

UNDERSTANDING INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION IN AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUNG  
ADULT WOMEN: AN EXAMINATION OF THE IMPACT OF INTERNALIZED  
OPPRESSION ON SELF-CONCEPTUALIZATION

by

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(Under the Direction of Anneliese A. Singh)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is structured in a non-traditional format enabling the researcher to seek journal publication in an effort to increase awareness and add to the scholarship related to young adult African American women's lived experiences. Chapter One is the introduction. Chapter Two is a stand-alone conceptual article/manuscript with a comprehensive literature review. Chapter Three is a stand-alone qualitative study/manuscript including a review of the literature, findings, and references. Chapter Four contains an examination of researcher reflexivity, implications for future research with African American young adult women using a phenomenological method with a Critical Race theoretical lens.

A phenomenological approach was used to document African American young adult women's experiences and personal narratives related to how their self-concepts are shaped by how they manage the pressures that lead to internalized oppression. Using Critical Race Theory as the analytical framework, the researcher sought to understand the social and psychological effects of the phenomenon that is internalized oppression as it relates to the personal perspectives of African American young adult women. Critical Race Theory addresses the intersectionality of

various forms of subordination like race and gender and challenges dominant ideologies (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). The researcher examined the associations attributed to internalization of oppression and how it might navigate self-conceptualization in African American emerging adult women.

This study was a response to the lack of scholarship that reveals, in their words, how African American young adult women digest the negative images, messages, and associations they are fed in this society. Even more, additional research in this area could increase awareness and the social injustices associated with race and gender that prompt psychological strains in African American women would be eradicated and the need to bandage and soothe wounded lives and spirits would diminish.

**INDEX WORDS:** African Americans, Young adult women, Self-conceptualization, Identity development, Critical race theory, Qualitative methods, Emerging adulthood, Stereotypes, Internalized oppression, Intersectionality

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## DEDICATION

For my Mama and Daddy, everything I am is rooted in your unconditional love and support.

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## CHAPTER 1

### **RACE, GENDER, AND SELF-CONCEPT: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUNG ADULT WOMEN**

*The year was 2081 and everybody was finally equal.*

*~from Harrison Bergeron (1961)  
a short story by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.*

*Harrison Bergeron*, a short story written by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. in 1961, appears in many literature textbooks for high school students. Vonnegut, a lifetime member of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), wrote this satirical science fiction piece as a way to parody government and social systems' idea of egalitarianism - that all men are created equal. He painted the picture of a society where the concept of equality had taken a wrong turn. He mocked the idea that equality could be achieved at the expense of liberty, freedom, and personal achievement. Although there are varying interpretations of this work, some readers have interpreted it as a critique of authoritative, dominant cultures. Who determines what is beautiful? Who determines what is acceptable? Who determines what is normal? Is social nonconformity punishable in society? In essence, Vonnegut's society demonstrates social injustices, discrimination, external systemic oppression and internalized oppression at its extreme. In reality, the experiences of African American young adult women in the United States are riddled with the same malignancies of Vonnegut's society yet the details of their stories are rarely considered (Carter, 2008; Eposito & Murphy, 2010; Evans-Winters & Eposito, 2010).

In summary, the story, *Harrison Bergeron*, is set in the year of 2081 in a dystopia, speculated to be representative of the past and future America. Harrison Bergeron, the main

character, is a 14-year-old alpha male who encompasses exaggerated qualities considered socially ideal—he is 7 feet tall; remarkably strong; handsome by societal standards; romantic; graceful; and physically, intellectually, and musically gifted. Without question, Harrison is not considered the typical 14-year-old. In the society in which Harrison lives, the government has legalized equality, and mediocrity became the great equalizer. The government had debilitated individuals who had qualities that were viewed as advantageous, special, unique, or above average. In order to normalize its citizens, people were forced to wear what the government called “handicaps.” Special glasses were worn to damage good eyesight. Persons who were thought to be more beautiful than others had to wear hideous masks or clown noses and blackened teeth. Persons who were more intelligent wore earphones or radios to distort free thinking and impede original ideas. Heavy weights were hung around the necks and bodies of those who appeared graceful or physically strong in order to fatigue them. Even citizens who had pleasant voices had to distort them to sound gruff. Television was used as a pacifier, sedating those who watched with images of others who were like them and how society wanted them to be. Harrison’s exceptionalities caused him to be overly restrained and later jailed. Rejecting the social norm and with a strong-willed desire to live as a fully free human being, he broke free of his restraints and encouraged others to do the same. In the end, Harrison was executed for opposition to system control.

In 2011, African American young adult women struggle with the social restraints of racism and sexism imposed on them by a dominant culture hindering any sense of equality (King, 2003; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). Their stories exist because the lack of equality exists (Bamberg, 2004). But, their stories are rarely heard. Historically, young African American women have been denied access to opportunities that would improve their quality of

life, and they have been measured by social standards and norms that they are forced to conform to or cannot conform to because of cultural differences (Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha, 2011).

Traditionally, the intent of dominant culture in this society has been to cultivate social conditions by assigning roles, influencing behavior, asserting values, shaping perception, and steering thoughts (Esposito & Murphy, 2010). Social conditioning is an effort to influence individuals to submit to the idea of *I am what you say I am*. One way dominant cultural systems facilitate conditioning is through the use of master narratives. Master narratives or discourses are derived from the traditional and historical experiences of the dominant culture (Love, 2004). This serves as a means to legitimize the narrative's premise. However, the truth of master narratives may be considered subjective and contrived at best because assumption and perception are used in creating the realities. Consequently, the acceptance of societal standards and norms by an individual who has been marginalized in society may be problematic, especially if those norms and standards are contrary to one's own lived experience (Jain, 2010). Add to that racist and sexist stereotypes, stigmas, and role expectations and the process of developing a healthy self-concept becomes a harrowing ordeal (Sanders & Sullivan, 2010) which could lead to internalized oppression.

Internalized oppression refers to aligning personal beliefs, ideas, and attitudes about self and member group with negative socially constructed beliefs, ideas, and attitudes about marginalized groups (Dorsey, 1998; Szymanski & Gupta, 2009). Further, internalized oppression may be more psychologically distressing than the experience of external forms of oppression (Speight, 2007). The inception of internalized oppression may be triggered by a barrage of external pressures (Brown, Linver, & Evans, 2010), and even though young African American women tend to be resilient and rely on mental fortitude to withstand everyday pressures, trying to

be strong still does not prevent the effects of oppression from influencing self-concept and belief in self-efficacy (Gaylord-Harden & Cunningham, 2009). Constant exposure to multiple oppressive systems such as racism, sexism, and classism, imposed by dominant culture may lead to internalized oppression leaving one to harbor negative feelings and attitudes about herself or her cultural group (Branch, 2007; Gaylord-Harden & Cunningham, 2009). The frequency by which negative images, messages, and associations are delivered gives the conscious and unconscious mind little time to process.

African American young adult women absorb the messages transmitted about them and to them through various conduits such as the media (Gordon, 2008). Family members and peers who struggle with internalized oppressive societal norms and ideals themselves may minimize the impact of external oppressive acts and may also relay negative messages to these women (Pyke, 2010). Although, African American young adult women may struggle with other dynamics such as classism, ableism, and heterosexism, there appears to be more salience with race/ethnic-related and gender-related issues (Moradi & Subich, 2003). Ultimately, the effects of social, cultural, and familial stressors could manifest in how a young African American woman views self (Street, Harris-Britt, & Walker-Barnes, 2009).

### **Racism, Sexism, and their Influence on Self-Conceptualization**

Answering the question, *Who Am I?* is an ongoing process (Yip, Seaton, & Sellers, 2006). Exposure to various life events, perceived as either good or bad, molds our worldview (Gourdine, 2009). Who we are in this world is sometimes imposed by societal standards; who we think we are in this world rests greatly on our perceived circumstances; who we become is predicated by our lived experiences (Gourdine, 2009). Traditionally, the experiences of African American women have been overlooked in this society (Bounds-Littlefield, 2008; Brubaker &

Wright, 2006; Buchanan, Fischer, Tokar, & Yoder, 2008; Gordon, 2008; Jones, Cross, & DeFour, 2007; Mitchell & Mazzeo, 2009; Moradi & Subich, 2003; Nollen et al., 2006; Settles, 2006). The wealth of uni-dimensional studies that separately focus on social issues based on either race/ethnicity or gender issues ignore the fact that African American women's reality includes both (Moradi & Subich, 2003) and should be studied as such. Earlier studies identified race/ethnicity as the primary source of oppression for African American women (Thomas et al., 2011). The recognition of race/ethnicity only in these studies ignored the complexity of the African American woman's experience. Beal (1970) urged researchers to consider the idea of "double jeopardy" – the notion that both oppressive positions (racism and sexism) have an impact on the lives of African American women. An experience with one may intensify the pressure of the other (Beal, 1970; Moradi & Subich, 2003). Double jeopardy theory (Beal, 1970; Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Buchanan, 2008) supports that African American women deal with the challenges of being devalued because of race/ethnicity and gender which makes them targets for racism and sexism. The intersection of race/ethnicity and gender places African American women in a unique position. Yet, there are few studies that concentrate on the thoughts and feelings that African American women have about their experiences as women in a racist and sexist society and how their perceptions of the world and their place in it shapes their sense of self and worth.

### **Intersections of Race/Ethnicity and Gender for African American**

#### **Young Adult Women**

The concept of intersectionality provides a means for understanding the interaction of socially constructed identities such as race/ethnicity, gender, and class emphasizing that each construct cannot be mutually exclusive from the other when attempting to determine the



impact each has on individual identity formation (Hoffman, 2006). Further, the challenges associated with each social station could elicit psychological consequences. Moradi and Subich (2003) conducted a study to determine if there was a link between the psychological distress of African American women and how they perceive racist and sexist encounters. The findings showed that African American women experienced acts of oppression in terms of intersectionality or race-gender fusion, a combination found to be psychologically distressing (Hoffman, 2006). Thus, racism and sexism are both influential on how they interpret their existence. The term “ethgender” or “gendered racism” has become popular with social scientists in describing the multiple identities of African American women (Essed, 1991; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; St. Jean & Feagin, 1997). Essed (1991) suggests that it is difficult to disconnect gender from race/ethnicity or race/ethnicity from gender when trying to understand the experiences of the African American woman. Although many scholars acknowledge the intertwined identities of African American women, there still remains the absence of research that addresses the concomitant experience of African American women with race/ethnicity and gender.

Settles et al. (2008) asserted in a study conducted with African American and White women that race/ethnicity may influence how women view their gender. The findings of the study showed that African American women were concerned about sexualized depictions of African American women in the media. The researchers also found that the subtleties of present day sexism and racism may cause a level of uncertainty in how women perceive oppression. Some younger participants believed that women have achieved equality and discrimination no longer existed yet later admitted to a lack of awareness. Surprisingly, only the White participants expressed concerns on balancing work and family and the White participants were of

a higher social class than the African American participants (Settles et al., 2008). Also, the White participants expressed having more advantages in their lived experiences as opposed to the African American participants. Overall, this study emphasized a need for more research in the area of identity and self-conceptualization among African American women possibly with a larger sample.

### **African American Women and Self-Conceptualization**

Gender is a social construct (Hoffman, 2006; Thomson & Zand, 2007). Self-conceptualization is the process of consciously and subconsciously accumulating images, ideas, and suggestions that influence perceptions and using that to formulate the idea of whom you are. Personal experiences, gender role expectations, social interactions, and media messages could shape a woman's self-concept (Settles et al., 2008). Thomson and Zand (2007) posit that a person derives a self-concept after evaluating their abilities and character traits. A person's self-efficacy is determined by how they feel about themselves (Cokley & Chapman, 2008).

King (2003) found a significant connection between African American women's self-conceptualization and their consideration of race/ethnicity and gender interconnectedness. The study was designed to increase understanding of how African American women perceived oppression. African American women are vulnerable to the practices of discrimination because of their membership to two devalued social groups (King, 2003). Research studies document the continuance of discriminatory attitudes, and impression of stereotypes directed towards African American women (King, 2003). Few studies examine the effects of prejudice on multiple oppressed groups such as women of color. Researchers attest that race/ethnicity and gender have been studied separately in order to gather clear results. For those individuals who have integrated identities, the results of the studies would not be totally applicable (King, 2003). Research

suggests that both race/ethnicity and gender are important to the lived experiences of African American women.

### **The Coping Resources and Resiliency of Young Adult African American Women**

African American women struggle to find ways to cope with racial and gender oppression (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Still, there is little scholarship that investigates how African American women handle the onslaught of racist and sexist encounters. The research that has been conducted focuses mainly on their coping strategies for general problems like finances. But, one cannot assume that African American women will handle the stress of oppression the same as they handle the stress of general problems (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). For example, Smyth and Yarandi (1996) studied 656 African American women who completed a questionnaire based on coping strategies and found that overall the participants dealt with general stressors in three ways: (a) active coping – making a concerted effort toward change; (b) avoidance coping – avoiding the problem, engaging in wishful thinking, finding comfort in eating and drinking; and (c) minimizing the situation – continuing as if nothing happened, downplaying the seriousness of the problem.

In a study conducted with African American men and women, Feagin and Sikes (1994) documented various responses participants had for dealing with oppression and racial discrimination such as avoidance, thinking before acting, or verbal and physical confrontation. Participants acknowledged the perceived need to always employ “protective defenses” or the perceived continued need to prove oneself to others by “overachieving.” However, gender was not considered in this study. Other researchers have discussed that African American women are taught at a young age to self-protect against the emotional and psychological threat of racism and

sexism, noting that women use internal strength to counteract the distress of oppression (Bell & Nkomo, 1998).

Shorter-Gooden (2004) identified three coping strategies for racism and sexism during a study she conducted with African American women: (a) role flexing; (b) avoiding; and (c) fighting back. First, role flexing entails adjusting one's behavior, speech or appearance to gain acceptance of the dominant group. This is done in an effort to curtail potential biased judgments and associations with negative stereotypes. Participants admitted to not wanting others to think they were inferior. This went along with the notion of "proving them wrong," especially in regards to stereotypes. Interestingly, when it came to gender biases, some women said they would downplay their intelligence in the presence of African American men so as not to make them feel intimidated (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). However, there were some situations when role flexing became internalized. The attempt to assimilate into a dominant culture and trying not to "act Black" is a manifestation of internalized oppression for African American young adult women. Next, avoiding was used more so in situations related to racial oppression such as not discussing cultural or race/ethnic related issues with Whites. Lastly, standing up or fighting back meant to challenge biases and stereotypes directly (Shorter-Gooden, 2004).

