Understanding African American Adolescents' Identity Development: A Relational Developmental Systems Perspective

Aerika S. Brittian
Arizona State University

Abstract

This article examines the development of African American adolescents' identity using a relational developmental systems theory framework, which led to the expectation that identity development is linked to both the reduction of risk behaviors and the promotion of African American adolescents' healthy development. Different personological theories of identity development were discussed, including Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and Marcia's theory of identity statuses. Developmental systems theory was used to further the literature on African American adolescents' identity development, by integrating various views of identity development as they pertain to these youth. Furthermore, the formation of many aspects of identity may be an important coping and resilience process for such youth. In addition, directions for future research are discussed, including a consideration of the complexity of diversity that exists within the African American adolescent population, and a call for more longitudinal assessments of identity development is presented.

The study of identity within the social sciences began with an interest in the implications of whether an individual's identity was achieved (see Erikson, 1968, 1974, 1980). The research focus then shifted to study of the processes involved in how an individual develops his or her identity, and to examining a more differentiated view of identity formation than that proposed by Erikson (Côté, 2009; Côté & Levine, 1983; Côté & Levine, 2002; Marcia, 1966). From this line of research, the literature rapidly expanded to focus on multiple aspects of identity, such as ethnic (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Romero & Roberts, 2003; Phinney & Ong, 2007), racial (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998; Yip, Seaton, & Sellers, 2006), gender (Egan & Perry, 2001; Zucker, 2002), vocational (Gushue, Clarke, Pantzer, & Scanlan, 2006; Hargrove, Creagh, & Burgess, 2002; Robitschek & Cook, 1999), and national (Huntington, 2004; Orchard, 2002) identity. Although extensive research has contributed to our understanding of identity, the field lacked an integrative means to examine the development of different aspects of African American adolescents' identity. In order to advance such integrative understanding, the purpose of this paper is to examine the nature of African American adolescents' identity development using a developmental systems perspective.

The study of identity from a personological approach

At every stage of development it is important to understand what leads to healthy development. Beginning at least with Erikson (1950, 1959), trying to understand what is associated with adaptation in adolescence has often been linked to the notion of identity (Muuss, 1999). In adolescence there are a myriad of changes, e.g., involving changing cognitive abilities (Steinberg, 2005), rapid physiological growth (Susman & Dorn, 2009),

changes in expectations from family, school, and society (Eccles, Brown, & Templeton, 2008), and increasing social opportunities for the young person to assert his or her independence (McElhaney & Allen, 2001). Thus, adolescence is a time of major transitions.

I will argue that attaining adaptation, or fit with contextual demands, may be particularly challenging for African American youth, because issues of race may complicate the search for an adaptive identity (Erikson, 1966). For African Americans, adolescence is also a time when they begin to consider themselves in regard to race and ethnicity. Tatum (1997) suggests that in early adolescence individuals first begin to differentiate friendships by ethnic group and to show increased group-esteem and ethnic exploration (see also French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006). Therefore, African American youth must define themselves in relation to the social status and meaning of their racial and ethnic group.

Erikson proposed that an individual's search for identity consisted of one's personal assessment of not only "Who am I?" but also "Who am I in this social context? (1980)." The "I," to Erikson, was seen as a synthesis of biological, psychological, and societal demands (Lerner, 2002). Stating that identity is a way of integrating many aspects of the self, Erikson suggested that when an adolescent achieved an identity he or she would know how to successfully navigate the demands of different social contexts.

In addition to Erikson's ideas on identity achievement, (i.e., going through an active search for identity and finding one that fits one's biological, psychological, and social characteristics) and of identity confusion or role confusion (i.e., the failure to achieve an identity), James Marcia (1966, 1980) noted that two other identity statuses exist. Foreclosure occurs when there is no search, but an identity exists. People with foreclosed identities usually assume the identity of their parent or guardian (Adams, Dyk, & Bennion, 1987). Moratorium occurs when an active search for an identity takes place, but the individual forms no commitment. As will be discussed later, Marcia's ideas about the four identity statuses have given rise to a large literature on differential aspects of identity, such as ethnic identity (French et al., 2006; Pahl & Way, 2006; Phinney, 1989; Phinney & Ong, 2007; Umaña-Taylor & Guidmond, 2010) and racial identity (Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006; Scottham, Sellers, & Nguyên, 2008), areas dominating the literature on African American adolescents identity formation.

Marcia agreed with Erikson that identity achievement is the most mature identity status, and research has examined the link between Marcia's three other statuses and adaptive functioning. People with a foreclosed identity are more likely to be influenced by authoritarian rules and to obey authorities (Adams, Dyk, & Bennion, 1987; Berman, Schwartz, Kurtines, & Berman, 2001; Côté & Levine, 1983). Furthermore, people with an identity in moratorium are apt to exhibit anxiety and uncertainty (Côté, 2009). Waterman (1999) also proposed that although diffusion is considered the least mature and least complex identity status, and achievement is the most mature, the identity statuses are not a continuum because both moratorium and foreclosure both have strengths and weaknesses. He stated that "The Moratorium status is both something more (exploration) and less (commitment) than the Foreclosure status. But the opposite of the previous sentence is also true. The Foreclosure status is both something more (commitment) and less (exploration) than the Moratorium status (Waterman, 1999, p. 603)."

