all Black men are being portrayed in the same way, revealing that media is one main source for enforcing cultural stereotypes that young Black men want to avoid.

The participants established that the media is one of the major sources for the negative presentations of African American males that they would like to avoid; another frequent source

identified by participants came from a location in their everyday environment—school. While in Noah's example above, it was the students that were enforcing the negative stereotypes of "ghetto" or "hood", in Alexander's experience, it was his teacher. He says, "Actually, when I was like 11, like my first real experience with like…you know the black white thing, was a teacher, we did like oral speaking thing and whatever, and the teacher said, 'For someone like you, you speak very well.'" In this example Alexander's teacher is suggesting that he is defying the expectation of his racial group by speaking eloquently, revealing yet another way in which stereotypes on a group is enforced.

Summary of Results

It is the expectations of an African American male's gender and race in combination with stereotypes that has piqued my interest in understanding how these males combat these societal pressures. One major goal of this study was to investigate whether or not African American males identify role models as a way to confront stereotypes, and the results of this study indicate that they do. For example, when asked if he had any idea about what he wanted to be when he grew up during the earlier stages of his development, 24-year-old Benjamin says:

> No. I didn't. At all. Even like, like, until like my freshman year of college, I was just, I was just going with the flow. But, one of my mentors, told me like, you know, 'I have a chance to do something that he wasn't able to. Like go to college. I can get my degree and that… I can be what he was but better because he didn't have the chance to go to college. So, that pedigree, like if he had effect on me, and he did the things that I couldn't do, what could I do? With a degree? And have an effect on kids, where it's like—it's like, 'okay, I don't have to be a dope-boy. I don't have to sell drugs. I could go to college and be something.

This is one example of the function of a role models in the identity development of African American males. In this example, Benjamin shares that the expectation for him as a Black man is to become a "dope-boy" or a drug-dealer, but he says that having role models helped open his eyes to other options. It is due to his direct relationship with his mentor that Benjamin was able to view himself as someone who could have the same effect on youth, especially if he was to attend college and get a degree.

Again, it is important to recognize that these thematic categories were identified by the researchers, but they were described by the participants. The role models that are described above are those that helped the participant see himself as an African American male, but they are also role models that were chosen for their ability to speak to different aspects of each participant's identity development, such as moral desires or career goals. Additionally, these types of role models are mutually inclusive and often overlap with one another (i.e., a participant could describe a person as both an indirect and positive role model and a positive and negative role model). The results of this study highlight who African American males are identifying as role models, why they are being selected, and how they often help males see themselves outside of the lens of a racially biased society.

Discussion

There are many kinds of role models that are identified by participants in respect to the different aspects of their identity. This study examined the types of role models identified by self-identified African American male BSU students in order to investigate the function that these figures play in their identity development. In each of these interviews, the participants described the sociocultural influence of race and gender constructions prevalent during their time of development and how it affected their decision-making in terms of their identity. Participants

also described the different kind of role models they had during their development which were categorized into the following six types: explicit or implicit, direct or indirect, and positive or negative. This study also found that the types of role models selected by these participants were often associated with shared experiences and similarities in physical appearance or career goals.

The participants in this study identified role models they had direct and indirect relationships to such as parents, siblings, coaches, mentors, celebrities, and fictional characters; however, additional research must be conducted in order to identify other potential role models. One limitation of this study is the selective sample of college students. In the future, this study could be expanded by interviewing African American males that are not attending college or by interviewing males earlier in their development (middle and/or high-school-aged students) in order to reveal other experiences and other potential role models. Additionally, the participants may have felt the pressure to compare their understanding of a role model to that of the investigators, a problem which is called response bias (or participant bias). In future studies, researchers could ask the participant to define the term role model in their own words at the beginning of the study in order to eliminate this pressure.

One positive outcome of this study is the ability to compare the experience of African American males across different time periods. In Walter and Benji's experience, there was a lack of direct role models portraying the type of identity each male desired to have. In Walter's case, there seemed to be limited access to Black role models due to the lesser influence of media culture in his time (1940's and 1950's), meanwhile in Benji's experience, there were several Black male celebrities that influenced his development, however they failed to meet the standard of a mixed race role model that he was searching for. In this current study, the participants described the media as a source for positive (and negative) presentations of African American

men, which leads to more role models being identified in the media as a result to its expansion overtime.