Schilling (2008) conducted an in-depth, individual case study with a young, economically disadvantaged, African American woman named Tasha. The author used cultural factors to define resilience and vulnerability. Interpretation of the case showed that the economically disadvantaged, African American woman reflected resilience when faced with adversity. Tasha also exhibited signs of vulnerability, but in some adverse situations, she became angry and began acting out. Tasha would succumb to moments of depression; she suffered from anxiety and panic attacks; and she struggled to excel in life. Tasha graduated from high school but worked

low-paying jobs. Tasha had tendencies toward resilience and vulnerability. Of significant importance was Tasha's resilient optimism that regardless of her circumstances, she had the ability to move beyond it (Schilling, 2008).

Findings from a study conducted by Settles et al. (2008) suggested that African American women believed that inner strength was important for all African American women to have. Participants linked racial and gender identities in terms of inner strength and the concept of the "Strong Black Woman." Behaviors of strength consisted of working and caring for family and supporting them economically. Terms such as "persistence, resolve, and self-reliance" were used to describe the personality of a Strong Black Woman. For African American women, racism has come to be expected and considered a mainstay in this society, therefore, there is a need to be guarded and protect oneself. However, participants felt the internalization of the defensive strategy of the Strong Black Woman or Superwoman persona could be emotionally and psychologically burdensome and result in negative psychological consequences. Pyke (2010) asserts that when African American women bear the weight of oppression without demanding social change, the oppressor benefits. She wrote:

Even though the construction of the non-White subject [African American] as strong and ever-resistant provides political capital for an identity politics, it is a distortion that obscures the injuries of racism and thus the extent of racial oppression. Herein is the appeal to the White dominant group of controlling images that cast the oppressed as impervious to pain, ever-resilient, and possessing a virtually superhuman ability to endure hardship. If the oppressed feel no pain, the oppressors can easily deny its infliction. (p. 563)

Conducting additional studies on how African American young adult women deal with and respond to race/ethnic-related and gender-related pressures could be beneficial in providing more insight into the human condition. The following proposed research question guided this exploratory study: What are the experiences of African American young adult women who have internalized oppression? The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how African American young adult women experienced internalized oppression and its impact on identity development and self-conceptualization. Using a phenomenological research design, the researcher applied Critical Race Theory as the analytical framework.

The researcher proposed that a phenomenological approach was most appropriate to answer the research question. Phenomenological inquiry strategies allowed the researcher to grasp the essential elements of the participants' experience (Creswell, 2009). Specific to this study, a phenomenological approach was used to document African American young adult women's experiences and personal narratives related to how their self-concepts are shaped by how they manage the pressures that lead to internalized oppression. The researcher sought to understand the social and psychological effects of the phenomenon that is internalized oppression as it relates to the personal perspectives of African American young adult women.

The researcher selected to use Critical Race Theory as a theoretical framework for this phenomenological study for several reasons. Critical Race Theory is a framework to aid in understanding oppression in order to bring about societal and individual change (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). A form of oppositional scholarship, Critical Race Theory's aim is to thwart society's capacity for racism and transform society's relationship with power (Carter, 2008; Jain, 2010) by emphasizing a commitment to social justice and challenging dominant ideologies (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Critical Race Theory helps one examine the role of racism

with the goal to eliminate it along with other forms of oppression including sexism identifying racism and other forms of oppression as a central function of U.S. society (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Critical Race Theory addresses the intersectionality of various forms of subordination like race/ethnicity and gender and challenges dominant ideologies (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). When using Critical Race Theory methods, the researcher must be able to compile, analyze, and make meaning of data found in concepts, ideas, and experiences (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Additionally, Critical Race Theory seeks to help validate the lives that people of color experience with the use of counter-narratives (Stanley, 2007).

The researcher examined the associations attributed to internalization of oppression and how it might navigate self-conceptualization in African American young adult women. An unhealthy identity could develop as a result of oppressive factors that have been internalized, sometimes manifesting as maladaptive behaviors and practices. Furthermore, these factors could cause African American young adult women to view themselves in a distorted way. Because today's generation of African American adolescents are growing up in a more diverse and integrated environment, they are exposed to various external factors that may influence the development of their self-concepts.

The current study was a response to the lack of scholarship that reveals, in their words, how African American young adult women digest the negative images, messages, and associations that are prevalent in this society. Even more, additional research in this area could increase awareness and the social injustices associated with race/ethnicity and gender that prompt psychological strains in African American women would be eradicated and the need to

bandage and soothe wounded lives and spirits would diminish. Until then, the struggle of African American women shouldering the weight of multiple oppressive identities continues.

In an effort to increase awareness and add to the scholarship related to African American young adult women's lived experiences, this dissertation is structured in a non-traditional format enabling the researcher to seek journal publication. Chapter One is the introduction. Chapter Two is a stand-alone conceptual article/manuscript with a comprehensive literature review. Chapter Three is a stand-alone qualitative study/manuscript including a review of the literature, findings, and references. Chapter Four contains an examination of researcher reflexivity, implications for future research with young African American adult women using a phenomenological method with a Critical Race theoretical lens.



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**CHAPTER 2**

**AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUNG ADULT WOMEN AND THE COMPLEXITY OF  
SELF-CONCEPTUALIZATION: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND  
A CALL TO THE FIELD OF SCHOOL COUNSELING**

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### **Abstract**

African American young adult women on the precipice of transitioning into adulthood are prime targets for developing emotional and psychological issues brought on by race/ethnic-related and gender-related stress (Williams, 2005). These stressors could lead to internalized oppression (Gaylord-Harden & Cunningham, 2009). Similarly, preconceived notions about womanhood and misconceptions about cultural tendencies could subjugate an African American young adult woman to engage in faulty thinking and pathological behavior like increased alcohol consumption, unprotected sex, or drug and tobacco use (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010). Still, despite the detrimental outcomes of oppression and discrimination in the lives of African American young adult women, gaps in the literature remain unaddressed (Gaylord-Harden & Cunningham, 2009). Fortunately, school counselors are in the unique position to competently guide and provide necessary resources to African American young adult women in order to enhance their chances of becoming productive, responsible, well-adjusted adults in this society (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). Thus, this article is an effort to illuminate factors that could lead to internalized oppression in African American young adult women and, in turn, influence self-conceptualization. Such an examination could provide insight into school counselor practices and the implication of their role as social justice advocates. (McMahan, Singh, Urbano, & Haston, 2010).



## Introduction

The concept of identity is a complex one, shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts. Who am I? The answer depends in large part on who the world around me says I am. Who do my parents say I am? Who do my peers say I am? What message is reflected back to me in the faces and voices of my teachers, my neighbors, and store clerks? What do I learn from the media about myself? How am I represented in the cultural images around me? Or am I missing from the picture altogether?

~ Beverly Daniel Tatum  
The Complexity of Identity: “Who Am I?”

Upon the precipice of leaving high school, African American young adult women may be faced with a number of barriers (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010). Whereas, the transition into young adulthood is typically characterized by decreased parental influences and increased independence, this stage in life could be potentially problematic for some adolescents growing up in the U. S. (Hendry & Kloep, 2010). Identity development is crucial during the stage of adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980; Arnett, 2000). African American young adult women must navigate through typical psychosocial developmental tasks during this stage while striving to form a self-concept in a society that devalues them as an African American and as a woman (Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). Although disproportionately represented as an “at-risk” population in much of the research literature (Lipford-Sanders & Bradley, 2005), many African American young adult women face a variety of hardships prescribed to them by a socially oppressive culture which has marginalized them and discriminated against them based on race/ethnicity and gender.

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued the report, *A Nation at Risk* which asserted that all individuals, regardless of race/ethnicity or social status, were afforded the opportunity and resources for personal growth and advancement in this country (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). Further stated was “that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself” (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). From a social justice perspective, one may question if the educational system is equipping marginalized groups with adequate skills needed to function in society once they graduate from high school. Specifically, have African American young adult women, for the duration of their educational career, been competently guided and provided with the necessary resources to advance in U.S. society?

School counselors are in the unique position to competently guide and provide necessary resources to African American young adult women in order to enhance their chances of becoming productive, responsible, well-adjusted adults in this society (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004). The utilization of the American Counseling Association (ACA) Advocacy Competencies and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model equip school counselors with standards and guidelines for advocacy and program management and mandate that school counselors serve as resources for student growth (McMahan, Singh, Urbano, & Haston, 2010; Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahan, 2010) which would include supporting healthy identity development in African American young adult women. Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1966) asserted that identity development is predicated on an experienced crisis during adolescence.

Unfortunately, African American young adult women on the precipice of transitioning into adulthood are prime targets for developing emotional and psychological issues brought on by race/ethnic-related and gender-related stress (Williams, 2005). These stressors could lead to internalized oppression (Gaylord-Harden, & Cunningham, 2009) Similarly, preconceived notions about womanhood and misconceptions about cultural tendencies could subjugate an African American young adult woman to engage in faulty thinking and pathological behavior like increased alcohol consumption, unprotected sex, or drug and tobacco use (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010). Still, despite the detrimental outcomes of oppression and discrimination in the lives of African American young adult women, gaps in the literature remain unaddressed (Gaylord-Harden, & Cunningham, 2009)

Yet, as student advocates, school counselors have an obligation to address oppressive factors that impede a student's growth, development, and well-being (Singh et al., 2010). Also, the school counselor must understand that the intersectionality of race/ethnicity and gender are integral in shaping the self-concept of African American young adult women (Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha, 2011). Further, school counselors should strive to implement strategies of empowerment that foster a sense of confidence and self-efficacy especially since society devalues African American women as a group (Bailey, 2005; Butler, & Bunch, 2005). Subsequently, school counselors should serve as a change agent to establish an environment that rejects race/ethnic-related and gender-related acts of prejudice and discrimination.

Nonetheless, the continued existence of racism and sexism in this society hinder African American young adult women from fully reaching their potential (Williams, 2005). Therefore, school counselors must readily embrace their role as social justice advocates and work to address inequalities at a systemic level (Singh et al., 2010) with the knowledge that the outcome of

oppression and discrimination could manifest in a variety of ways. In 2010, 15.2% of African American women did not complete high school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). However, the rate of educational completion for African American women still remains lower than White women and the overall national average. Reportedly, African American high school graduates experience higher levels of unemployment compared to White American high school dropouts (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2007). In 2007, the average income for African American women was lower than the national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). In 2010, African American women living below the poverty level equaled 27.5% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). When compared to all Americans, 41% of single, African American mothers are living below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008) and 51% of African American youth are growing up in female-headed households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Based on labor queuing theories—a work force hierarchy that supposes the better jobs should be allocated to favored persons considered to be more desirable and attractive—race/ethnicity and gender have typically translated into lower occupational positions for African American young adult women with limited education compared to White men, African American men, and White women (Branch, 2007).

While attending high school, African American female adolescents may have presented issues related to psychosocial development but may have been referred to the school counselor for a different reason (Adams, Benschhoff, & Harrington, 2007). The transitional period of adolescence to adulthood may cause anxiety and depression because of the frequent social, physical, and emotional changes (Gaylord-Hayden, Ragsdale, Mandara, Richards, & Petersen, 2007).

Anxiety and depression may surface for African American female adolescents based on stress related to limited postsecondary options, social issues, or even economic issues (Beal &

Crockett, 2010; Constantine, Kindaichi, & Miville, 2007). Researchers suggest that females in late adolescence are twice more likely than males in late adolescence to experience episodes of depression during the transition into adulthood (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Nolen-Hoeksems, 2001). Further, researchers have suggested connections between encounters with racism and discrimination and depressive symptoms in African American youth during the period of transition into adulthood (Lambert, Herman, Smith-Bynum, & Ialongo, 2009). Depressive symptoms due to environmental changes and instability could lead to a postponement of commitments to occupational ideas, identity development, and personal relationships causing a cessation in the progression to adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Cote & Bynner, 2008). For these reasons, school counselors should be especially aware and proactive in providing resources to support African American female adolescents during this transitional period.

Likewise, the progression from adolescence to adulthood has been explored by several researchers. Arnett (2000) established the concept of “emerging adulthood” to represent the developmental stage for ages 18-29 years old because he believed that certain social and economic conditions in life could prolong adolescence. However, some scholars have not been supportive of Arnett’s additional development stage concept, acknowledging that the theory was not age specific and merely represented frequent changes in occupations, relationships, or responsibilities in an adolescent’s life (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010). Hendry and Kloep (2010) conducted an exploratory study to examine the universality of “emerging adulthood” and the findings suggested that although experiential regression in life stages occurred with the participants, the theory of emerging adulthood could not be substantiated with the precepts developed by Arnett. So, what does that mean for the African American young adult woman? Shorter-Gooden and Washington (1996) conducted an exploratory qualitative study with

seventeen African American young women ages 18-22 years old and found that in addition to the challenges of the developmental tasks associated with adolescence and identity development, African American young women also had to contend with the social constructs of race and gender and the detriments that go along with being socially devalued.

Historically, the devaluation of African American women comes from years of systemic racism and sexism and as a result, African American women remain at a social disadvantage in the United States even now, during the post civil rights era, when liberalism promises freedom, equal opportunity and the right to social advancement (Esposito & Murphy, 2010). The illusion of the American Dream—to live freely and to prosper—fails to take into account the racial and sexist barriers that still exist in this country (Branch, 2007; Harley, Jolivet, McCormick, & Tice, 2002). For instance, the African American woman's condition continues to be plagued by low socioeconomic status, sub-standard healthcare, sub-par housing, unemployment, unaffordable childcare, and race/ethnic-related and gender-related stressors (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Esposito & Murphy, 2010). Yet, the sense of urgency to address the social concerns of African American women seems nonexistent (Constantine, 2002; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). Over the past decades, social progression has occurred. That being the case, the acquisition of small victories by individuals could have engineered the misconception that every person is allotted the same opportunities to progress in this society and that discrimination is not longer a social issue (Esposito & Murphy, 2010; Pyke, 2010).

However, racism and sexism still exist just in more subtle, obscure forms (Esposito & Murphy, 2010). Racial and gender discrimination hide behind the guise of egalitarianism and meritocracy. People are led to believe that there is liberty and justice for all (Iglesias & Cormier, 2002). But, how can one advance based on achievement and skill in a society that dictates

privilege to some and denies access to vital resources to others? How can one achieve a better quality of life when appearance, background, and heritage could inhibit an individual from meeting the social standard? It is fair to assume that if White dominant culture is considered the norm in U. S. society then experiences outside of that norm could be interpreted as abnormal, perhaps even leading individuals to view themselves negatively (Lipford-Sanders, & Bradley, 2005).