The concepts of identity development as proposed by Erikson and Marcia have both benefits and limitations. Although both perspectives are useful in emphasizing the link between identity and adaptation in adolescence, both fall short in regard to their explanations of the process of identity development. To Erikson, identity emerges as part of a general

maturational ground plan. The timing of identity development is therefore not under the person's control. Although the outcome of the identity process depends on one's interactions with the specific characteristics of his or her historical, social, and cultural niche (Erikson, 1958, 1969), there is little role for the person to actively shape the world that is impacting him or her. Rather, to Erikson, the identity process is controlled by inner biological pressures and affected by outer socio-cultural ones. But the young person is not an active agent in his or her own development.

Marcia (1980) leaves the process of identity development largely unspecified, in that he does not discuss how individuals form a given identity status or move from one status to another. Therefore, Erikson and Marcia present views of identity which describe its role in contribution to healthy adolescent development; but it is unclear if or how adolescents can play a central role in navigating this developmental period. The shortcomings of Erikson and Marcia are countered by what today is at the forefront of developmental theory, developmental systems theories (DSTs).

Identity Development from a Developmental Systems Perspective

Adolescents are not only molded and shaped by the environment in which they reside (e.g., family context, peers, neighborhoods, and historical context), but they become integral parts of their own identity development process (Spencer 2006, 2008). All adolescents experience biological, cognitive, and social transitions that are consistent with the normative transition from childhood to adulthood (Steinberg, 2005). However, they are also embedded within proximal and distal processes than can directly and indirectly influence development. Developmental systems theoretical (DST) models indicate that individuals are dynamic parts of the multilevel ecology of human development, involving biological, psychological, social, cultural, and historical components that, together, are linked through bidirectional relationships between the individual and the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Lerner, 2002). In other words, all levels of organization from the biological (e.g., genetic and physical) through the individual, behavioral, and socio-cultural are dynamically interrelated, and as such, the individual is both a product and a producer (e.g., an active agent) of his or her development (i.e., there is a person ↔ context relation).

Identity formation is one such developmental process that involves the individual's contribution to his or her sense of self and the context's actions to activate, hinder, or foster the process of establishing an identity. This systems approach to development is not only seminal to developmental science (Ford & Lerner, 1992; Overton, 1998, 2010) but, more specifically, it has been used to frame the view of identity development put forth by Margaret Beale Spencer, whose phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST) will be discussed when directions for future research are presented in the third section of this paper. PVEST is one such DST that is particularly useful for considering the challenges that are most relevant to African American adolescents' healthy development and for understanding how identity may lead to various behavioral outcomes.

African American youth in the United States are not only expected to undergo typical developmental experiences that are the hallmark of adolescence, such as physical growth and development (Susman & Dorn, 2009) and developing a desire to assert their independence (McElhaney, Allen, Stephenson, & Hare, 2009); they are also coping with a world in which they may be normatively expected to experience racial prejudice (Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003). According to Spencer (2006, 2008), the stressful conditions in which they live require them to use effective coping strategies to function in society. Youth can deal with prejudice and discrimination in a problematic way and form a negative identity or develop a feeling that something is "absent" (Erikson, 1966).

Such outcomes of the identity process may allow them to say who they are, however they may always be in a state of conflict. Alternatively, they can deal with prejudice and discrimination in a positive way that provides resistance to, or resilience in the face of those stressors. They can, then, express productive behaviors.

As argued below, contemporary research on African American adolescents' identity development is much too molecular, predominately focusing on African Americans' ethnic and racial identities. However, a given adolescent's identity is comprised of many personal and social components (e.g., Black, African American, Christian, nonreligious, female, athlete, student, etc.), that may vary in importance by social context and that may function differently over time. Various studies have examined differential aspects of identity as they pertain to African American youth; however, no one has embedded this research within a relational developmental systems framework. The next section will assess if DSTs provide a useful way to enhance our understanding of the complexity of African American adolescents' identity, and suggest directions for future research.

African American Adolescents and Identity

Relational developmental systems theories provide an integrative, framework to examine person ↔ context relational processes involved in human development. The person ↔ context relational focus within DSTs means that individuals act on the context that is influencing them. Therefore, DSTs focus on the role of the individual as a producer of his/her own development -- identity in this case. In the developmental period of adolescence, an individual is generating his or her own meaning in relation to influences from all the levels of organization within the complex ecology of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). However, the literature regarding African American adolescents' identity development has been much too molecular focusing on demographic characteristics, such as economic status, race, ethnicity, and gender in a non-dynamic, non-individual-context relational way (e.g., Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997; Sellers et al., 2006).