It is possible that the participants in this study searched for role models in the media when there was a lack of role models in their physical environment. For example, 22-year-old Liam shares that his father was absent during the most crucial time of his life (puberty), but he is able to identify numerous role models in the media during his development, including celebrity Donald Glover and fictional character Randall from *This Is Us*. Furthermore, there may have been positive people in the participant's personal environment, but these individuals may not have aligned with the aspect of identity that the participant was negotiating. For example, when asked what career path he would like to follow, Liam responds, "I'm focused on doing acting, um, film stuff, and then maybe one day, if music opens up again, I will pursue that too." For Liam, it makes sense to identify a musician/actor and a TV show character as role models because it aligns with his career goal to become an actor and potential musician.

Similar career goals is one of the expressed reasons why participants chose specific role models during their development, but in other cases, participants appeared to identify role models due to their ability to encourage or motivate the participant to do things for themselves which seemed out of reach. For example, 24-year-old Benjamin reveals that while playing basketball at a community center, he developed a positive relationship with his mentor (and role model). He says, "I met them at like umm community programs like I played basketball at community centers and… one guy I had for like six years I used to call him pops cause like he took me and like a group of my friends and showed us that it's bigger than Boston." In this example, Benjamin looks to his mentor as a positive role model for helping him broaden his horizons when thinking about playing basketball professionally.

In some cases particular role models kept participants out of trouble's reach, while in other instances, specific programs allowed them to escape societal pressure. At the end of his memoir, Walter shares that he enlists in the military as a way of escaping his environment, while the participants in this study express that for them it is programs like the Boys and Girls club or the YMCA that help them do the same. For example 24-year-old Benjamin suggests that his involvement with the Boys and Girls club is what led him and his brother to two different paths. He says, "I stayed around sports. I stayed around the Boys and Girls club until it was time for me to leave so we just got real different." In this example Benjamin reveals that this club helped keep him on the right track which distinguished him from his brother who chose the opposite path to him.

In another example, 21-year-old Noah says that his involvement in three different leadership programs helped him grow as an individual and learn how to gain control over things he felt he did not have control over. He says, "I did Gates Youth Scholarship program, um, I did the program called Summer Search, anddd… I did a leader's program at the YMCA…those were like the 3 main programs that I did, that really kind of like…helped me grow a lot…learn how to kind of like…be an adult." Noah continues, "so I felt like, through like a lot of like those programs, where I kind of like…got like a handle, like on some of the things that I felt like, might hold—might like be out of my control at the time." In this example Noah is explicitly describing that there are some things that are out of his control, while making a connection between positive programs that he was involved in and his ability to both grow and learn control. This suggests that more programs must be made accessible to African American youth in order for them to potentially stay on the right track; furthermore, these participants describe that there are specific people within these programs that they viewed as role models which suggests that by

creating more spaces like this for African American males, there might be more opportunity to identify role model figures.

In addition to outreach programs that foster the development of these males, college becomes another "escape" and potential location for African American males to identify role model figures. For example, when asked about his experience in college, 24-year-old Benjamin says:

> This experience has been real different like I tell- I tell all my friends like back in the hood like if you can- I mean I tell the younger ones cause the friends that's my age now their life is like set like they're doing what they're doing, but the kids I know that's younger than me that I grew up with, I told them like "If you can, even if for one year try to like live on the college campus cause the experience is so different. Like your whole mindset will change."

In this example, Benjamin is clearly advocating on the behalf of college, claiming that it is a place that enhances the mindset of individuals. However it is interesting that he chooses not to communicate this message to his friends whose lives are already "set"; by saying this, Benjamin appears to be suggesting that college is an alternative to the lifestyle already possessed by his friends.

In another example 21-year-old Noah explains that it was not until he was physically in college that he discovered which kind of profession he wanted. At first, Noah says he wanted to be a police officer "up until like college really." He continues, "cause I kind—kind of… had these… rose-colored ideas about education and kind of like teaching and stuff like that, ummm, not that I still don't have positive ideas about that, but just like, of the type of stuff I wanna like

do with like young people now isn't as conducive as being in an educational environment." In this example Noah is revealing that it was not until college that his mind was expanded on the different career paths that he could follow. In both examples the participants not only describe what college has done for them personally, but they reveal that it has shifted their mind to helping others who have shared similar experiences.

Full Circle

In almost every single interview, the participant described his desire to return to his community and become the positive role model that he himself had (or desired to have). For example, 21-year-old Noah explains that at the beginning of college he wanted to be a teacher but after learning so much about "the power structure," he says that he wants to work with youth in a way that will help them be successful in their own way. He says, "definitely like more so going to like youth work and kind of like seeing that as you know, um… like a guiding way of getting like students into avenues that like… are conducive to like the success and like whatever that means for them, you know." In this example, Noah indicates that he would like to go back into his community and do some kind of youth work to provide students with tools for success.