Consequently, the internalization of oppression may become a factor for many African American young adult women (Gaylord-Harden, & Cunningham, 2009). The devaluation of their lived experiences and cultural attributes suggest that issues relevant to African American women are unimportant or less important than others (Harley, Jolivette, McCormick, & Tice, 2002). Explicit and covert messages of inferiority or lack of worth could be detrimental to the process of self-conceptualization for African American young adult women. African American young adult women, in particular, face unique challenges especially related to transitioning into adulthood and developing a sense of identity (Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). According to Erikson (1968), adolescence is a pivotal developmental stage for young adults. Phinney and Alipuria (1987) acknowledged that while Erikson's concepts are central to the understanding of identity development, the aspect of culture must be taken into consideration as well. For instance, during this the adolescence stage, individuals attempt to integrate multiple identities. The intersectionality of race/ethnicity and gender impacts how African American young adult women self-conceptualize (Hoffman, 2006). However, other influences, such as the internalization of race/ethnicity and gender oppression, must be taken into consideration as well. External factors leading to internalized oppression such as peer pressure, family expectations,

and social standards and norms of the dominant culture could have a strong impact on how African American young adult women perceive self (Thomas et al., 2011).

Thus, this article is an effort to illuminate factors that could lead to internalized oppression in African American young adult women and, in turn, influence self-conceptualization. Such an examination could provide insight into school counselor practices and the implication of their role as social justice advocates (McMahan et al., 2010).

The literature in this area highlights important contributions from research studies that explore the stages of identity development and some issues related to adolescent identity development and self-conceptualization. In regards to African American young adult women, identity development tends to be associated with racial barriers. Gaps in the literature occur as it relates the connection between internalized oppression and complexities of identity development in African American young adult women. Further studies in the area of African American young adult women and the influence of internalized oppression are needed.

### **Comprehensive Examination of the Literature**

#### **African American Young Adult Women and Developmental Theory**

The process of developing personal identity is complex (Thomas et al., 2011). Burt and Haplin (1998) conducted a comprehensive literature review based on African American identity development and compiled a chart identifying main components from various theorists as they relate to African Americans. Overall, many theories based on identity development evolved from Freud. Freud discusses identity in terms of integration and the ability to interact within one's group as well as with other groups. Group identity and acceptance is an important aspect for African American adolescents, however, most studies fail to focus on adolescents of color.



Based upon Freud's theory of ego development, psychosocial theorist Erikson further examined the concept of ego identity development. According to Erikson (1968), it was clear that the development of a healthy personality is directly related to children's cognitive and social growth. In other words, in order to develop a healthy personality, a child must have a series of positive cognitive experiences as well as significant social interactions. In turn, it is conceivable that exposure to negative cognitive experiences and social interactions could nurture an unhealthy personality.

Theorist Marcia (1966) built on Erikson's theory by adding the component of commitment and decision as it relates to an individual's period of crisis. A significant crisis may lead an individual to commit to an ideology thereby achieving identity. Like Marcia, Phinney (1988) stressed commitment and decision after crisis, yet studied the process in terms of minority adolescents. Phinney believed that minority adolescents must explore what it means to be a minority in a predominantly White society before achieving a healthy ethnic identity. Phinney highlighted the connection between self-esteem and ethnic identity and she emphasized that environment plays a substantial role in identity development of ethnic minorities.

Phinney and Alipuria (1987) define personality as a characteristic of an individual that is developed by continuous experience. It is an aspect of identity which is psychosocial, recognized and evaluated by others.

### **African American Young Adult Women and Social Perceptions**

Dominant cultural groups construct social reality imposing identities onto the oppressed (Pyke, 2010). Racial stereotypes and derogatory impressions are valuable in reaffirming the normalization of White culture (Esposito & Murphy, 2010). Higher social status and greater resources are given to individuals who meet the standard of dominant culture because dominant

culture is more accepting of attributes that are similar to its own. To that end, internalized oppression could occur when an individual makes the connection between upward mobility and conforming to the social standards (Pyke, 2010).

Still, African American young adult women must contend with negative stereotypes and stigmas that lurk in the conscious and unconscious minds of society (Dorsey, 1998). Stereotypical representations of African American women include the Mammy, the Welfare Queen, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire or Angry Black Woman (Dorsey, 1998; Foster, 2008; Gillum, 2002; Settles, 2006). The Mammy image is seen as the servant nurturer (Dorsey, 1998). Her only goal or desire is to take care of others, particularly the families of the dominant culture. The Mammy is oftentimes portrayed as asexual. The opposite of the Mammy is the Jezebel who is depicted as “animalistic and hypersexed” (Settles, 2006). The Jezebel is easily aroused and enjoys promiscuity (Gillum, 2002). The Welfare Queen is depicted as a single woman with multiple children who demands public assistance and scams the taxpayers (Foster, 2008). The Sapphire or the Angry Black Woman is animated, boisterous, and emasculating to men (Foster, 2008). Additional stigmas about appearance (skin color, hair texture, and body size) further complicate the African American young adult women’s identity development process. Sometimes, these socially constructed perceptions of African American women may be internalized causing pathological thoughts and psychological distress.

### **African American Young Adult Women, Identity Formation, and the Influence of Race/Ethnicity**

Nigrescence Theory is a racial identity model conceived as a means to encourage the acceptance and affirmation of race/ethnicity as a defining part of identity (Cross, 1971). The word nigrescence is a French term that means *becoming Black*. There are five stages that

structure this model: Pre-Encounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization-Commitment. Cross's intent (1971) with this theory was to move African Americans from any form of self-hatred because of race/ethnicity to self-acceptance.

In the first stage, Pre-Encounter, individuals identify more with the dominant culture and mainstream values. It is during this phase that an individual would reject associations of African American culture. Because of this they are viewed as self-hating as a result of low self-esteem. It is at this point that one's personality is considered impaired. The second stage, Encounter, marks some type of crisis or unsettling event that causes the individual to question the role of race in society prompting the individual to question his or her own thoughts and beliefs about race and catapulting the individual towards stage three. The third stage is identified as the Immersion-Emersion stage. The individual is overcome with African American culture and actively engages in those things that represent the culture. However, in accepting a strong African American identity, the individual rejects what is perceived to be related to a White identity. This stage forces more reevaluation of self and society. Towards the end of this stage, the individual finds balance and could make rational decisions about experiences and racial identity. No longer rejecting other cultures, the individual moves to stage four, Internalization. In this stage the individual truly accepts race/ethnicity as the basis of his or her identity. The individual reaches a level of intellectual and emotional contentment. Stage five, Internalization-Commitment, entails becoming involved with social activism and social change. In 1991, Cross included a revised Nigrescence Theory in his book, *Shades of Black*. Cross maintained the original five stages but substantial modifications were made, particularly to the Pre-Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, and Internalization stages (Cross, 1991; Vandiver, 2001).

A healthy self-concept and positive ethnic attitudes are linked to healthy ethnic identity development (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010). Phinney and Alipuria (1987) asserted that positive ethnic attitudes and self-acceptance result after a period of exploration. In order to arrive at a level of commitment to one's ethnic identity, the individual must explore various aspects of his or her life including past experiences.

Syed (2010) conducted a study to investigate the connection between ethnic identity development of ethnically diverse college students and how they select academic majors. Recognizing that ethnicity is extremely important in how many ethnic minorities define themselves, Syed found that these students tend to feel pressured to study in an area they feel is befitting who they are ethnically like areas in the social sciences and humanities because these areas, more than others, are more likely to incorporate course materials that appeal to their cultural or social identities. It was found that these students also deal with pressure from family to choose an academic major that will allow for social advancement (Syed, 2010). Overall, for students for whom ethnicity is central, the pressure to integrate who they are ethnically with educational goals is of great concern because they look to certain majors that will aid them in continuing their ethnic identity development (Syed, 2010).

Recognizing the sparse research related to ethnic identity development during adolescence, Phinney (1988) concentrated on an examination of the antecedents that lead to such developments. Other sociologists have stated that minority individuals need to feel accepted by a group in order to develop. According to Phinney, when "black youth come to believe that they can never be treated like White Americans, they seek to define themselves in contrast to White culture" (p. 4). This is based on how minorities have been treated historically, Phinney further writes. Because of this, African Americans seek to legitimize certain behaviors, attitudes, beliefs

and preferences that may be in opposition to what is considered acceptable practices by mainstream America. Thus, a culture emerges in which young minorities feel they could belong to regardless of the negative aspects that may be associated with that culture. Haphazardly, the idea of *acting Black* becomes an association that is considered in opposition to mainstream society and culture in which negative attachments abound. But, what does this mean when it comes to womanhood? How do these elements manipulate the process of an adolescent who is Black and on the verge of becoming a woman?

In the context of *acting Black*, along with the many negative associations that come with it, African American adolescents tend to legitimize oppositional behaviors. There is a strong belief that they are changing the meaning of stereotypes attributed to an oppositional culture from something negative to something positive (Phinney, 1988). For example, the use of degrading terminology and the sexual objectification of women are commonplace in this subculture. They own it, exploit it, and glamorize such behaviors. Yet, a bigger concern is the internalization of these attitudes and behaviors. Exposure to external factors that promote this subculture somehow intertwines with identity development and acts as a cancer, eating away at any innate moral compass while polluting the minds and lives of the next generations. This, in turn, could lead to a distorted self-concept. The research in this area is adequate, albeit rather limited on insights regarding the African American adolescent population. Therefore, these findings provide more questions that need to be studied in future research.

### **African American Young Adult Women, Identity Formation, and the Influence of Gender**

Young women struggle with their place in society and their relationship with men (Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Buchanan, 2008). The researchers assert that studies fail to significantly explore women's thoughts and feelings about womanhood and their personal sense of self. Most

prevalent are articles related to body-image that are usually focused on White adolescents. How women conceptualize themselves may be impacted by many factors like the media, personal experience, and interactions with others (Settles et al., 2008). For African American women, race/ethnicity and gender intersect. Their racial lens impacts how they view gender and how they perceive and define womanhood (Settles et al., 2008). Because Black women possess two devalued identities, they have to deal with double marginalization in the form of racism and sexism. Historically, Black women have been stereotyped as animalistic and hypersexed (Settles et al., 2008).

Additionally, although there need to be more studies conducted, there is research that suggests that Black women may experience pressures related to body dissatisfaction (Baugh, Mullis, Mullis, Hicks, & Peterson, 2010). Binge eating has been associated with anxiety in African American women (Mitchell & Mazzeo, 2009) which, in turn, could cause weight gain. A more substantive study was conducted with 117 African American women using Objectification Theory to measure concerns with skin tone and it was found that skin tone is an area of dissatisfaction for some African American women and is significantly associated with body shame (Buchanan et al., 2008).

### **African American Young Adult Women and the Intersection of Race/Ethnicity and Gender**

How individuals reconcile their identities or how they manage their various identities may be a reflection of their life demands (Syed, 2010). There are few studies that explore how young adults attempt to integrate their identities (Syed, 2010). However, according to Erikson (1968), young adulthood is a critical period of development which initiates the phase of identity integration. Identity integration or the pressure an individual feels to amalgamate the many aspects of who they are may affect how that individual makes life decisions (Syed, 2010).

### **African American Young Adult Women and Socialization Conduits**

Marcia (1980) believed that young people were able to sort through the dynamics of crises in their lives which included physical development, cognitive growth and social expectations in order to synthesize their experiences and construct an identity as an ongoing process toward adulthood (Burt & Haplin, 1998). Exposure to positive and negative experiences may influence one's worldview and his or her perception of self. Therefore, instead of there being achievement or failure associations, there could result a diffusion of both leading to an unhealthy self-concept and identity formation.

According to Stroman (1991), television has become an instrument of socialization and provides role models that profoundly affect the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of adolescents. African American children and adolescents may be more susceptible to the effects of television because they tend to use television as a source of guidance. They may use television to learn about dating, occupations, family, and fashion. Needless to say, that they may use media to learn about womanhood as well.

Content analysis studies show that television could conceivably influence the social learning and cognitive growth of African American children (Stroman, 1991). Adolescents are exposed to actors who engage in casual relationships without any concern for protection against disease or pregnancy; they view African American actors stealing cars, killing and having others killed. All of these images may be suggestive when it comes to socialization. Even more, "programming is frequently undesirable and often fails to provide behavioral modes that are worthy of imitation or conducive to wholesome growth and development" (p. 317). Although there may be images that counter the negative, those negative images still outnumber the positive

images which may be very damaging to the adolescent self-concept and sense of self-efficacy.

Stroman (1991) continues:

Among the numerous potentially negative effects of television are the following:

(a) television's potential to incite violent, aggressive, or antisocial behavior; (b) television advertising's potentially negative effects; and (c) the potential of televised portrayals of minorities and women to cultivate stereotypes about these groups. Critics of television's impact on African American children add a fourth category—television's potential to negatively affect minorities' self-concept. (p. 317)

Although little research has actually been conducted in this area related to African American teens, what has been done shows that adolescent males tend to be more susceptible to violent, aggressive images presented on television and this aggression is imitated and played out in real-life experiences (Stroman, 1991). Ultimately, television may be providing role models for young men that may negatively affect their behavior. This may also be the case for young women. Yet, the harmful effects of television go ignored because of its ability to hold a child's attention, thereby providing a part-time babysitter of sorts. If parents are not proactively selective about what types of programming their children watch, then they leave the door open for shows that transmit messages and images that may be inappropriate for young viewers.

When it comes to advertising, research has shown that African American youth respond favorably to advertisement stimuli (Lee & Browne, 1995). Although there are a very limited number of studies done related to African American consumers, the available research has clearly demonstrated that advertising has a considerable influence on African American adolescents.



African American girls, ages 12 years to 19, who read teen magazines represent the “single largest non-White group of readers”; however, 65% of the images depicted in teen magazines are White females and the images of White males outnumber females of color by more than three to one (Duke, 2000). The content of teen magazines is relatively consistent including information related to fashion, beauty, entertainment, and interpersonal relationships and studies have shown that teen magazines are influential in the socialization of adolescents and young adult females.

In an effort to explore the influence teen media has on socialization and self-concept, Duke (2000) conducted a longitudinal qualitative study with ten White adolescent females, initially when they were 12-13 years of age and later with the same group of participants at the age of 16-18. During the follow-up study, Duke (2000) included two groups of African American adolescent females – eight girls ages 12-14 and eight girls ages 17-18. Although researchers anticipated levels of psychological distress in African American female participants, findings suggested that African American female participants appeared less affected by the social imagery than their White counterparts and African American female participants cited cultural factors as most influential to positive self-assessment (Duke, 2000). However, other studies have suggested that although some African American young adult women are resilient when faced with race/ethnic-related and gender-related stressors, the possibility to internalize social images still exists.