Many pathways exist between experiences with negative race-related stressors, and the ways in which African American youth will cope with those experiences. The mechanisms and processes through which negative experiences can be interpreted to produce positive outcomes need to be understood. For instance, through experiences with discrimination youth may develop problematic internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Hall, Cassidy & Stevenson, 2008; Stevenson, 1997), or they may choose participation in community-based programs (Ginwright, 2007). One specific research question may be how do these two classes of youth differ? In other words, are there moderators that influence the relationship between discrimination and prosocial versus antisocial behaviors?

Stevenson (1997) posited that misrepresentation of Black culture and the overrepresentation of European American images on television, may lead African American youth to feel "missed." They find themselves omitted from the array of positive youth images presented in popular culture. Continued reinforcement of negative stereotypes in society and negative interactions with law enforcement brings about feelings of being "dissed (or disrespected)." This reaction may contribute to feelings of anger (i.e., being "pissed") towards society (Chestang, 1972; Spencer, Swanson, & Cunningham, 1991).

Thus, the totality of the response to such challenges may involve African American youth expressing negativity in light of these challenges. Indeed, discrimination and prejudice may prompt youth of color to develop negative identities, which may, consequently, lead to deviant behaviors and poor psychological functioning (Cooper, McLoyd, Wood, & Hardaway, 2008; Davis & Stevenson, 2006; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2008). On the other hand, some youth may develop a positive sense of self. Research suggests that parents'

racial socialization can buffer the negative impact of race-related stressors on youths' negative affect (Simons et al., 2006). I wonder if there are other pathways which lead to positive youth outcomes, such as into participation in actions linked to social justice and civic engagement (e.g., Lerner & Overton, 2008).

In addition, for a young person of color, living in a high stress environment (e.g., an urban neighborhood) may be a threat to psychological, emotional, and physical health. Choosing to join a gang may both give the young person a sense of identity and provide him or her with a means of self-protection (Taylor, et al., 2003; Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001; Weisel, 2002); however, this type of coping may be a maladaptive response to extreme life stressors. In contrast, choosing to join a pro-social community-based organization may provide the young person with a more adaptive identity, in that such engagement may present opportunities for youth to constructively address issues of injustice (Ginwright, 2007).

Encounters with stressors may trigger African American youth to use various coping processes. Research indicates that African American adolescents who believe that society holds negative views about their racial group are more likely to experience racial discrimination. However, positive attitudes about one's racial group are associated with better psychological functioning (Sellers et al., 2006). Developing positive attitudes about the self is an adaptive coping process that leads to better mental health.

Based on what reactive coping processes are expressed, African American adolescents' coping may become stable. If so, such styles of coping may become part of their identity. Through positive influences, such as parents' socialization, African American youth may not only develop a positive identity, when exposed to a negative event, such as racial profiling (Gabbidon, 2003), but an identity that leads to positive behaviors. For example, an adolescent who experiences discrimination at school may internalize these negative stereotypes and exhibit deviant behaviors (e.g., acting out in class), or reject them in favor of positive ideas about African Americans, and consecutively choose to exhibit prosocial behaviors (e.g., start a diversity club). There has been no empirical work on adolescents that tests these assumptions, although previous studies that link discrimination to mental health and substance abuse (e.g., Williams & Mohammed, 2009) would suggest that such a relationship exists.

Many studies have demonstrated the link between supports and African American adolescents' mental health and behavioral outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, academic achievement). However, an explanation of the processes that occurs between supports, such as parents' socialization or social support from one's religious community, and the youth's positive outcome is often ignored. DSTs provide a potential link by suggesting that supports lead to adaptive coping processes, while adaptive coping leads to the development of a positive identity, and then in turn, youth are able to express productive coping outcomes. One may ask, then, whether identity precedes behavior or is identity reinforced by behaviors? DST methodology would suggest that both the former and the latter are true! Identity is bidirectionally linked to behaviors, meaning behavior stems from a consolidation of one's beliefs and values within one's social world, a relation that coalesces into a coherent, continuous sense of self. Then, the more one acts in ways that are consistent with such an identity, the identity will be strengthened.

Normative changes in adolescence and identity development

The myriad biological, cognitive, and social changes that occur during adolescence lead the person to engage in self-evaluation and social redefinition. These changes will be discussed not in any ranking order. Rather, it should be reinforced that the shared relationships between changes in biology, cognition, and societal influences all contribute to the

developing person. From conception, individuals' varying genetic and hormonal makeup plays a part in the developmental trajectory that a person will follow. The interplay between biology and context has a great deal of influence on who a person will become and how society will respond to a given individual. Genetic factors may relate to various phenotypic expressions, such as skin pigmentation (Anno, Abe, & Yamamoto, 2008; Myles, Somel, Tang, Kelso, & Stoneking, 2007; Sulem et al., 2008), facial features, and hair texture. Biological factors, present at birth, are beyond the adolescents control but are directly and indirectly related to a person's self-concept in adolescence. For instance, research indicates that adolescents' perceptions of pubertal timing, relative to their peers, may be related to overall self-image, self esteem, and mental health later in life (Golub et al., 2008; Jin et al., 2008).