In another example, referring to the youth in the current day, Benjamin says, "it's crazy anything they see is—they try to duplicate it so if they see me I'm not somebody on TV but I'm—I could be successful like show them like they don't have to be the biggest person in the world but they can still do something good." He goes on to say, "[during college breaks] I'd go home and um in a mentor program at the [location] cause that's where I feel like I started to become a man…I see kids go there now that was the same age as me and I feel like if I can go there and keep them in like places that like can like help their development then you know I did something positive." In this example Benjamin describes his desire to go back to the community

that he came from and become a role model for the youth developing in the same environment that he did. Not only is Benjamin an African American male, but he is a graduating senior that will become another source of inspiration for the youth developing in the present day. The same way in which Benjamin received support from his mentors that altered his path and led him to college, he now desires to do the same for others suggesting that there will be one more person demonstrating to Black youth that there are more options than the ones displayed for him by societal constructs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while African American males may choose to focus on one aspect of their identity at a given time in their development, the expectations of their gender and race in combination are constantly shaping their understanding of themselves. In some cases, African American males may choose to abandon behaviors that do not align with their masculine identity, yet they are incapable of denying their skin color and race seems to be consistently influencing their identity; this creates a conflict for anyone who desires to be seen outside of masculine or racial constructs. These themes of identity can often be explored in literature and investigated in psychological interview studies. A comparison of two texts, *Bad Boy* (1940's and 1950's) and *Sag Harbor* (1985), to the experience of African American males born in the 21st century reveals that the expectations (or stereotypes) of this group have remained the same to an extent. Males are still expected to behave in a competitive or aggressive way, and Black males in particular, are still facing discrimination and mixed experiences in the U.S.; however, the expansion of professions held by African American males and the access to different representations of Black males has led to an expansion in the way that young Black males can view themselves. Six types of role models (explicit or implicit, direct or indirect, and positive or

negative) were identified in this study about African American males, but future research may reveal other potential role models. While choosing role models, the participants of this study expressed that being able to relate to this person was a huge factor in their decision and that in many ways it allowed for them to view themselves doing the same kind of work. This finding suggests that if African American males can continue to identify positive role models in their environment and in the media, they will continue to explore other opportunities and then become role models for others—creating a full circle.

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Appendix A

The Function of Role Models in the Formation of Identity in African American Males:

Each Unique Face Has His Unique Story—What's Yours?

SEEKING PARTICIPANTS FOR AN INTERVIEW STUDY

✓ Must be a self-identified African American Male
✓ Must have been born and raised in the U.S.
✓ Must be a BSU student

For more information about this study, contact Genesis Galan (ggalan@student.bridgew.edu)

EACH PARTICIPANT WILL BE COMPENSATED $10 CASH

Appendix B

Hi (participant's name),

My name is Genesis Galan and I am a senior here at Bridgewater State University. I am currently conducting life-story interviews focused on the function of role models in the identity development of African American males and I would love for you to participate in my study!

For this study, I am seeking current Bridgewater State University students who are at least 18-years-old (or older) and self-identify as an African American male, born and raised in the U.S.

Participation in this study involves:

- Roughly a 1-hour time commitment to be interviewed
- Compensation of $10 cash for your participation

If you agree to participate, I will interview you using open-ended questions about the types of role models that you have looked up to during your identity development.

If you are interested in participating, here is my availability for the next week:

- Mondays: 9am-12pm or any time after 2pm
- Wednesdays: 2:30-4:30pm
- Thursdays: 9am-1:30pm

If none of these times work for you, we can find another time for you to participate in this study.

If you have any questions or concerns, please let me know.

Also, I have attached the flyer! Please feel free to share this with anyone you know who may be interested in participating!

I look forward to hearing back from you.

Best Regards,

Genesis Galan

Co-investigator

Appendix C

Bridgewater State University Informed Consent Document

Title of Research: The Function of Role Models in the Formation of Identity in African American Male Adolescents

Researchers:

Dr. Joseph R. Schwab, Primary Investigator, Psychology Department (jschwab@bridgew.edu)

Genesis M. Galan, Co-Investigator, Psychology Major (ggalan@student.bridgew.edu)

Introduction

You are being asked to participate in a project that is being conducted through Bridgewater State University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of this project, the procedure(s) being used, and the potential benefits, as well as the possible risk of participation. You may ask him/her any clarifying questions that you have that will help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions or concerns you may have. If you then decide that you would like to participate in the project, please sign on the last page of this form in the presence of the investigator that has explained the project to you. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

Nature and Purpose of Project

This study is being completed in order to investigate the figures and role models that African American males look up to during their identity development, and to explore the ways that these figures may have helped them throughout their lives.