Arnett, Larson, and Offer (1995) acknowledged that adolescents interpret the content of various media differently and outlined five reasons why adolescents become engaged with media: (a) for entertainment purposes; (b) for high levels of sensation stimulation; (c) for identity formation or self-conceptualization; (d) for subculture identification; and (e) for solace or

coping. However, the authors did not take race/ethnicity into account when considering developmental stages and media socialization. Adolescence is a crucial stage for development and identity formation; and although studies have been conducted to explore the impact media has on social learning and social identity development, African American female adolescents are often missing as participants. Therefore, it is unclear as to how impactful social imagery is on the self-conceptualization process for African American young adult women (Carlson-Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004).

The music industry's contribution to identity development in African American adolescents might be one of the most impactful factors. The Hip-Hop culture has definitely influenced the social identity and values of today's youth (Roach, 2004). In that regard, there is a concern that rap music and other characteristics of the culture influence adolescents in a negative way. Although one side of hip-hop seeks to elevate minds and promote unity, a darker side, which seems most appealing to teens, serves as a catalyst for degenerate behavior. Clarence Page, a nationally syndicated columnist, was quoted in an article by Roach as stating, "The teens did display attitudes consistent with the macho pose of hip-hop rappers. Their motto: *Use or be used*, among others. And *Get it while you can*" (p. 2). Critics have stated that there is a difference between appreciating certain music and letting it control you (Stewart, 2004). But, when it comes to adolescents, there seems to be a fine line between real life and the imitation of art. The inability to separate a form of expression and true identity, mistaking certain images seen as real and desiring to adopt such images may be dangerous when it comes to development. If one is not mature enough to reject a hazardous lifestyle, the responsibility will fall elsewhere. Media images have the greatest impact on those who view them most; this means Black teens (Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005).

“Objectification theory seeks to examine women’s experiences within an objectifying culture” (Buchanan et al., 2008). The media has long been a conduit for objectified images of women. Most commonplace are those images in advertisements and television. Exposure of female body parts sexualizes women insinuating that sex is a woman’s primary purpose. Because of this, many adolescent girls fall victim to the idea that they must meet such standards to be accepted. So, what of the African American teenage girl? Not only do they deal with issues of sexualization but they also face overtones of women of color being secondary in beauty to those of their Caucasian counterparts.

### **African American Young Adult Women and Psychological Health**

Psychological distress as a result of internalized oppression in young African American women could manifest in the form of depression. One major factor contributing to the depression in women, in general, is the pressure to fulfill unhealthy, oppressive, societal gender standards, in turn, leading to poor self-image and self-doubt (Schwartzman & Glaus, 2000). In fact, women are nearly twice as likely to suffer from major depression as men (Frank, Matza, Revicki, & Chung, 2005). Other related oppressive stressors contributing to depression include demographic characteristics such as poverty and racial status (Frank et al., 2005). So, what happens when mental and emotional health issues of women are compounded by other oppressive factors such as race and class? Considering that in the U.S. 44% of African American women live in poverty, studies related to depression suggest that this group is at a high risk to succumb to mental and emotional health issues (Frank et al., 2005).

The implications of poor mental and emotional health issues of African American women are personally and socially profound. The chances of additional health issues become greater. Ferketich and Schwartzbaum (2000) conducted a study which substantiated an association

between depression and an increased risk of cardiovascular disease in women. Jonas and Mussolino (2000) conducted a study which substantiated an association between depression and an increased risk of stroke among African Americans. Also great is the possibility that mental and emotional health problems in African American women could manifest as poor social functioning, increased anxiety, lack of motivation, or lack of vitality. Yet, even greater is the potential to transfer damaging life patterns, including thoughts and practices, to other generations (Frank et al., 2005).

These implications pose tremendous concern because studies suggest that African Americans are significantly less likely to seek mental and emotional health care (Nicolaidis, 2010). Many African Americans, women in particular, have adopted the notion that they are strong enough to handle any problem. There is even an undergirding belief of some African American women that they are not vulnerable to depression (Ward & Heidrich, 2009) associating it to weakness. Admitting to mental and emotional health problems is perceived as a direct correlation to a lack of strength (Nicolaidis, 2010). This coping mechanism, although effective in many situations, could backfire in the sense that the added pressure of “being strong” could inadvertently exacerbate existing mental and emotional fatigue leading to even more psychological and physical burdens (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). For these reasons, there is clearly a fundamental need to address the mental and emotional concerns of African American women. However, the problem lies in the fact that African American women have been understudied when it comes to mental, physical, and emotional health and much of their lived experiences have been ignored in the literature (McKenzie, 2006; Nicolaidis et al., 2010).

One key to encouraging mental and emotional well being in African American women is to understand how they cope with the pressures of their lived experiences (Ward & Heidrich,

2009). If the few studies that have been conducted show a connection between health related issues and multiple oppressive variables such as race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status, then conducting more studies with this target group may lead to plausible interventions that take into account cultural beliefs and practices, prompting a shift in the types of health care methods provided to African American women (Borrell, Kiefe, Williams, Diez-Roux, & Gordon-Larsen, 2006). Even more, additional research could increase awareness and prompt social change (Jones et al., 2007). Until then, the struggle of African American women shouldering multiple oppressive identities continues and without attentive care, the complete liberty to authentically answer the question “Who am I?” fades.

Tatum (as cited in Adams, Blumenfeld, Castaneda, Hackman, Peters, & Zuniga, 2000) agreed that this paradox of dealing with multiple oppressive systems like racism and sexism can prove to be physically and psychologically taxing and the internalization of negative messages could possibly lead to self-doubt or even self-hate. Whether an African American young adult woman has to deal with societal, cultural or familial pressures, how one defines herself may depend heavily on how others define her (Adam et al., 2000). As a result, identity development could be influenced. Yet, there are few studies that examine this phenomenon. A synthesis of recent findings reveal that ethnic identity development may be influenced by external factors (Cokley, 2005; Cokley & Helm, 2007) and separately documented findings show gender related issues influence identity development as well, (Thomson & Zand, 2007) but few studies explore the complexity and intersectionality of identity development in African American young adult women and the internalized oppression that they experience (Gaylord-Harden, & Cunningham, 2009).

### **Recommendation for School Counselors**

Based on a review of the literature, school counselors who work with African American young adult women need to be able to conceptualize the various issues that this group of students contends with on a daily basis in order to effectively provide interventions and resources that will attend to their affective needs (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). However, issues related to ethnic and gender identity development has rarely been discussed by school counselors and personnel (Akos & Ellis, 2008). Furthermore, some school counselors lack sufficient knowledge of the developmental stages in order to understand the needs of the students (Akos & Ellis, 2008). Studies suggest that by the age of twelve, while processing messages about identity, African American girls begin internalizing social standards and expectations which includes derogatory images and stereotypes of African American women (Akos & Ellis, 2008; Corner, 1989; Phinney & Alipuria, 1987). Various forms of oppression have saturated the school environment such as racial and sexist slurs, sexual harassment, race/ethnic-related and gender-related bullying, cyber bullying, counselor referrals based on racial or gender stigmas and stereotypes, and academic tracking (Adams et al., 2007; Lambert et al., 2009; Linnehan, Weer, & Stonely, 2011). School counselors can help facilitate healthy identity development in African American young adult female students by analyzing the climate and culture of the school environment and addressing any prejudicial or discriminatory dynamics (Akos & Ellis, 2008). This calls for school counselors to be vigilant in exercising their role as social justice advocates and organizational change agents.

Subsequently, a call to action is predicated on the notion that school counselors will educate themselves about the population in which they serve. School counselors should understand multicultural competencies in order to help in conceptualizing student needs and

concerns (Akos & Ellis, 2008). Understanding the complexities of multiple identities as it relates to African American young adult women is a necessity of a multiculturally competent and knowledgeable counselor who can effect change (Day-Vines, Patton, & Baytops, 2003). Also, counselors should seek to understand racial/ethnic and gender theories and use theory to guide practices (Day-Vines et al., 2003).

However, school counselors must do more than teach students how to cope with oppressive situations. In order to develop effective strategies for coping and combating oppression of African American young adult women, the counselor must be cognizant of different ways internalized oppression manifests (Day-Vines et al., 2003). Empowerment is critical in combating maladjusted identities that developed from the influence of internalized oppression. The school counselor must be proactive in establishing effective interventions, conducting presentations, and educating school personnel (Akos & Ellis, 2008) while modeling appropriate behavior in addressing social tensions (Day-Vines et al., 2003). Maintaining a list of community resources and consultants; developing partnerships with civic and social organizations such as African American sororities and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); and establishing empowerment groups that address the specific concerns of African American young adult women would prove useful (Day-Vines et al., 2003; Holcomb-McCoy, 2005).

Still, some counselors remain hesitant to address issues related to race/ethnicity and gender especially those issues that stem from social injustices. Some reasons school counselor evade involvement in social justice issues include fear, discomfort, lack of awareness, and what Bemak and Chung (2008) call “the nice counselor syndrome.” Basically, the “nice counselor” wants to be perceived as a nice person and avoids situations that might be confrontational

(Bemak & Chung, 2008). At this point, self-analysis is important for the school counselor in order to address biased beliefs and attitudes related to race/ethnicity and gender as well as their own internalized issues (Akos & Ellis, 2008). Paulo Freire (1970) stated that the social justice process begins with self, through reflection, which includes a thorough examination of moral and ethical contradictions as well as attitudes of neutrality. Utilizing a reflective journal to record and analyze reasons for hesitation may prove to be beneficial. Bemak and Chung (2008) encouraged counselors to ask themselves the following reflective questions: (a) Why did I become a school counselor?; (b) What do I hope to achieve in doing this sort of work?; (c) What am I doing to address multicultural/social justice issues at my school in general?; (d) What sort of profession and personal risks am I willing to take to address these issues in the future? “Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly” (Freire, 1970, p. 60).

If additional support is needed to help school counselors develop advocacy skills, they should refer to such projects as the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI) which supports school counselors in their efforts to incorporate multicultural advocacy competencies into school programs (Bemak & Chung, 2008). Implementing effective counseling programs mean embracing the role of change agent and moving beyond the traditional methods and practices (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). Collaborating with other school counselors, engaging in professional learning, or enrolling in graduate level school counselor preparation programs are all options for school counselors to gain knowledge about social justice advocacy that will strengthen their abilities to fully address the needs of African American young adult women (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010; Paisley, Bailey, Hayes, McMahon, & Grimmer, 2011).



### **School Counselor Recommendations at a Glance**

In order to effectively work with African American young adult female students to facilitate healthy identity development and self conceptualization, school counselors should:

- embrace the role of change agent and move beyond the traditional methods and practices;
- become multi-culturally competent;
- conceptualize the various issues that African American young adult female students contend with on a daily basis;
- analyze the climate and culture of the school and address discriminatory dynamics;
- help African American young adult female students develop effective strategies for coping and combating oppressive situations;
- be cognizant of different ways internalized oppression manifests in African American young adult female students;
- be proactive in establishing effective interventions, conducting presentations, and educating school personnel;
- maintain a list of community resources and consultants;
- engage in self evaluation and self reflection on a regular basis to manage personal biases;
- engage in continued, professional learning and seek support when needed.

### **Conclusions**

Matsuda (1996) developed a simple approach to help conceptualize the interconnectedness of multiple oppressive systems. The method called, “ask the other question” implies that forms of oppression exist in concert with other forms of oppression (Matsuda, 1996).

For example, if an individual has been a target of racism, the “other” question should be asked: Where is the sexism in this racism? or Where is the classism in this racism? This method forces an examination of other factors that could be the source of an individual’s internalized oppression (Pyke, 2010). African American young adult women could internalize oppression that derived from multiple areas of subordination. However, their experience with oppression cannot be compartmentalized.

So, why is it important to understand internalized oppression in African American young adult women? To answer this question, one must acknowledge the effects that systemic oppression has on individual lives. Although there is sufficient literature that addresses racial and gender issues separately, few explore the paradox of the African American young adult woman’s lived experience. However, three conclusions may be drawn from what is available: (a) social stigmas and stereotypes associated with African American young adult women seem to be a societal mainstay; (b) demographic characteristics of African American young adult women tend not to meet social standards and norms; and (c) African American young adult women seem to lack the social capital needed for social advancement.

First, African American women cannot seem to escape stigmas and derogatory stereotypes. Research studies show that the internalization of negative images along with the images that represent the social ideal may influence self-perception (Thomas et al., 2011). In contrast, many African Americans, in general, try to distance themselves from negative stereotypes because they are inclined to believe that derogatory stereotypes may be true for African American of a lower socioeconomic status (Pyke, 2010). With this form of internalized oppression, African Americans consider themselves the exception and strive to prove it to the dominant culture (Pyke, 2010). African Americans also seem to influence internalized

oppression by instilling ideas of racial inferiority such as making derogatory statements about skin color or hair texture. However, some might perceive an individual's conformity to social norms as a form of survival considering conformity could lead to social advancement (Pyke, 2010).

Internalized oppression may occur in African American young adult women when a connection is made between conforming to social expectation and upward social mobility (Pyke, 2010). However, White dominant culture is more accepting of physical attributes that are similar to their own. Relational demography relates to the level of similarities or differences between individuals (Linnehan et al., 2011). According to Byrne (1971) who created the Similarity-Attraction Paradigm, individuals who share relational demographics are more likely to have a positive connection or relationship as opposed to individuals who are dissimilar. Furthermore, demographic similarities are perceived as more attractive and more trustworthy than dissimilarities (Byrne, 1971; Cunningham & Sagas, 2006).

Of particular concern is the subtlety of aversive racism [or sexism] which is used to describe individuals who present a non-prejudicial and non-discriminatory image but unconsciously preserves negative attitudes and beliefs about marginalized groups (Linnehan et al., 2011). Although an individual may genuinely believe in egalitarianism, aversive racism [sexism] could manifest as "a discriminatory decision or behavior" that is attributed to aspects other than race/ethnicity [or gender] (Linnehan et al., 2011, p. 542). For example, when conducting a study with White employers on the process of employee evaluations, Gilbert and Lownes-Jackson (2005) found that race/ethnicity was influential in the employers' assessment. The results showed that African American female employees were consistently rated lower than

White female employees in the area of work ethic and attitude towards work. However, the areas of salary and hiring produced no significant differences (Gilbert & Lownes-Jackson, 2005).