The genetic and/or phenotypic makeup of minority youth may expose young people to particular stereotypes or discrimination (vulnerability) and in turn, challenge the search for a positive sense of identity. Very little research has examined the link between biological processes and African Americans' identity development. The onset of puberty, physical growth, and sexual maturation are an example of potential biological markers that may influence adolescents' self-image and the ways in which society responds to them. Therefore, an important question to ask would be how do African American adolescents form a salient sense of self in light of these particular fundamental changes. One potential research question is, are there different developmental trajectories for early maturing African American males in comparison to late maturing African American males regarding their experiences in school and neighborhood contexts? I expect that early maturing boys may have more challenging experiences with teachers and peers given the literature on stereotyping, school climate, and African Americans academic achievement (e.g., Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). This question could be followed up with an examination on the different ways that youth navigate these challenges which lead to better outcomes, if they exist, such through active or passive coping.

The second most notable change in adolescence is an increase in cognitive abilities, which allows a person to go beyond thinking in terms of self-definitions, to creating a more complex network of thoughts (i.e., schemas) about the self and society. Both Erikson (1968) and Piaget (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958) believed that cognitive processing is directly linked to one's identity development. This suggests that the enhanced cognitive development that occurs across adolescence allows a person to go beyond thinking about concrete qualities about the self to examining and evaluating abstract ideas, such identity. Thus, it should be expected that older adolescents' identities are more developed and fully formed than early adolescents. Research by French et al. (2006) demonstrated that differences exist among groups of early, middle, and late adolescents in ethnic identity development. However, from a DST perspective I believe there may not only be group differences among stages of adolescence related to cognitive development (e.g., early, middle, and late), but that individual differences in cognitive abilities may influence identity development as well. This is a concept that previous studies have not explored. For example, how to African American adolescents cognitively process (e.g., receive and absorb experiences that challenge or reinforce their sense of self) their experiences related to identity formation, and how can these processes be facilitated?

Identity broadens in adolescence as individuals become better able to receive, store, and manipulate information about the social world (Berzonsky, 2008). The ability to create mental representations, a key quality in forming a sense of identity, becomes enhanced in adolescence (Olsen & Dweck, 2008). As the brain becomes more malleable, the role of adults becomes ever more important in helping youth shape their ideas, beliefs, and values

about society. For African American adolescents, this means shaping a sense of self in a world in which they are a member of one or more minority groups.

The third most notable change in adolescence is the greater impact of social influences on adolescents. Without contextual supports, adolescents may develop negative identities or come to think negatively about being African American. Consider, for example, the famously cited Clark and Clark (1950) study, where Black children were more likely to choose a White doll over a Black doll, and considered the Black doll to be "bad" or "evil," whereas the White doll was considered to be "good." In the present day, African American children are still found to be aware of positive images associated with being "White" and the negative stereotypes associated with being "Black" (Davis, 2005). The fact that African American children came to understand the Black doll as "bad" is really a product of cues from the social environment. It is both through context and social influences that African American youth are developing ideas about where they fit in, and what it means to be African American.

The contemporary approach to studying African Americans' identity has examined this aspect of human development from a differentiated perspective, usually discernible by studies linking identity to demographic characteristics. The question here has been whether African Americans' identity differs in relation to other variables linked to social or cultural categories. Accordingly, studies have assessed identity in relation to vocational roles, sexual roles, gender roles, race, ethnicity, culture, and political differences. Researchers have sought to attain a differentiated notion of identity, but always in the service of understanding how identity can play a role in influencing adaptive or healthy functioning across different social and cultural contexts. This work has been predicated on the idea that "identity formation during adolescence requires that youth understand themselves as members of a society within particular ethnic, cultural, religious, or political traditions—each of which is associated with potential and unique protective factors (Spencer, Fegley, & Harpalani, 2003, p. 184)."

This work provides a description of whether, for example, the sense of self for Christian African American males who are second generation immigrants, working in minimum wage jobs, and politically involved, differs from that of non-religious African American females, whose families have been in the U.S. for centuries, are engaged in high-earning professions, and are not politically involved. What this research does not tell us is how the varying social and cultural categories, with which these people are associated, have contributed to their senses of themselves, or how this phenomenology was either developed or impacts their coping styles. Yet, from a DST perspective understanding the link between the identity of these individual African Americans and their adaptive functioning is critical.

Some research exists that does reflect DST-oriented themes, by examining complex relations among personal and social identities. In societies where some groups are underrepresented in political and social contexts, identification with one's minority group is more prominent, as it both serves to provide group affiliation and preserves one's positive identity (Juang & Syed, 2008). Studies suggest that identification with one's group serves as a buffer against prejudice and discrimination for minority group members (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Moreover, a positive identity has the greatest impact in societies where discrimination and negative stereotypes exist for one or more groups (e.g., racial, religious, and/or gender discrimination) (Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1987; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990).