Explanation of the Procedures

You will be interviewed and asked a series of questions pertaining to your developmental experiences from childhood to present and the type of people that you looked up to along the way. You will be audio recorded and your participation in this study is estimated to last about one hour.

Discomfort and Risks

Talking about your feelings and experiences while growing up may cause discomfort or feelings of stress. If you are to experience any discomfort or stress during the interview you are welcome to not answer any questions you do not wish to, and you are welcome to end your participation in the study at any time. If you wish to talk to someone about your feelings upon completion of this interview, there are free resources available to you that are listed at the end of this consent form.

Benefits

You may find that reflecting on your feelings and experiences may help your understanding of yourself, and it may generate feelings of relief. We hope that this study can be useful for you and others who may have encountered similar feelings or experiences during their development.

Additionally, this study is beneficial for the scientific world and society as a whole because it will provide professionals with a better understanding of the types of role models that African Americans rely on during their identity development and how this helps them combat systematic pressures and stereotypes.

Confidentiality

Your information will be kept confidential. Your name on this consent form will not be connected to the audio from our interview. The transcript that will be made from this interview will not include your name, and no identifying information will be included. The audio will be kept locked on a password-protected computer, and it will be destroyed upon the completion of the project.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:

* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;

* Representatives of Bridgewater State University, including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at BSU.

Refusal/Withdrawal

Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

By signing below, I am indicating that I understand that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and I believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks. I agree that all known risks to me have been explained to my satisfaction.

_____

Participant Signature and Date

Witness Signature and Date

Any questions regarding the conduct of the project, questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or research related to injury, should be brought to the attention of the IRB Administrator at (508) 531-1242.

Any questions about the conduct of this research project should be brought to the attention of the principal investigator Dr. Joseph R. Schwab (jschwab@bridgew.edu) and/or Genesis M. Galan (ggalan@student.bridgew.edu).

Should you wish to discuss your feelings or topics mentioned during the interview, please contact the Bridgewater State University Wellness Center, Counseling Services, located in Weygand Hall at (508) 531-1331.

Appendix D

Demographic Survey: The Function of Role Models in the Formation of Identity in African American Male Adolescents

Please indicate your age (in years).

_____

What is your current year in college?

- o Freshman
- o Sophomore
- o Junior
- o Senior
- o Other: _____

Please indicate your birth location.

_____

Have you been raised in the U.S.?

- o Yes
- o No

What is your ancestors' country or countries of origin?

_____

What is the highest level of education your **mother (or primary female guardian)** has completed?
- o Less than high school degree
- o High school degree
- o Some college or vocational school
- o Vocational school degree
- o College degree
- o Some graduate school
- o Graduate school degree
- o If other, please explain:_____

What is the highest level of education your **father (or primary male guardian)** has completed?
- o Less than high school degree
- o High school degree
- o Some college or vocational school
- o Vocational school degree
- o College degree
- o Some graduate school
- o Graduate school degree
- o If other, please explain:_____

Appendix E

Interview Script: The Function of Role Models in the Formation of Identity in African American Male Adolescents

I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Before we begin, I just wanted to give you a brief explanation of the purpose of this study and its intended goals.

This interview study is for my honors thesis that is directed towards identifying the influences that shape African American male identity.

For you, this study will help you reflect on some of the key experiences that may have shaped your life up until this point, and it can help you acknowledge where you are in life now and where you want to be in the future.

I am going to have a notepad with me, however, this is only to jot down points that I would like to discuss further. At this moment, I just want to add that I am not a therapist or a counselor and my intentions are not to analyze you or your behaviors, but rather to explore the experiences that have shaped you to be who you are today. If you wish to continue this discussion outside this interview study, I will be providing you with campus resources that can help you do that.

Do you have any thoughts or questions about the study that you would like to share right now?

Before we begin, I will administer a consent form stating that you agree to participate in this study and that you acknowledge your right to withdraw from this study at any point if you feel the need to do so.

Administer Consent Form

Additionally, I am going to administer this demographic survey that will help me gather more information about you, while also establishing that you fit the criteria for this study.