Aversive racism may also be connected to the concept of social capital. Social capital refers to personal, social, professional, and institutional connections that are reciprocal in nature (Linnehan et al., 2011). Also known as networking, establishing and maintaining such connections is encouraged even necessary in this society to gain access to opportunities like career choices and college selection (Royster, 2003). Greater social capital means access to greater opportunities and “opportunities exist for those who know the right people” (Royster, 2003). Moreover, studies have shown that after graduating from high school, African American students have far less social capital than White students (Royster, 2003). Thus, marginalized groups may lack skills to build social capital or their socioeconomic status serves as a hindrance as well, thereby causing them to perpetuate their own social disadvantage.

In summary, this article detailed influential factors of internalized oppression and self-conceptualization. By providing data on African American young adult women, an under-researched population as it relates to the studied phenomenon, the current study aimed to raise awareness and to provoke action toward the betterment of social circumstances surrounding African American young adult women. Of critical importance is the inclusion of personal experiences of participants that serve as counter narratives to societal expectations and perceptions. Perhaps, the current study may help dispel preconceived ideas about African American young adult women and their lived experiences; and perhaps lead to a greater understanding of the human condition.

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**CHAPTER 3**

**A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF SOCIAL IMAGERY AND INTERNALIZED  
OPPRESSION IN AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUNG ADULT WOMEN**

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### **Abstract**

Historically, the social construction of African American womanhood has been plagued with negative imagery (Hill, 2009). Though socially constructed imagery of African American women have been challenged in recent years, negative perceptions of African American women are still pervasive in U.S. society (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). The issue of internalized oppression in young African American women should be a primary social concern (Gaylord-Harden & Cunningham, 2009) and understanding this phenomenon could add to social enlightenment thereby moving society forward in advocating for improved measures to address systemic oppression. This current study was a response to the lack of scholarship that reveals, in their words, how African American young adult women digest the negative images, messages, and associations they are fed in this society. The researcher examined the associations attributed to internalization of oppression and how it might navigate self-conceptualization in African American young adult women. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to understand how African American young adult women experience internalized oppression and its impact on identity development and self-conceptualization. Using a phenomenological research design, this study drew from Critical Race Theory. Interview questions explored how the following factors contextualize African American young adult women's identity development and self- conceptualization: familial pressures/expectations, social pressures/expectations, and cultural pressures/expectations.



## Introduction

Race/ethnicity and gender are the most apparent or visible indicators of social group membership (Braboy-Jackson, P., & Mustillo, S., 2001). Unfavorable comparisons of African American women to dominant culture may hinder positive self-conceptualization (Rosenberg, 1979; Braboy-Jackson & Mustillo, 2001). The reproduction of negative ideologies about African American women through social interaction and discourses places them at a social disadvantage (Richardson, 2009). Personal self-efficacy may be impacted by how African American women view themselves in terms of employment and income (Braboy-Jackson & Mustillo, 2001). Individuals who perceive themselves as less attractive may have internalized ideas of inferiority and may view discriminatory treatment as fair (Hersch, 2011). Social roles such as parent, manager, or spouse tend to be primary factors that influence self-conceptualization; however, findings are inconsistent regarding the impact such roles have on psychological health (Braboy-Jackson & Mustillo, 2001). One reason is because much of the research has been conducted with White women only. More studies are needed to examine outcomes related to African American women.

Understanding African American young adult women means understanding their challenges and experiences and how race/ethnicity and gender influence their development (Lipford-Sanders & Bradley, 2005). Hill-Collins (1990) shared a personal experience which illustrates the challenges of African American women:

When I was five years old, I was chosen to play Spring in my preschool pageant. . . I delivered my few lines masterfully, with great enthusiasm and energy. . . All the grown-ups told me how vital my part was. . . Their words and hugs made me feel that I was important and that what I thought, and felt, and accomplished mattered. As my world

expanded, I learned that not everyone agreed with them. Beginning in adolescence. . . I saw nothing wrong with being who I was, but apparently many others did. My world grew larger, but I felt I was growing smaller. I tried to disappear into myself in order to deflect the painful, daily assaults designed to teach me that being an African American working-class woman made me lesser. . . And as I felt smaller, I became quieter and eventually was virtually silenced. (pp. xi-xii)

The effects of racism and sexism have permeated the process of self-conceptualization in African American young adult women (Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006). Understanding this phenomenon could add to social enlightenment thereby moving society forward in advocating for improved measures to address systemic oppression. The issue of internalized oppression in young African American women should be a primary social concern (Gaylord-Harden, & Cunningham, 2009). Freire (1970, p. 47) defines internalized oppression as the adoption of the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of the dominant culture because of one's fear of freedom. Self-depreciation is derived from internalized oppression (Freire, 1970, p. 63). The oppressed must be involved in the process of her own liberation (Freire, 1970, 49). Internally oppressed people have no voice in society because their thoughts and beliefs are replicas of their oppressors (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003, p. 19).

Historically, the social construction of African American womanhood has been plagued with negative imagery (Hill, 2009). Freire (1970, p. 47) would agree that cultural stereotypes are forms of "prescriptions" which involves the dominant culture prescribing certain roles and images to oppressed groups in an effort to influence thoughts and behaviors. Though socially constructed imagery of African American women have been challenged in recent years, negative

perceptions of African American women are still pervasive in U.S. society (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007).

### **African American Young Adult Women and Social Identity Development**

Believing that the dominant culture represents the true model of womanhood, some individuals who are socially oppressed strive to emulate the oppressor or dominant culture with the expectation of receiving social approval and acceptance (Freire, 1970, p. 45). Social oppression could be sustained by the belief in stereotypes, by the devaluing of cultural differences while promoting the values of another culture, or by conscious discriminating against another (Torres et al., 2003, p. 22). African American women tend to report job related discrimination. In a study conducted by Marshall and Barnett (1991) with a group of African American women who worked as LPNs and social workers, the researchers found that the social workers reported more instances of gender discrimination whereas the LPNs reported more instances with racial/ethnic discrimination. Because of the inconsistencies, no significant inferences could be drawn from this study.

Braboy-Jackson and Mustillo (2001) conducted a study with a representative sample of African American women ages 18 years and older to examine how various social identities impact their psychological well-being. Using a mixed methods approach of face-to-face interviews and data collected from the 1979-80 wave of the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA), researchers measured participants responses to questions related to body image, role expectations, discrimination, and class status and the connection to mental health issues (Braboy-Jackson & Mustillo, 2001). The findings suggested that African American women associated high levels of psychological distress and unhappiness to personal experiences of race/ethnic-related and/or gender-related discrimination. Some participants believed that they had been

overlooked for 'good' jobs because of their race/ethnicity and gender. Although the findings suggested that African American women with higher incomes were less psychologically distressed than African American women with lower incomes, the research could not determine a relationship between occupation and psychological well-being. Yet, poor self-concept was attributed to lack of education, low socioeconomic status, and job dissatisfaction (Braboy-Jackson & Mustillo, 2001).

**Racial/ethnic socialization.** Studies show that African American female adolescents reported higher levels of racial/ethnic socialization compared to African American male adolescents (Brown, Linver, & Evans, 2010). Using the Adolescent Racial and Ethnic Socialization Scale (ARESS), Brown, Linver, and Evans (2010) sought to investigate the influence of gender on racial/ethnic socialization with 218 African American high school students. The quantitative study supported that parental influence impacts socialization as well and further suggested that parents appeared more engaged in the socialization of female adolescents (Brown, Linver, & Evans, 2010). Reasons cited for higher levels of racial/ethnic socialization in African American female adolescents included stage of developmental maturity (Lyntton & Romney, 1991); level of receptiveness and parental perception of potential success (Brown, Linver, & Evans, 2010; and the significance of behavior differences (Bronstein, 2006; Hastings, McShane, Parker, & Ladha, 2007).

Consistent in the socialization literature was the primary role of mothers in the process. Findings suggests that African American mothers tend to be more involved in racial/ethnic socialization overall, but particularly with older female adolescents (McHale et al., 2006). However, research on the role of African American fathers and racial/ethnic socialization tends to be scarce whereas literature pertaining to the absence of African American fathers from African

American families has been explored with prevalence (McHale et al., 2006; Phares, Fields, Kamboukos, & Lopez, 2005) particularly as it relates to African American adolescents and gender role development (Mandara, Murray, & Joyner, 2005).

**Gender socialization.** Parental involvement is integral in gender socialization with African American young adult women as well (Brown, Linver, & Evans, 2010). However, Hill (2001) recognized that few studies examine socialization in relation to the intersectionality of race/ethnicity, gender, and class. Mandara, Murray, and Joyner (2005) suggest that African American mothers tend to pressure their daughters to be independent and success-oriented whereas African American fathers tend to be more permissive with their daughters while emphasizing feminization. However, Townsend (2008) purports that “many African American mothers devote a considerable amount of energy attempting to buffer, defend, and fortify their girls against racial oppression and sexual discrimination, even while struggling against these forces themselves” (p. 438).

Scholars also recognize the importance of the mother’s role in the sexual socialization of African American young adult women indicating that African American mothers could explicitly and nonverbally impact the sexual behavior of their daughters (Warren-Jeanpeire, 2006). For instance, some African American mothers may communicate to their daughters to “honor their bodies” and refrain from sexual promiscuity, however, adolescent girls tend to be more observant of the mother’s behaviors (Townsend, 2008). The old adage of “do as I say not as I do” is often dismissed if contradictory messages are communicated by the parent (Hurd, Zimmerman, & Xue, 2009; Townsend, 2008). Therefore, African American female adolescents’ perceptions of their mothers are strongly linked to their own identity formation and self-conceptualization (Warren-Jeanpeire, 2006; Mandara et al., 2005).

In a study with 106 15-year-old African American male and female high school students, Mandara et al. (2005) used the Family Environment Scale (FES) to assess family functioning, the Multi-Dimensional Self-Esteem Inventory (MDSEI) to assess self-esteem, and the Adjective Q-Sort cards to assist in the measurement of gender role development. Findings suggested that African American female adolescents had significantly lower levels of feminine identification when fathers were absent from the home as opposed to African American female adolescents whose fathers were present in the home, however, both group of girls apparently indicated a desire to be more feminine than what they perceived themselves to be (Mandara et al., 2005). Furthermore, findings suggested that African American female adolescents with absent fathers desired to be significantly less masculine than what they perceived themselves to be. This could imply some internalization of stereotypical perceptions (Townsend, 2008; Sanders & Sullivan, 2010).

According to Fordham (1993), stereotypes of African American women, particularly single African American women, are presented as aggressive, formidable, and overly independent which are traits contrary to society's expectations of femininity (Sanders & Sullivan, 2010). Therefore, an African American female adolescent in the crucial stage of identity development and self-conceptualization could conceivably desire to disassociate from characteristics that do not align with social norms (Hoffman, 2006). For African American female adolescents who live in single-mother households, gender roles and the characterization of womanhood may be more flexible than traditional depictions especially considering that single mothers must function in roles that may be socially associated with masculinity (Collins, 1997; Harris, 1996). Nonetheless, the attempt to navigate identity formation and solidify a

worldview could be influenced by external factors and may lead African American young adult women to experience psychological distress.

Standardized methodology to assess femininity and masculinity could be skewed based on the instrument's development. Consideration should be given to the variance of feminine and masculine perceptions and stereotypical beliefs about femininity and masculinity in relation to instrument development (Barrett & White, 2002). Also, socioeconomic background of the participants could influence answers to certain questions thereby impacting interpretation of the results.

### **African American Young Adult Women and the Concept of Authentic Self**

Marginalized groups have a dual existence in society that hinders them from having an authentic identity (Freire, 1970, p. 48). Research in the area of socially feminine ideals and African American young adult women is quite limited (Duke, 2000). However, studies conducted with African American young adult women suggest that a predictor of positive self-conceptualization for African American young adult women is attitude and perception of individual skin color (Keith & Herring, 1991). The implication is that African American women with lighter skin tones experience less psychological distress than African American women with a darker skin tones (Keith & Herring, 1991). The differential treatment of African American women on the basis of skin color could lead to internalized oppression as well. Bond and Cash (1992) conducted a study with African American women enrolled in college and found that the participants believed African American men view women with lighter skin as more appealing than women with darker skin. Another study related to color dissatisfaction found that some African American women indicated a desire for lighter skin (Robinson & Ward, 1995).

However, none of these studies defined the parameters for differences in shade nor did they provide specifications about range of color.

In a study of African American and White, men and women, ages 18 years and older using the Detroit Area Study (DAS 1995), Hersch (2011) found little indication that perceived unfair treatment was associated with physical appearance. However, one exception suggested that African Americans with lighter skin color were less likely to report instances of discrimination as opposed to African Americans with darker skin color which is consistent with other studies regarding African Americans and perception of preferential treatment (Hersch, 2011). Still, physical appearance may be associated with levels of success.

According to sociologists, the appearance of hair is an important factor in the self-conceptualization process for African American women and could represent a sense of empowerment, a sense of social status, or a sense of personality (hooks, 1995; & Patton, 2006; White, 2005). Historically, African American women have contended with negative associations related to hair style and texture and as a result some women have internalized negative images leading to the development of negative self-concepts (Patton, 2006). In a qualitative study conducted by Bellinger (2007) with fifteen African American young women ages 16 years to 18, the concept of 'good hair' was examined. Findings suggested that participants chose to chemically alter their hair to create what they perceived to be more manageability or to create an impression that was more aligned with dominant culture. Participants believed that better job opportunities were associated with more socially acceptable appearance (Bellinger, 2007). Some participants noted that their hair was initially chemically treated by their mothers at an early age which was a generational pattern; however, some participants expressed concern that their altered hair would be perceived as a lack of racial pride (Bellinger, 2007). African American



young adult women who suffer from internalized oppression could live a divided existence trying to maintain cultural qualities and values while conforming to mainstream beliefs and expectations (Freire, 1970, p. 55).

### **A Phenomenological Approach to Understanding Internalized Oppression in African American Young Adult Women**

Qualitative research can facilitate the understanding of phenomena by funneling knowledge, experiences, worldviews, circumstances, perceptions, and life stories through a lens constructed for inquiry into the human condition. A qualitative research paradigm allows for the examination of assumptions or suppositions and aims to provide researchers with a method to study the experiences of individuals or a group in an in-depth manner and to interpret the meaning those individuals or group give to social or human problems (Creswell 2009). In short, the process involves extracting the essence of an experience and the meaning that is shaped for that experience. Through the use of such strategies as purposive sampling, the researcher selected participants for the study who provided rich information, enhancing the understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Devers & Frankel 2000). Qualitative inquiry, data collection, and data analysis should all be conducted inductively (from particular instances to general realizations) with the intent of unveiling common patterns or themes (Creswell, 2009). In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research utilizes language instead of numbers to present findings which are commonly written in narrative format (Heppner & Heppner 2004).