Research on African American adolescents has primarily focused on the aspect of racial identity. Work by Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, and Chavous (1998) indicates that

African Americans' racial identity is comprised of four components: *salience, centrality, regard*, and *ideology*. Salience refers to the meaning that one makes out of being Black in varying social situations. Centrality refers to the extent to which people define themselves by race. Regard is defined as positive or negative feelings about one's racial group; included in this category is both one's opinion's (i.e., private regard) and one's perceptions of how society views one's racial group (i.e., public regard). Lastly, ideology refers to attitudes and opinions about how one's racial group should behave in society. Research suggests that African American high school students' racial identity is positively related to their academic achievement (Chavous et al., 2003). In addition, African American adolescents who believe that society holds negative opinions about their racial group are more likely to experience racial discrimination; however, positive attitudes about one's racial group were associated with better psychological functioning (Sellers et al., 2006). Research that has examined racial identity has mostly focused on preparation for bias, and experiences with racism and racial discrimination (Helms, 2007). Therefore, although there is some confusion in the definition of racial identity and other aspects of African American adolescents identity, such as ethnic identity (described below), I define racial identity as the aspect of one's identity that is linked to a person's connection with other Black people, which has particular historical significance in the United States (Omi & Winant, 1994).

As will be discussed in future directions for research, some problematic research design has led to confusion in interpreting these two related yet different aspects of identity on within- and between-group experiences. Although often studied in tandem or used interchangeably, ethnic identity is both historically and qualitatively different from racial identity. Ethnic identity is the second most prominent aspect of identity that has emerged in the literature, defined as "sense of belonging to an ethnic group, that is, a group defined by one's cultural heritage, including values, traditions, and often language (Phinney & Ong, 2007)." Therefore, I define ethnic identity as one's connection with other people, values, and cultural practices from a particular ethnic group in the United States (e.g., African American, Haitian, Jamaican, and Nigerian). Studies have indicated that ethnic identity is associated with greater self-esteem among many ethnic groups in the U.S., as well as higher academic achievement and effective coping with discrimination for ethnic minority group members (Phinney, 2003; Quintana, 2007; Juang & Syed, 2008). What is not known is if these aspects of identity are distinctly different from each other. I suspect that they are because the meaning of being Black in America is somewhat different from being Black in South Africa, for example. In addition, the experience of being Haitian American may vary from that of being African American, although both groups may share some common experiences around being Black in the United States.

Research suggests that some developmental differences exist for the presence of ethnic identity among adolescence. A study by French, Seidman, Allen and Aber (2006) revealed that African American adolescents' group esteem starts relatively low in early adolescence and increases during middle adolescence, as they begin to reevaluate what it actually means to be African American and reject negative stereotypes about their ethnic group. In addition, work by Phinney, Cantu, and Kurtz (1997) indicated that ethnic identity is associated with African American adolescents' self-esteem, such that adolescents with higher ethnic identity reported higher opinions of themselves.

It should be noted that other aspects of identity have gained some attention in the literature regarding African Americans, for example gender and sexual identity (Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, Soto, 2002; Whitehead, 1997); however, very few studies focus on adolescents' identity development. In particular, knowing that adolescents begin to define themselves in light of rapid physical and biological changes, it would be advantageous for researchers to consider how, for example African American girls' gender identity development is

influenced by the media and popular culture; or, how African American boys' sexual identity is shaped by cultural norms and societal expectations.

In sum, a DST perspective provides a useful framework to think about African American adolescents' identity development, and moreover pushes research to consider the implications of identity for positive developmental outcomes in an interrelated way. Developmental outcomes are based on the relationships shared between the person and his or her environment, and varying by historical context. Gaps in the identity literature pertaining to African American adolescents indicate areas through which the literature can be expanded. In the final section of this paper, I will suggest some general directions for future research.

Promising research using developmental systems theory

The Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST; Spencer, 2006, 2008) has been proposed by Margaret Beale Spencer to examine the process through which one forms an identity. PVEST has been the most widely used DST to examine the complex relations between African American youth and their context, by incorporating aspects of risk and resiliency that are most relevant to people of color. Her theory explains how the links between identity and health are different for people who are living under conditions of high stress and high conflict.

Spencer and colleagues (Spencer, Dupree, & Hartman, 1997; Spencer, Fegley, & Harpalani, 2003) have assessed how individuals cope with their context in ways that allow them to establish an identity that enables adaptive functioning. As people encounter stress, it is the person's interpretation of those events (e.g., phenomenology) and their response to those events that will lead to healthy or maladaptive behaviors. People are not biologically destined to have one identity status or another. Her theory emphasizes the importance of an individual's plasticity, which is consistent with DST ideology. For example, an African American adolescent may have been born in a time when African Americans did not have access to equal education. One's interpretation of the surroundings and one's response to negative events, that may be associated with living in this historical and social context, will ultimately define one's identity, and in turn influence how one will respond to those events. In other words, things are happening to the adolescent that will shape his or her identity. However, the adolescent is an active agent in his or her own identity development process.