Administer Demographic Survey

As it is written in the consent form, this interview study will be audio recorded and at this moment I would like to begin by turning on the audio recorder.

Turn on audio recorder

Interview Protocol

Part 1: Explaining the Interview Protocol

As it has been described to you, this study is aimed at revealing the potential experiences and/or people that have influenced your identity development throughout the years. Therefore, I will begin by asking you a series of questions starting in early childhood and following chronologically to your present day experiences; later we will spend some time discussing your future self. In childhood, these questions will focus on the lessons that you may have learned, in adolescence these questions will focus on the specific relationships that you were establishing

and the roles that you were exploring, and in the present day, this will further build on the critical themes during childhood and adolescence that we may discuss. These questions are meant to unlock your life story— that is who you are and which experiences have been combined together to determine this. My goal is to further investigate the type of role models that you have had (or have) and how they have aided (or continue to aid) your identity development. More specifically, I would like to understand how these specific role models were presented to you and your reasoning for identifying them as someone you look up to. Additionally, I would like to understand the ways that it has shaped your present identity. In all, I am interested in seeing the way you viewed yourself then, how you view yourself now, and how you view yourself in the future, and how this relates to your experience with role models. With all of this being said, I would like for you to begin sharing your life story with me, so let's begin with your earliest memories of childhood.

Part 2: Childhood experiences

Goal: To learn about the participant's early experiences and early influences in childhood

- What was your family life like? Who did you live with?
- What were the occupations of your parents or guardians?
- Generally speaking, what was your childhood (experiences before 12-years-old) like? How was school, friendships, involvements?
- What one or two stories do you remember most clearly about your childhood?
- What was your neighborhood like?
- What were your interests like as a child?

Part 3: Adolescent experiences

Goal: To begin connecting some early childhood experiences to adolescent experiences and learning about the participants way of thinking and decision-making during this stage.

- What was your adolescence like (middle school, junior high, high school)?
- What was school like in middle and high school? Are there any teachers or subjects you particularly liked or disliked?
- What was your relationship with your parents and closest friends like during this stage?
- Were you involved in sports, music, drama or other extra-curricular activities?
- What kind of music or television series did you watch as you were growing up (or other sources of popular culture, such as games, movies, etc.)?
- What did you want to be when you grew up?
- Who helped you during the process of applying for college? Why Bridgewater?

Part 4: Present day experiences

Goal: To bridge the gap between early experiences and present experiences and to understand how they affected the participant's place in present day.

- What is your major?
- What kind of music or television series to do you listen to/watch/play, etc.?

- Where do you work? What is your involvement on and off-campus?
- What are your friends and relationships like? Family life?

Part 5: Role-models, stereotypes, and integrated aspects of identity

Goal: To further investigate the ways in which the participant has been shaped by others, their opinions, and their personal experiences with the exploration of identity.

- Have there been any people in your life that you believe have helped you get where you are today?
- Have there been any people in your life that you have looked up to and have wanted to emulate, imitate, or follow?
- Did you have any role models throughout your childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood? Who were they? Why do you consider them role models?
- When you listen(ed) to music or watch(ed) your favorite TV show, are there any lyrics/characters that you relate(d) to or with? Any you look(ed) up to as a role model?
- Do you believe that there are any misconceptions about you?
- Did you ever experience a moment where you were torn between two commitments or parts of yourself?

Part 6: Vision for Future

Goal: To understand how early experiences and present experiences are working together to shape the way that he views his future, and to potentially discover more information about why he views his future that way specifically.

- How do you feel that your past and present experiences are shaping your plans for the future?
- What have you learned up until now that you would like to pass along to the next generation?
- What message would you like to give your children, younger family members, or others who may look up to you?

Part 7: Closing Statements

Goal: To ensure that the participant has had the chance to say anything that he believes is worth mentioning, orienting him towards final self-reflections.

- Is there any situation that you view differently now that we have had the time to discuss it?
- Is there anything that you feel pressed to add?
- Is there anyone that you forgot who played an important role in your identity development?
- In general, is there anything that you wish to clarify?

Remind Participants of Information on Consent Form

- If you have any other questions regarding this study, feel free to contact my mentor, Dr. Joseph Schwab, or myself. Our contact information is on the consent form provided to you.

- If you feel anxious, worried, or have any further experiences that you feel compelled to share with a professional, we have listed contact information for campus resources, such as the wellness center that can help you, on the consent form.

- Give them $10, have them fill out the receipt and reimbursement form