In the area of counseling and psychology, qualitative research has the ability to expand the scope of knowledge in a particular area thereby extending the research in a meaningful direction. However, providing a platform for participant voices will not only extend the existing literature, but a study of this sort—one focused on the dichotomy of internalized oppression for

African American young adult women (race/ethnicity and gender)—could prompt social awareness, social action, and even social change with regard to an understudied group. A qualitative research design is most appropriate for this study because it allows for the analysis of personal experiences. The voices of the participants are the data. Their stories, which may be contrary to the social truths and discourses of the dominant culture, are validated and given credence through the use of qualitative methods. The realities of marginalized groups which may have been ignored or devalued by society are able to be highlighted through qualitative methods. An avenue for greater understanding of the human condition is constructed through the parameters of qualitative design. The intimate details of an individual's life are gathered and presented with the goal of enlightening those who review the content of the study providing necessary information to add to the meaning of authentic truth. For these reason, a cogent rationale for the use of a qualitative research design to explore this topic can be established.

Of the various qualitative traditions available to aid in conducting a study of the experiences of African American young adult women who have internalized oppression, the researcher proposed that a phenomenological approach was most appropriate to answer the research question. Phenomenological inquiry strategy allowed the researcher to grasp the essential elements of the participants' experience (Creswell, 2009). Specific to this study, a phenomenological approach was used to document young African American women's experiences and personal narratives related to how their self-concepts are shaped by how they manage the pressures that lead to internalized oppression. The phenomenological researcher sought to understand the social and psychological effects of the phenomenon that is internalized oppression as it relates to the personal perspectives of young African American women. Understanding that worldviews and assumptions guide action, the researcher employed Social

Constructivism (meaning is formed through interaction with others) to support the research paradigm. The researcher's use of focus group interactive interviews supported the idea of Social Constructivism.

In addition, employing phenomenology as a method of study enabled an investigation into how this targeted group functions and develops as a result of the internalized oppression. Not only did a phenomenological study focus on personal and individual experiences but it allowed the use of open-ended questions so that participants could subjectively offer meaning based on their interactions with the phenomenon. The goal here was to rely mostly on the participants' views while considering personal, cultural, and historical experiences in the interpretation of data (Creswell, 2009). The researcher could then take the common threads woven throughout the meaning of each participant's response and formulate a universal essence of meaning thereby, developing a composite description of what internalized oppression is for this targeted group of African American women.

Historically, the works of phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophers William Dilthey, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, and F. D. E. Schleiermacher provide a fundamental foundation for phenomenological studies (Heppner & Heppner, 2004). The philosophical tenets of this research approach provide phenomenologists with the means to cultivate a study rooted in ontology—the nature of how existence or reality is conceptualized. According to Creswell (2009), the qualitative researcher embraces multiple realities with the intent to report those multiple realities. In this current study, ontology is relevant because the researcher will describe how young African American women see themselves in terms of race/ethnicity and gender. Multiple identities here could be viewed as multiple realities within an individual. Further, the complexities that go along with multiple identities and identity

integration may lead to issues with internalized oppression—the central phenomenon in this study. Thus, a collection of multiple realities and multiple perspectives, after being reduced to the essence of individual experiences, aided in the development of a composite description of what internalized oppression is for this group of African American women being studied.

### **Conceptual Framework for the Current Study**

A phenomenological approach was used to document African American young adult women's experiences and personal narratives related to how their self-concepts are shaped by how they manage the pressures that lead to internalized oppression. Using Critical Race Theory as the analytical framework, the researcher sought to understand the social and psychological effects of the phenomenon that is internalized oppression as it relates to the personal perspectives of African American young adult women. Critical Race Theory addresses the intersectionality of various forms of subordination like race/ethnicity and gender and challenges dominant ideologies (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). The researcher examined the associations attributed to internalization of oppression and how it might navigate self-conceptualization in African American young adult women.

This current study was a response to the lack of scholarship that reveals, in their words, how African American young adult women digest the negative images, messages, and associations they are fed in this society. Critical Race Theory was most appropriate to support this phenomenological study for several reasons. Critical Race Theory is a framework to aid in understanding oppression in order to bring about societal and individual change (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). A form of oppositional scholarship, Critical Race Theory aim is to thwart society's capacity for racism (Carter, 2008). Critical Race Theory helps one examine the role of racism with the goal to eliminate it along with other forms of oppression including sexism

(Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Critical Race Theory addresses the intersectionality of various forms of subordination like race/ethnicity and gender and challenges dominant ideologies (Jain, 2010; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). When using Critical Race Theory methods, the researcher must be able to compile, analyze, and make meaning of data found in concepts, ideas, and experiences (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Additionally, Critical Race Theory seeks to help validate the lives that people of color experience with the use of counter-narratives (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Stanley, 2007).

According to Solorzano and Yosso (2001), Critical Race Theory has five overarching themes. Four are relevant to this study: (a) the realization that race and racism along with other forms of subordination such as gender and class are a central factor of oppression and institutional power; (b) challenging dominant ideology is necessary to bring about change; (c) social justice as an obligation to eradicate racism, sexism, and poverty and to empower marginalized groups; and (d) the knowledge one gains through experience should be valued. Critical Race Theory emphasizes the need to provide marginalized groups the opportunity to name and define their own reality which is directly related to establishing identity and self-conceptualization (Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, & 2010). This also provides insight to better understanding how racism functions in society (Degado & Stefancic, 2001). Counter-storytelling gives voice to African Americans and provides a means to give an account of their lived experiences (Carter, 2008). This practice could also be empowering and psychologically liberating (Evans-Winters, & Esposito, 2010). Such narratives challenge the insistent normative and authoritative position of dominant or master narratives. Master narratives are meant to be viewed as historical truth (Love, 2004). Majoritarian stories are based on the traditional values and beliefs of the dominant culture and are used to construct reality and justify its power over

other groups (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Love, 2004) by obscuring the existence of privilege and the perpetration of oppression. The combination of Critical Race Theory and a phenomenological approach provided the researcher with the necessary tools to not only examine the experiences of young African American women with internalized oppression but also create a way for the perspectives of these women to be unveiled and their stories to be told.

### **Method**

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to understand how African American young adult women experience internalized oppression and its impact on identity development and self-conceptualization. Using a phenomenological research design, this study drew from Critical Race Theory. Interview questions explored how the following factors contextualize African American young adult women's identity development and self-conceptualization: familial pressures/expectations, social pressures/expectations, and cultural pressures/expectations.

### **Procedures**

The researcher followed transcendental procedures for this phenomenological study. Transcendental procedures allowed the researcher to focus closely on the participants' description of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2009). The goal was for the researcher to "transcend" any prior knowledge of the phenomenon and to conduct the study with a level of perceived unawareness so as not to taint the data collection process with any preconceived ideas. Understanding that total detachment could not be achieved, reflexivity assisted the researcher in the process. In the initial phase of the research project, the researcher began journaling about personal feelings, presuppositions, assumptions, and bias about the topic of internalized oppression and self-conceptualization as it relates to young African American women. The

researcher also described her own experiences with the phenomenon of internalized oppression in this reflective journal. Therefore, by using this technique, the researcher was able to retain a measure of objectivity.

Creswell's (2009) delineation of transcendental phenomenological research procedures, as adopted from Moustakas (1994), helps to illustrate the structure the study followed. There were seven steps to this process. First, the researcher identified a phenomenon to study which was to understand the impact internalized oppression has on self-conceptualization for young African American women. This was accomplished by delving into the current literature, analyzing the gaps in the literature, or from mere observation. Realizing that the literature lacked substantive research on the personal perspectives of African American women and their lived experiences with this phenomenon, the research topic was selected. Once the topic was determined, bracketing, another form of reflexivity, took place. With bracketing, the researcher continued the method of recording personal experiences or knowledge of the phenomenon in a reflective journal. The collecting of data then ensued with the goal of gathering information from persons who met the criteria for the study. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling. Ten participants were selected for the study; however, one participant did not attend because of a prior commitment unbeknownst to the researcher at the time.

The first meeting with the participants consisted of reviewing and signing Informed Consent forms and demographic forms were completed. In a second meeting, the group participated in a psychoeducational session in which the researcher used photo elicitation and literary writings to help participants understand the nature of internalized oppression, and handouts with relatable examples were provided. At the end of this session, participants were asked to engage in stream of consciousness writing for ten uninterrupted minutes. For the third

and fourth sessions, the nine participants were divided into two focus groups, a primary method for collecting data. The goal of this type of data collection was to solicit thick, rich descriptions to answer proposed research questions. Data analysis consisted of transcribing audio tapes and, with the use of a research team, carefully sifting through gathered information in the transcripts to identify significant statements or quotes. Member checking was also utilized allowing the participants to review the transcripts for accuracy. From the significant identified statements, themes were extracted. Finally, in compiling the research findings, the themes were supported by essential textual (*what* participants experienced) and structural (*how* the participants experienced the phenomenon) descriptions identified from the transcripts.

Certain philosophical elements, mostly credited to German mathematician Edmund Husserl (Creswell, 2007), guided this phenomenological study as well. One philosophical element used was epoche—the act of suspending judgments about what is real (Creswell 2009). The goal of epoche is to allow for objectivity under subjective circumstances. In order to accurately describe the experiences of the targeted group, the researcher strived for an unbiased state. Therefore, the use of a technique called bracketing (the setting aside of experiences) was important. Another philosophical element used was intentionality of consciousness which serves to explicate the relationship between reality and consciousness (Creswell 2009). In other words, the reality of a subject or object is how it appears in one's consciousness—the state of awareness encompassing total thoughts and feelings. Stream of consciousness writing was used for that purpose.

### **Participants**

Participants for this study included nine African American young adult women between the ages of 18 and 20 years old from low socioeconomic to middle class backgrounds.



Participants were obtained using purposeful criterion sampling. In phenomenological research, purposive criterion sampling is a strategy of selecting individuals to study based on their experience with the phenomenon (Creswell 2009). Potential participants were solicited with the use of flyers and by word-of-mouth, also known as snowballing. Potential participants were asked to volunteer and participate in small focus group interviews designed to gain insight about internalized oppression in African American young adult women. Internalized oppression was defined on the flyer as “negative attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about oneself as a minority group member and about one’s minority group” (Szymanski & Gupta, 2009). Other information relevant to the nature of the study was detailed on the flyers such as topics of focus group discussions (e.g., self concept; the need to be perfect; trying to live up to the expectations of others; and issues with body image, race/ethnicity, and sexuality). The flyers were distributed to African American female students on the campus of a local university. The flyers were also forwarded to professional school counselors, educators and program coordinators who worked directly with African American young adult women and who might be knowledgeable of possible participants. Potential participants contacted the researcher directly by phone to volunteer for the study. Screenings were conducted by phone to determine if potential participants met the criteria for study participation.

From a pool of volunteers, ten participants were chosen because they met the criteria for the study based on the initial phone screening; however, one participant declined her participation because of a prior commitment. The screening of participants consisted of the researcher providing an overview of the study and asking a series of questions to determine inclusion or exclusion. Selection criteria included: (a) all participants should be African American; (b) all participants should be young adult women—young adult was defined as 18

years of age to 20 years of age; and (c) all participants should be able to provide at least one experience of internalized oppression as an African American young adult woman. Each participant who met the criteria for inclusion self-identified as African American, was between the ages of 18 and 20, and could verbalize some experience with internalized oppression. Specific questions asked during the screening were included to assist the researcher in determining the extent to which participants experienced internalized oppression. The nine participants were from various economic backgrounds and had a range of varying goals and aspirations for the future. Eight of the nine participants had exited high school either by way of a diploma or certificate of performance. Students who earn certificates of performance in lieu of a high school diploma have completed course graduation requirements but have not mastered all portions of the high school graduation test. One of the nine participants was still enrolled in high school, but was 18-years-old. Each of the nine participants had plans to attend college or was employed. Each participant expressed a desire to engage in some form of post-secondary education.

During a session prior to the focus group interviews, participants were asked to complete a demographic form. Included on the demographic form was a checklist of background items. Participants were given the opportunity to check all items that applied to their background or individual experience. Also included on the demographic form was a list of questions used as thought provoking prompts for the discussion. Following is a detailed summary of participant backgrounds based on researcher inquiry and demographic information forms. Pseudonyms were used in place of the participants' given names.

**Camille** was 18-years-old, recently graduated from high school, and planned to attend college in the fall. She worked a part-time job and described herself as single but in a

relationship. She got along with her parents and attended church regularly. Camille believed that she could be more in life if she was not an African American woman. She attended a predominantly White high school and expressed examples of racism and sexism she has experienced. She said she felt pressure to compete with her White classmates feeling like she had to work twice as hard to maintain a positive academic identity. Also, she felt pressured to look attractive based on societal standards of beauty.

**Patricia** was 18-years-old, had recently graduated from high school, and planned to attend college in the fall. Patricia was disappointed in her college choice. She was denied admission into her first choice of colleges because of low test scores although she excelled academically in high school. She described herself currently as single and not in a relationship. She resided in the state where she was born. Patricia had negative feelings about African American women as a group and she felt that being an African American woman in this society is an obstacle for her. She believed that some young women make foolish choices based on social or cultural pressures because they lack strength and self-esteem. She admitted that at a younger age she struggled with body image and issues with skin color.

**Tammy** was 19-years-old, had exited high school two years prior to the study with a certificate of performance and at the time of the study, was still striving to pass a portion of the graduation test. She desired to enroll in college but could not with a certificate of performance. She was employed, resided in the state where she was born, and described herself as single and not in a relationship. Tammy got along with her parents and attended church regularly. Tammy believed that being an African American woman was an obstacle for her. She described herself as a “big girl” and said it is a struggle for her to lose weight. She felt images of women in the media didn’t reflect her. She felt embarrassed when trying on clothes in the department store

and they do not fit. She has come to accept herself and her body image but still believed she is looked upon negatively.

**Sandra** was 18-years-old but had another year of high school to complete. She was retained in the ninth grade. She described herself as single and not in a relationship and she resided in the state where she was born. Sandra was very athletic and participated in several sports. Her goal was to get a scholarship to college by running track. Sandra believed that being an African American woman was an obstacle for her and that she could be more in life if she was not an African American woman. Sandra had expressed examples of sexism because others characterize her as boyish or manly because she played sports and her muscular build. Sandra felt she had to strive for perfection when it came to sports because sometimes she felt like she was representing her race. She believed that it was expected that she should be better than athletes of other races.