Spencer's theory was influenced by the ideas of Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), as well as by other developmental systems theories (see Lerner, 2002, for a discussion). Her model specifies that identity formation is attained through a series of bidirectional processes, involving risk and coping strategies. She proposes that identity is associated with coping, for instance, with the stress of racial prejudice, poverty, and historical inequity. Furthermore, coping with these stressors may reinforce one's identity. For these reasons, I propose that the PVEST framework provides an ideal model for integrating research regarding the specific challenges for African American adolescents' healthy identity development.

The five components of PVEST are: the net vulnerability level, net stress, reactive coping strategies, emergent identities, and life stage outcomes (See Spencer, 2008, for a full review of the model). In the fourth component in the of the PVEST model, Spencer suggests that, *emergent identities - stable coping responses,* develop as a product of past experiences and reactions to risk and stress. The development of a positive or negative identity is based on one's use of adaptive or maladaptive coping strategies. Based on how a person reacts to various life stressors, an adolescent may begin to think "This is who I am all the time." African American adolescents may choose to define themselves in a number of ways, for

example "I am a Christian" "I am a Muslim" "I am Black" or "I am American." In this stage an adolescent accepts the cultural norms of the identity that he or she assumes, and in turn acts in ways that are consistent with his or her identity.

This research begins to unpack the notion of African American adolescents' identity; however, the studies that examine the development of different aspects of identity for this group are sparse. Within the PVEST framework, positive and negative identities are bidirectionally linked in Component 4. I propose that African American adolescents' identities are even more complex than positive or negative. Here is where Marcia's (1966, 1980) concept of four identity statuses becomes informative. As noted, as in all DST theories, one of the assumptions of Spencer's PVEST framework is that individuals are active agents in their own development. Proposing that an adolescent establishes a positive or negative identity assumes that the individual has actively explored aspects of his or her identity. As proposed by Marcia, people may have achieved a salient identity, or have an identity in moratorium. Both instances of identity support a person who has examined or thought about his or her identity. However, another option may be that African American adolescents' have a diffuse or foreclosed identity.

Research by Phinney and colleagues (Phinney, 1989, 1992; Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997; Phinney & Chavira, 1992) demonstrated that there is variability within African American adolescents' identity. The variation means that one can be high on ethnic identity (i.e., searched and explored aspects of one's ethnic identity, and committed to the ideals and values associated with one's ethnicity) or low on ethnic identity (i.e., has not yet explored aspects of one's ethnic identity, and has not committed to the ideals and values associated with one's ethnicity). In addition, when considering the developmental stage of adolescence, it may not be until late adolescence that young people begin to examine various aspects of their identity (Schwartz, 2005).

The PVEST framework provides a good way to arrange the literature regarding African American adolescents' identity. There has been some promising research that has begun to utilize the PVEST framework to further the study of African American adolescents identity (Fegley, Spencer, Goss, Harpalani, & Charles, 2008; Neblett, Philip, Cogburn, & Sellers, 2006; Spencer, & Tinsley, 2008). I believe there are some areas through which the PVEST model can be better clarified to increase its utility. In addition, as I will explain when directions for future research are discussed, this aspect of human development needs to be examined and explained more frequently from a longitudinal design.

There are some ambiguities within the framework that, if addressed, would strengthen its utility for assessing African American adolescents' identity development. One area that is unclear is Spencer's use of the term "coping" in Components 3, 4, and 5. For example, an adaptive reactive coping strategy leads to a positive stable, coping response, and in turn leads to productive coping outcomes. By including coping in each component, it appears that the sole purpose of developing an identity is to "cope" with one's surrounding. Coping implies that one is struggling or dealing with challenges. Yet, the model, as an instance of DST, stresses that adolescents are active agents in their own development. They do not just cope or react to environmental influences. On the contrary, they act to shape the context that is influencing them.

In addition, similar to Component 4, I propose that Component 5: *stage-specific coping outcomes* is much more multifaceted when assessing the link between identity and behaviors (i.e., productive or unproductive). Adolescents behaviors can be productive for themselves (e.g., achieving good grades), or productive for themselves and society (e.g., volunteering in their community). Conversely, their coping behaviors can be unproductive for themselves

(e.g., dropping out of school), or unproductive for themselves and detrimental for society (e.g., committing acts of crime). If these areas of the theory were further developed, perhaps through testing, I expect that its application to the literature would be much stronger.

There has been a great deal of promising research on African Americans based in a PVEST-perspective. For example, research indicates that African American adolescents' racial identity is positively associated with better mental health and well-being (Mandara, Gaylord-Harden, Richards, & Ragsdale, 2009; Seaton, Yip, & Sellers, 2009; Sellers et al., 2006) and academic achievement (Byrd & Chavous, 2009; Neblett, Philip, Cogburn, & Seller, 2006). I found two unique dissertations that broaden the utility of PVEST and the identity literature by examining aspects of identity development that have yet to be examined. One research study examined the relationship between racial identity and mathematics identity in an African-context school (Nyamekye, 2010). The other research study examined the influence of identity on promoting African American youths' activism (Wilson, 2009). The studies described here have laid the foundation for the present work. Both racial identity and ethnic identity are prominent aspects of identity that when fostered in African American adolescents can lead to positive psychosocial and behavioral outcomes. However, identity is much broader than race or ethnicity. For some youth, an athletic identity or an academic identity may be more protective and central than the racial or ethnic components of their identity. Kaiser and Wilkins (2006) proposed that there are many different ways and degrees to which a person may feel discriminated against. Racial identity may only be salient component of African American adolescents' identities in the context of race related discrimination. I propose that a consideration of individual differences that exist for all people may lead us to draw unique conclusions about the course and function of African American adolescents' identity development.

Directions for future research

The purpose of this paper is to examine and discuss the nature of African American adolescents' identity development, using a relational systems perspective. Developmental systems theories urge researchers to consider that identity does not just exist preformed or as a product of context -- independent, maturation processes (e.g., see Erikson, 1959, 1968). For African American adolescents it is a developmental process that begins at birth and continues to develop throughout the life span. Identity is influenced by a range of stages from an individual's first encounter with stressful events to reactive coping strategies that may follow. In addition, the meaning that adolescents draw from their experiences and the type of identity that is formed are embedded within complex systems ranging from the family context to societal-level influences, and in a particular historical frame of reference. For example, one may consider what affect the election of the first African American U.S. president will have on this generation of African American adolescents, and how African American adolescents will interpret this historical event.

The contemporary study of African American adolescents' identity has largely ignored the complexity of this facet of human development. Aspects of one's identity become more prominent depending on the context. Differing aspects of identity serve different functions for various adolescents and for their healthy development. The varying aspects of identity may work together to promote positive functioning among African American adolescents, or the contrary may be true that varying aspects of identity may be in conflict within a single individual (Juang & Syed, 2008). Future research should examine the relationship among different aspects of one's identity, such as racial and gender, or ethnic and religious. For instance, attending an African American church may provide positive reinforcement and support for one's ideas about being African American (ethnic identity) and prepare adolescents to deal with negative events (effective coping). However, one's ethnic identity

may be in conflict with other aspects of identity, such as one's sexual orientation (Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, & Soto, 2002; Zamboni & Crawford, 2007), depending on the level of acceptance in the community. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, African Americans may be one such example where different parts of one's identity may be at odds. Furthermore, the intersection between ethnic identity (e.g., being African American) and sexual identity (i.e., male or female), and the various stereotypes about those aspects of the person, may be an intricate relationship for African American youth (Brittian & Spencer, 2011). In this section, I discuss issues in research methodology, identify gaps in the previous literature, and provide applications for clinical significance to further the study of African American adolescents' identity development.

Research and methodology

One major contribution that DSTs make to the identity development literature is the emphasis placed on understanding within- and between-person change. Previous research on identity development has focused a great deal on between group differences (e.g., how different African Americans' ethnic or racial identity development is from other ethnic groups). However, identity by definition is a continuous process of self-evaluation. Therefore, it can be expected that not only will ethnic groups differ from each other, but the process of identity formation will vary between individuals within an ethnic group (Kaiser & Wilkins, 2006), in this case African American adolescents. In addition, the process through which a person forms a salient sense of self will manifest in various ways in individuals. For example, for some African American adolescents the course of identity achievement may be on an upward trajectory, starting with confusion about who they are and progressing towards a clear understanding of themselves and where they fit in the social world. For other adolescents, the course of identity development may be on a downward trajectory with the individual beginning with a stable sense of identity (i.e., achieved or foreclosure) and when presented with a stressful situation (e.g., encountering new racial, ethnic and social groups in college) may choose to reevaluate the components of their identity or their overall sense of self.

The advance of research and methodology in the psychological sciences has allowed us to better model the course of development for phenomena such as identity development. By use of multi-level and growth modeling methodology (e.g., Nagin, 2005; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) scientists can: 1) better statistically model the course of development, 2) examine factors that influence one course of development over another, and 3) further assess the influence of developmental trajectories on later psychosocial and behavioral outcomes. These type of modeling techniques have presented a way for researchers to analyze longitudinal data in new and innovate ways (e.g., Green, Pahl, & Way, 2006; Knight et al., 2009; Repetto, Caldwell, & Zimmerman, 2004; Seaton, Scottham, & Sellers, 2006). Therefore, one direction for future research is to consider that identity development is part of a multilevel system, meaning that African American adolescents are constructing their identity in the context of schools, neighborhoods, and varying geographic regions. In addition, the developmental trajectory for African American adolescents' identity development may not be an increasing or decreasing linear pathway. Furthermore, African American adolescents may be initiating the search for an identity at different time points within adolescence and the rate of change for developing various aspects of their identity may vary by individual. A third option is that groups of adolescents may follow similar pattern of identity development that cannot be captured by looking at mean-level differences, and the differentiation of developmental trajectories may be linked to adolescents' behavioral outcomes. Some research has begun to utilize such methodology (e.g., Seaton, Scottham, & Sellers, 2006; Pahl & Way, 2006) in the service of understanding racial identity development.