**Tammy** and **Sandra** were sisters. The dynamics of their relationship ranged from loving and supportive to resentful and envious. Because of their different body shapes, Tammy was sometimes envious of Sandra and Sandra sometimes felt guilty for being slimmer. However, both young women interacted positively with each other. The love and support that they had for each other could be observed.

**Kathy** was 19-years-old and recently exited high school with a certificate of performance. She had applied for a variance and received her diploma during summer. She planned to attend a technical college in the fall. She was unemployed, got along with her parents, and described herself as single and not in a relationship. Kathy described having negative feelings about herself as a young African American woman and believed she could be more in life if she was not an African American woman. Kathy socialized with White friends

when she was younger and was teased by her family as “acting White.” When Kathy was older, she attended a predominantly Black high school and felt the need to please others in order to have friends. Kathy described herself as “big” and admitted it hurts her feelings when people made fun of her about her weight. However, she said she accepted herself how she was and tried not to let other people’s opinion of her bother her.

**Nicole** was 18-years-old, had recently graduated from a predominantly White high school, and planned to attend a historically Black College in the fall. She described herself as heterosexual, single and not in a relationship. She resided in the state where she was born and got along with her parents. She was involved in African American organizations and attended church regularly. Nicole sometimes had negative feelings about African American women as a group and she believed that being an African American woman was an obstacle for her. Nicole admitted that she was a perfectionist. Because she excelled academically, she felt the need to be a leader in her school to represent her race. Many of the women in Nicole’s family got pregnant in high school and dropped out. Nicole was determined not to follow that path. She placed high expectations on herself as a result of her family background. She had a strong desire to have African American women seen in a positive light.

**Connie** was 18-years-old, had recently graduated from high school, and planned to attend college in the fall. The only item she checked on the demographic form to identify herself was unemployed. The researcher observed that Connie came across as reserved and docile. She allowed others to talk over her during parts of the interview. Connie had negative feelings about herself as a young African American woman and had negative feelings about African American women as a group. She believed that being an African American woman was an obstacle for her and that she could be more in life if she was not an African American woman. Connie admitted

to valuing Afrocentric qualities about herself. She was resentful that her mother had her hair permed when she was younger. She no longer had a perm but she wore her hair pressed and straightened. She said she does not get a positive response from her peers when she wears her hair in its natural texture. However, she claimed that she tried not to let other's opinions dictate the decisions she made about herself.

**Natalie** was 18-years-old, had recently graduated from high school, and planned to attend college in the fall. She resided in the state where she was born and is employed. She described herself as single but in a relationship. She felt her friends would describe her as dependable, helpful, and loyal. Natalie took pride in being what she considered a good person. Natalie had negative feelings about African American women as a group and felt that being an African American woman was an obstacle for her. Natalie recalled wanting to have White parents when she was younger so she could get whatever she wanted. Her family suffered financially and Natalie said her parents argued a lot leading to their separation. She viewed White families as more stable, as better providers for their children, and believed that White parents kept promises made to their children. Natalie also admitted to struggling with body image although she has not been described as overweight. However, she had a sister who was considered to be "in shape" and Natalie compared herself to her sister a lot.

**Audrey** was 20-years-old, had graduated from high school two years prior to the study, and at the time of the study, worked full-time at a retail store. In high school, Audrey had aspirations of going to college and was accepted to a least three schools. Her plans were put on hold because she and her mother felt she needed to get a job and earn some money first. At the current time, she was looking for a second job. She was helping with household expenses. She had set a goal to join the military the following year. She resided in the state where she was born

and got along with her parents although her father lived in another state. She described herself as single but in a relationship. Audrey had negative feelings about herself as a young African American woman. She also had negative feelings about African American women as a group and sometimes got angry and embarrassed about being an African American woman. Audrey admitted feeling pressure to have sex with her boyfriend so that he would not cheat on her.

### **Phenomenological Data Collection**

After employing purposive, criterion-based sampling (see Table 1) to identify participants for the study, the researcher used two focus groups as the primary method for data collection. The first focus group contained four participants. The second focus group contained five participants. The researcher selected to use two small focus groups to provide a more opportune environment in which to hear the voices of each of the participants. The goal for using focus groups in this study was to derive thick, rich descriptions from African American young adult women who have internalized oppression. Focus groups are “advantageous when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information” (Creswell, 2009). Onwuegbuzie, Leech, and Collins (2010) identified that the benefits of using focus groups include collecting social data in a social environment and creating an atmosphere that encourages more responses.

The rationale for selecting a focus group data collection was that participants tend to find the atmosphere of focus groups less threatening than individual interviews (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). The sense of belonging to a group is a reason why participants tend to feel safe while sharing experiences. Phinney (1988) suggested that African American adolescents tend to feel the need to be part of a group (Phinney, 1988).

Table 1

*Participant Criteria Verification Table*

Participant	Age	Statement agreement that coincides with Internalized Oppression
Audrey Focus Group #1	20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Sometimes I have negative feelings about myself as a young African American woman.</i></li> <li>• <i>Sometimes I have negative feelings about African American women as a group.</i></li> <li>• <i>Sometimes I am angry or embarrassed about being an African American woman.</i></li> </ul>
Connie Focus Group #2	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Sometimes I have negative feelings about myself as a young African American woman.</i></li> <li>• <i>Sometimes I have negative feelings about African American women as a group.</i></li> <li>• <i>Sometimes I think that being an African American woman is an obstacle for me.</i></li> <li>• <i>Sometimes I believe that I could be more in life if I was not an African American woman</i></li> </ul>
Camille Focus Group #2	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Sometimes I believe that I could be more in life if I was not an African American woman.</i></li> </ul>
Kathy Focus Group #1	19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Sometimes I have negative feeling about myself as a young African American woman.</i></li> <li>• <i>Sometimes I believe that I could be more in life if I was not an African American woman.</i></li> </ul>
Nicole Focus Group #2	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Sometimes I have negative feelings about African American women as a group.</i></li> <li>• <i>Sometimes I think that being an African American woman is an obstacle for me.</i></li> </ul>
Natalie Focus Group #1	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Sometimes I have negative feelings about African American women as a group.</i></li> <li>• <i>Sometimes I think that being an African American woman is an obstacle for me.</i></li> </ul>
Patricia Focus Group #2	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Sometimes I have negative feelings about African American women as a group.</i></li> <li>• <i>Sometimes I think that being an African American woman is an obstacle for me.</i></li> </ul>
Sandra Focus Group #2	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Sometimes I think that being an African American woman is an obstacle for me.</i></li> <li>• <i>Sometimes I believe that I could be more in life if I was not an African American woman.</i></li> </ul>
Tammy Focus Group #1	19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Sometimes I think that being an African American woman is an obstacle for me.</i></li> </ul>



African American participants are therefore more likely to feel safe and comfortable in a focus group setting while sharing personal stories and in turn will offer more details of their experiences. Studies show that focus groups provide an environment where more responses can be shared (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Even if the group interaction turns argumentative, the situation becomes another opportunity to gather rich data.

The social interaction of focus groups, in itself, could provide important data and is consistent with the Social Constructivist theoretical framework of this current study. Social Constructivism emphasizes that meaning is constructed through the interaction with others (Creswell, 2009). Furthermore, the focus group method could aid in building evidence of multiple realities or ontology, another important element of this current study's research paradigm.

Focus groups also allow for the use of various instruments to elicit and stimulate responses from the focus group members in order to gather rich data. Creswell (2009) suggests that rigorous data collection includes the use of multiple forms of data. The use of creative and diverse methods is also encouraged (Creswell, 2009). Even the use of literary content that depicts the experience being researched can help a researcher gain rich data (Creswell, 2009). In addition to using the researcher as an instrument of data collection, this study used an interview protocol, photo elicitations, stream of consciousness writing, and literary writings. A research team was used to assist with the management of data collection and data analysis. The research team was comprised of two doctoral candidates in the area of counseling and student personnel services.

## **Instruments**

**The researcher.** The researcher is considered the main and most important instrument when collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data in phenomenological studies (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010). Collecting data through interview, observing, and examining documents makes the researcher the key instrument in data collection (Creswell, 2009). However, it is important to acknowledge that the researcher is not free from assumptions, biases, and presuppositions and cannot totally suspend them for the duration of the study (Creswell, 2009). The researcher for this study used reflexivity to add to the validity and the rigor of the study. This aided in reducing researcher bias. Reflexivity is a phenomenological technique that researchers rely on as a way to process any personal feelings related to aspects of the study. The researcher disclosed information related to biases, values, personal background, and past experiences. This was done by recording assumptions and biases in a reflexive journal. Engaging in reflexivity by critically examining biases and continuously self-analyzing will assist in the efforts to preclude biases from affecting researcher inference and interpretation of the data (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010). Some of the researcher biases include wanting to see young African American women, in particular, succeed and strive to improve their quality of life; wanting to defend those who are unable to defend themselves; wanting to empower young African American women to identify and deal with internalized oppression in order that they might be able to deconstruct negative self-concepts and reconstruct healthy, positive self-concepts.

The primary researcher was an African American female who identified as heterosexual. Her worldview had been shaped by her experiences as a Christian and her level of graduate education. Her background marked her as an insider to the culture and the researcher acknowledged having experienced forms of internalized oppression because of racism and

sexism which caused the researcher to closely identify with the participants. Sharing these experiences with participants helped build rapport and established a comfort level for them to share their experiences openly and freely without judgment. However, the researcher continued to engage in epoche (the act of suspending judgments about what is real to allow for objectivity under subjective circumstances) and reflexivity for the duration of the study. Bracketing, member checking, and triangulation also were used as preventative measures to distinguish between the realities of the participants and the reality of the researcher.

**The research team.** The research team for this study consisted of three African American women: the primary researcher and two other team members all of whom were doctoral students in the Counseling and Student Personnel Services department at the time of this study. The doctoral program of study for all three members emphasized a concentration in social justice, providing each member with the background to understand Critical Race Theory (the theoretical framework for this research study), internalized oppression, and self-conceptualization. All members had experience with conducting research using qualitative methodology. Also, at the time of this study, each member was employed in the counseling field, one as a high school counselor, one as a middle school counselor, and one as an elementary school counselor.

Prior to conducting the study, research team members participated in a group session to discuss and bracket biases, presuppositions, and assumptions. The team discussed personal experiences with internalized oppression and self-conceptualization and critically analyzed any influences it would have on the interpretation of data. One member was conducting research with African American female adolescents and expressed that the decisions of this targeted group tend to be influenced easily by outside factors. Another member voiced a connection

between socioeconomic status and increased experience with internalized oppression. The team recognized generalizations and bracketed those as well. Interview questions were discussed and adjusted if needed to evoke thick, rich descriptive responses from the research participants.

At two additional team meetings, code books with common themes identified from the focus group transcripts were discussed. Transcripts were provided to the team members in advance to analyze and each team member created a code book independently. The system of coding provided a controlled manner to analyze the data and categorize the statements. The stream of consciousness writings were also discussed and analyzed for common themes.

**Interview protocol.** The Interview Protocol was predesigned by the researcher and used to record information collected during phone screening and focus group interviews (Creswell, 2009). Scripts to conduct the phone screening and begin the focus group interviews were included. This item helped the researcher organize thoughts related to the interview sessions and provided a way to record project information and take notes during the interview (see Appendix A). Questions for the phone screening and the focus group interviews were constructed in collaboration with research team members and a doctoral writing group. Questions like, “What has been your experience with internalized oppression as an African American young adult woman?” and “What has the impact of internalized oppression been on how you see yourself?” were used. The use of audio taping accompanied this process. Audio tapes were later transcribed in order to develop transcripts for data analysis.

**Participant demographic information sheet.** Each participant completed a demographic information sheet (see Appendix B). The sheet was a means to record background information and support that participants met the criteria for participation. Coded identification

information was used. Answers to questions provided gave the researcher additional insight into the participants feelings and beliefs about African American women.

**Psycho-educational session.** The researcher conducted a psycho-educational session with the participants to solidify their understanding of internalized oppression. The researcher provided handouts that provided examples of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors typically associated with internalized oppression. Also, during the psycho-educational session, the researcher presented visual images and literary writings that would prompt thoughts and remembrances of personal experiences the participants may have had with internalized oppression. Afterwards, the participants engaged in an uninterrupted stream of consciousness writing session (see below). Data gathered from the psycho-educational session was used to support participants' verbal acknowledgement of their experience with internalized oppression which was a criteria for participation in the study.

**Photo elicitation.** Photo Elicitation was used during the psychoeducational group session. Creswell (2009) supports that this technique is engaging and thought-provoking. For this research study, this process served to generate thoughts about personal experiences with internalized oppression and self-conceptualization. The researcher showed pictures with the intent that participants would make connections. Pictures of women from magazines and advertisements were used. Magazines that appeal to African Americans, the male population, and the dominant culture were used as resources. Photo elicitation was used in conjunction with stream of consciousness writing. The goal was to gather data related to self-conceptualization and internalized oppression.

**Literary writings.** Like photo elicitation, literary writings were used to stimulate the thought process with research participants. Utilized during the psychoeducational session, this

technique provided a creative way to demonstrate examples of racism and sexism. The literary writings used were the *Ain't I a Woman* speech by Sojourner Truth and the *We Wear the Mask* poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar. Rhetorical questions like, “How can you relate to the subject matter in these writings?” or “How does this make you feel?” were asked.

***Streams of consciousness writing.*** Stream of Consciousness Writing was used during the psychoeducational group session in conjunction with photo elicitation and the literary writings. Stream of Consciousness is a concept derived from William James (1890) and is explained in his book, *Principles of Psychology*. Stream of consciousness writing as an exercise was an attempt to gather uninterrupted flows of thought about internalized oppression and self-conceptualization from research participants. Participant responses were used to provide insight into their perceived experiences with internalized oppression. Data acquired was also used as a means to provide descriptive background information of each participant. The participants engaged in a 10-minute timed writing segment in which they were instructed to continuously write their uncensored thoughts and personal experiences with internalized oppression and self-conceptualization. This was to be done without pause or stopping or consideration for mechanics. Uninterrupted thought, according to James, is a true deliverance of consciousness and uncensored cognition. Streams of consciousness can be compared to personal narratives which provided a suitable way to gather data on individual life experiences. Syed and Azmitia (2008) believe narrative perspectives can reveal conflict and may account for past events that may have been impactful to life experiences and decisions (Syed & Azmitia, 2008).