For example, one may ask if identity development does indeed follow a linear increase for all individuals across adolescence, and if adolescents follow this upward pattern of identity development that ends in achievement, is that course associated with better well-being at the end of adolescence? On the contrary, developmental theory suggests that adolescence is a time of self-exploration (Erikson, 1968). Therefore, it should be expected that some adolescents are increasing in their commitment to their overall sense of self, while some may be decreasing, and some may follow a mixed pattern as they try on "different hats" and different personas in adolescence. I, therefore, urge future research to consider the importance of the nature and implications of identity development for African American adolescents in particular in the context of DSTs and the advanced methodology that is presently available.

A second issue regarding African American adolescents' identity research is the matter of sampling and research design. Many studies that examine instances of African Americans' identity (e.g., ethnic, racial, and religious) are cross-sectional, and therefore are unable to answer questions regarding the process of development. Theory suggests that identity is marked by sameness and continuous in an individual's thinking about him or herself (Côté, 2009; Phinney & Ong, 2007), and thus should be examined over time. Studies which examine the presence of identity from a single time point are addressing an "instance" of identity and not the development of identity. Future studies should consider that adolescents' identity is a developmental process, evolving within society. Therefore, identity development is better examined and understood within a longitudinal study.

A third issue with the study of African American adolescents' identity is that previous research has not captured the diversity that exists within the African American youth population. Generally these studies aggregate all children of African descent into an African American or Black category. Few present studies have begun to explore how these aspects of racial and ethnic identity may be important for African American adolescents' identity development (e.g., Hall & Carter, 2006). For instance, it should not be assumed that Afro-Caribbean Americans will have similar experiences regarding race (e.g., skin complexion) and ethnicity (e.g., language), as other African Americans. There may also be ethnic differences confounded with immigrant status (Waters, 1990, 1999). Furthermore, research should consider that African American adolescents may draw strength from both racial identity and ethnic identity, but perhaps in different ways. Researchers should not assume that adolescents within this group are the same. In fact, within group discrimination (Kaiser & Wilkins, 2010; Maddox, 2004) may be an important ethnic-related stressor related to identity development that has yet to be examined in the literature. By committing this potential error we may be performing a disservice to some and underestimating the success of others. Future studies should examine the phenomenology of the group African American adolescents self-identify with, and then determine what function that facet of identity serves for them.

Clinical significance and application

As scientists, our goal should not only be to examine and explain phenomena relative to healthy functioning, but we should also be interested in how research applies to program development, the maximization of adolescents' productive livelihood, and how research can be integrated into clinical practice. Therefore, we should consider possible applications for identity research for promoting African American adolescents' positive development and reducing negative outcomes. As discussed in previous sections, one of the key developmental tasks of adolescents is to establish a sense of identity. I have discussed at length that research indicates that identity is associated with mental health, self-esteem, achievement, and interpersonal relationships. Therefore, in practical settings it is critical for adults to assist youth in exploring and developing a positive sense of self. In regards to

prominent aspects of identity that may be specific to African American adolescents, the existence of negative stereotypes and racial prejudice may make the development of a positive racial- and ethnic identity essential for later success and well-being. Identity research can be used in youth development programs, schools, parents' education, and clinical settings. While the family and peer context may serve as the main socialization agent for adolescents' identity development, many youth participate in youth development (YD) programs, such as 4-H clubs, Boys and Girls Clubs, and Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. Such programs have the capacity for shaping youths' beliefs and values, and in turn fostering identity formation (Kroger, 2007). Many YD programs have integrated identity development into their curriculum (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008), and may play a critical role in assisting urban youth in developing a positive overall sense of self. Whether these programs focus on specific aspects of identity that are critical for African American adolescents is yet to be determined.

A second way that identity research can be applied is related to the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. Theory suggests that young people who have established a positive sense of identity are more likely to become productive citizens in later life (Sherrod & Laukhardt, 2008). In this paper I have discussed the host of studies which indicate that identity is positively related to productive behaviors, such as higher academic achievement and reduced substance use. Given the challenges that many African American youth are expected to experience (e.g., discrimination may be compounded with the negative effects of poverty), we may consider the role of social influences in assisting urban African American youths' development of a positive sense of self. In turn, we may ask how identity relates to facilitating a smoother transition from adolescence into a productive adulthood for African American adolescents in particular.

Conclusions

Assessing identity development from a differentiated perspective (e.g., assessing the influence of racial and ethnic identity) has greatly contributed to our understanding of the nuanced nature of identity as it relates to African American adolescents. Although helpful in advancing the study of this area of research, a more integrative approach that incorporates multiple aspects of identity has been called for (Schwartz, Zamboanga, & Weisskirch, 2008). By providing a more integrative framework for assessing identity development, studies may be able to consider the implications of identity for healthy development more clearly. This paper attempted to bring together the research regarding African American adolescents' identity development using the DST perspective. Future studies should continue to consider adolescent identity development from within an integrative framework as well; one that considers the intricate, relational nature of biological, psychological, social, and historical influences on African American adolescents' identity.

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