In summary, data collection was conducted in the following manner. Participants were selected using purposeful criterion sampling. Informed Consent forms were reviewed, signed, and obtained from each participant. A 45-minute psycho-educational session was conducted to

increase awareness of internalized oppression in research participants. Demographic forms were completed. Group expectations and confidentiality were explained. Two focus group sessions were conducted, each lasting 45 minutes to an hour. For each focus group session, the following occurred: (a) researcher, who also served as moderator, welcomed participants, explained the purpose and design of the study, and introduced the moderator and the moderator assistant; (b) researcher continued to build rapport with participants by engaging in an ice breaker and team building activities; (c) participants were reminded that the session would be recorded; (d) researcher used instruments previously described to gather data; (e) researcher conducted debriefing with participants; (f) researcher transcribed audio tapes and contacted members of the focus groups to engage in member checking of the transcript (Krueger, 2002).

### **Phenomenological Data Analysis**

According to Creswell (2009), data analysis in qualitative research can be conducted in six steps: (a) collection of raw data which includes transcripts, field notes, images, etc.; (b) organizing and preparing data for analysis; (c) reading through all the raw data; (d) coding the data; (e) interrelating themes from the data; (f) interpreting the meaning of the themes. Throughout this process, the researcher engaged in validating the accuracy of the information. For this research study, with the assistance of a research team, horizontalization was conducted. The team analyzed the raw data including streams of consciousness and focus group interview transcripts and coded overall themes that illustrated the participants' experiences with internalized oppression. From that, consistent themes were identified moving towards the essence of meaning as described by the participants. The use of contact summary forms assisted in identifying common themes. A counter-narrative was written to present the data.

Counter-narratives, an element of Critical Race Theory, are stories that present experiences that are not told as a part of dominant culture (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). The point of the counter-narrative is to offer personal insight into the issues being researched. In constructing counter-narratives as a method of presenting data, composite characters were created from the data gathered and these characters engage in dialogue based on the researcher findings. Storytelling has long been a part of African American heritage and tradition and serves as a tool for liberation.

### **Trustworthiness of Study**

Researcher and research team biases were explored. The use of a research team helped identify the biases and assumptions about the research topic for the research team members. Anticipating biases which could turn into ethical issues served as a strategy for validating findings. Other steps to bracket biases and minimize assumptions included member checking and seeking clarification during interviews. The research team openly identified misconceptions about African American young adult women and addressed politically incorrect or insensitive wording.

Disclosure of the positionality of the researcher added to the trustworthiness of the study. The researcher is an African American, heterosexual female with beliefs in Christianity. The researcher acknowledged that past experiences with internalized oppression may influence the research process and interpretation of data. The use of a reflexive journal to bracket biases, religious values and beliefs, presuppositions, past experiences, and limitations was employed.

### **Findings**

This study examined the phenomenon of internalized oppression and the impact on self-conceptualization in African American young adult women. Particular consideration was taken



to comprehend the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender and the adolescent stage of identity development to enable an informed interpretation of the data. As a result, a detailed examination and analysis of the African American young adult woman's lived experience yielded an enhanced understanding of the phenomenon as it relates to the research participants.

The following research question guided the study: What are the experiences of African American young adult women who have internalized oppression. The data was collected from two focus group interviews, demographic information, and stream of consciousness writing. The participant sample included nine young adult women who identified as African American and ranged in age from 18-20 (see participant section of this chapter and Table 1 for further descriptions of the participants).

The research team analyzed the transcripts of two focus group interviews and found two overarching themes related to internalized oppression in African American young adult women. The findings suggested that oppressive experiences contributing to internalized oppression for the participants may be categorized under two broad themes: (a) familial influences that tend to foster an environment for self-doubt, insecurity, and a lack of trust and (b) sociological influences stemming from experiences that may be contrary to societal standards or norms as well as in-group contentions that posed racial concerns. In addition to these two broad themes, seven subthemes emerged. The researchers identified four subthemes under the first theme—familial influences—which included: (a) dealing with emotional detachments from fathers; (b) overcoming mothers' legacy of struggle; (c) shaping perceptions of African American families based on lived experiences; and (d) attempting to avoid making the same mistakes as others in their family. Additionally, the research team identified three subthemes under the second theme—sociological influences—which included: (a) struggling with body image issues;

(b) coping with cultural stigmas and stereotypes; and (c) needing to prove one's self or represent the race as a whole. An underlying subtheme of resiliency resonated throughout the interviews. Participants engaged in member checking of transcripts to clarify unclear statements (e.g., incomplete phrases). Participants verified that the meaning and essence of their statements remained intact. There was no preference to the order of the themes. Themes are not mutually exclusive of each other and may overlap as evidenced in participant quotations.

**Familial influences on internalized oppression in young African American women.**

Participants suggested that family encounters contributed to their experience with internalized oppression. Participant responses revealed four subthemes in this area which included dealing with emotional detachments from their fathers; comparing their lived experiences to their mothers' lived experiences; shaping perceptions of African American families based on lived experiences; and attempting to avoid making the same mistakes as others in their family.

*Struggling with emotional detachments from fathers.* Participants described situations with their fathers that contributed to their internalized oppression. Participants perceived experiences with their fathers as unsupportive and emotionally and psychologically harmful. Some racist and sexist ideas seemed apparent in the participants' encounters with their fathers. For example, Nicole, an 18-year-old high achieving student, said about her father's view of her as an African American woman:

I went over to my dad's house last week and I was like, Oh, I'm going to college, and I've gotten all these scholarships, and I'm going to Hampton, and I'm doing all this stuff. He told me, I guess he realized how serious I was. He was like, 'You dumb, you can't think for yourself, who you think you is, you a Black girl. You think you gonna get some cracker's money' – that's how he said it. But then I'm like [thinking] I'm doing this hard

work, but he was like, ‘Who do you think you is. All you need to do is get a high school diploma, get a job working at Kroger or somewhere and that’s about it.’

Nicole continued with a description of an additional incident with her father that revealed his devaluation of her race/ethnicity and gender. The fact that her father was not very supportive of her has affected how she views her hard work and sense of accomplishment. In her description, Nicole developed a realization of her father’s stereotypical view of her—which influenced Nicole’s perception of her worth as an African American woman:

I feel like if my dad believed in me more or helped me out more. . . . I made it to become a Gates Millennium finalist. I went to the next step, but you need your parental support. My dad never filed any of my taxes or none of that stuff. So, I feel like that was holding me back. You [dad] didn’t take the responsibility to do what you were supposed to do. So, I’m like dang, I did all this work as a parent and a student and I still didn’t feel like I accomplished [anything] because my dad feels like I can’t be nobody because I’m an African American woman. Like the only thing I’m good at is getting a job, getting a high school diploma, getting married, and having somebody’s babies.

The participants’ experiences with their families shaped the way they view the role of the father. Kathy described her need for her father’s support:

Yeah, I wanted him [dad] there but I see he’s not doing anything. I felt like he could at least pick up the phone and call me. I just wanted him in my life. I don’t need him to take care of me [financially]. He never did. I just wanted him there. I just wanted to call my daddy. I didn’t want to call him to ask him for nothing ‘cause I don’t expect nothing from him ‘cause he wasn’t there. I expect that from my momma. But him. . . I just wanted him there. That’s why I am so angry. I’m angry ‘cause I didn’t have my father. I

wish I had a father figure to talk to versus just talking to my momma and getting one perspective and not getting it from my daddy. I never had a father figure. And now that my momma has a boyfriend, I can talk to him, but he is not my daddy. I can't talk to him about things as much. But, I'm not about to go out here and look for a man [to replace my dad]. I want a man better than my daddy. I want a man who's not going to hit me, who's gonna take care of me. I don't want you to just sit here and I take care of you. Give me the same equal opportunity that I am giving you versus you hitting me, beating me, being lazy and doing nothing. I don't want that.

Natalie discussed that the absence of a father's affection could be an indication to increased sexual behavior in young African American women. Even with her father in the home, Natalie described feelings of detachment. Natalie seemed to express that emotional detachment from one's father leaves a void and that a woman might find affection from another man to fill that void. Natalie stated:

My daddy does what he needs to do, but at the same time he doesn't do what he needs to do. When I was younger, I don't ever remember my daddy doing anything. My momma did everything. My momma was the momma, the daddy, the everything you needed. My mommy was right there. Daddy was just in the house. Yeah, it's good to have your mom and your dad because everybody else likes that. But, sometimes you gotta look at it like, if your own daddy don't do good for you at that time, who else can you go too? That's why most African American women go out and do what they gotta do [find sex] so at the end of the day they feel like they got that love from a man - all because their daddy was not there. My dad is here now, but I feel like it's too late. There's no need for him to be here now because I am about to go off to school.

Sometimes a person dealing with internalized oppression will interpret someone's comments as a form of devaluation. Here, Patricia viewed her father's comments as a form of degradation. Patricia appeared to believe that her father's comments were an implication of her inferiority, an issue that often surfaces during racist encounters. Patricia, also an 18-year-old, high achieving student, said this of her father:

That's how my daddy was. I used to tell my daddy that I'm going to GA State, I'm going to GA State. That's all I used to say. But. . . I didn't try hard enough on my SAT and I only took it once. And you know GA State is a very hard school to get into, so I didn't get accepted off of my test scores. So he was like, 'Well college ain't for everybody. You can start off at GA Perimeter. You know that ain't good. You didn't even get into this one.' I was like [thinking], Daddy you didn't even finish high school. How do you compare your daughter who graduated in the top 10% of her class and telling me college ain't for me and maybe college ain't for everybody and start off at a community college. That's not being a parent.

*Overcoming mothers' legacy of struggle.* Many of the participants appeared to compare their lived experiences to those of the women in their families, particularly the mothers. Their resiliency was demonstrated in their determination not to succumb to certain stereotypes that have become reality for the African American women in their families. Patricia seemed to have internalized the stereotypical image of the unwed teenage mother. Much like Nicole, it seemed Patricia's determination is partly driven by the desire to not be like her mother. Patricia has perceived her mother's situation as a pitfall that she must avoid in order to be successful and achieve her goals. Patricia (18 years old) stated:

My mama went to high school. She finished high school but she got pregnant with me and she didn't get to go to college. I'm determined not to get pregnant and take the same steps as she did. I want to pursue my dreams and become what I want to become and it's like she could have pursued her dreams if she didn't get pregnant with me. She could have gone to college but it's like she's stuck at a job not a career.

Natalie was another participant who appeared to show resilience in her situation. The internalized image of the African American women struggling to provide for the family seemed to affect her behavior and choices. Natalie referred to and has adopted the concept of the strong Black woman to motivate her to reach her goals. Natalie (18 years old) stated:

It makes me look at myself as a stronger Black young lady. I see my mom and how she had to go without to make sure we had what we needed. Also, I see my mom struggling to get what she needs to get so this just makes me know what I have to do to step up in order to be to be, not better than my mom, but better than my mom.

Tammy described her mother's lived experiences and it appears that she has internalized the perceived mistakes of her mother. Tammy appeared to compare her lived experience to her mother's and expresses a sense of satisfaction that she has not fallen victim to her mother's circumstances. Tammy stated that her mother says she wants Tammy to be "better" than her which could indicate that Tammy's mother has established a poor or negative self-concept. Tammy also indicated the desire to prove other's wrong. Although Tammy felt as though she had made some mistakes in life, compared to her mother she seemed to be developing a more positive self-concept. Tammy (19 years old) stated:

I know everybody's momma has said, 'I don't want you to be like me.' My momma had me at 15. Thank God I didn't have a child at 15, nor 16 nor 17 nor 18 nor 19. (laughter in

background). So, it's like I did accomplish something. So, there is something that I am doing right. Every parent says, 'I want you to be better than me. I want you to go out there and prove to them White people that you can do it.' You know, stuff like that. Because my momma had me at a young age, she had to go to night school. I didn't have to do all that, I stayed through high school. My mom's sister did good in school, she graduated from high school, and went to college. My mom didn't. My mom was like the bad girl and I guess my aunt looked down on her. My momma sold drugs, she been in and out of jail, and her sister never did stuff like that. So, my momma would say, 'I don't want you to do what I did.' So, it's a good thing that me and my sister and my brother aren't doing half of the stuff my mom did.

Audrey's story was very similar to the other participants when it came to resilience and the desire not to succumb to the circumstances that surround her mother's lived experience.

Audrey's mother also appeared to have established a poor self-concept and wanted Audrey to be "better" than her. Audrey has internalized stereotypical images and seemed to use them to motivate her to do better. Audrey seemed to display a sense of satisfaction that she has done "better" than her mother; however, her goals and level of accomplishment seem stagnant.

Audrey appeared pleased that she has graduated from high school without having children but does not appear to express a strong desire to accomplish much else, unlike some of the other participants. Audrey (20 years old) stated:

My grandma was the type of person who was just laid back. Everybody knew my grandma as being a laid back person. My momma at the age of 15 was married and she was in her own apartment with my dad. My dad was 5 years older than she was. She had a man that came in and did what he needed to do to take care of home. My momma had

her first child at the age of 16 and she didn't finish school. My momma was in school for 2 weeks and then she dropped out of high school. She said after that they [the babies] just came one after the other. She had me at 18, my other brother at 19 and it continued in her twenties. Now, she says to me, 'Well, you know, be better than me.' But I tell her, Ma, you know you are still my momma and I love you no matter what. But [I think to myself], I did beat her at something. I did accomplish something. I did graduate from high school and you didn't do that. I have no kids - never had to worry about that. So, I think I'm on a good path. So, people look at my choice and my situation and think your parents are gonna be disappointed. But, my momma thinks, you have done all this, I'm proud of you.

***Shaping perceptions of African American families based on lived experiences.***

Participants' perception of the African American family emerged in their responses as contrary to the social norm. Most participants believed that the African American family does not fit the social norm of how a family is structured. The master narrative about family in this society entails a two parent household which includes a mother and a father present. Most of the experiences of the participants reflected homes that lacked a father figure or the participant expressed the need for the biological father is intense and his absence could influence how African American women view themselves and their worth in terms of abandonment and relationships. The participants provided insight into internalized images and perceptions of the African American family, African American men, and relationships. Patricia (18 years old) made this comment about her family:

For me, I don't know what it is to be a real African American family 'cause my daddy and my mama, they wasn't even together when I was born. It took my dad 14 years to



sign my birth certificate and it's like I just never experienced a real American family. I mean a real African American family.

Nicole (18 years old) acknowledged that her father had a girlfriend, but was not married to her:

For me, my mom died when I was 2 and I never knew or I didn't know my dad until I moved in with him—that was 8<sup>th</sup> grade. So, I felt bad 'cause her [my mom] relationship was abusive. So, I never had a stable home with a mom and a dad. He [dad] has a girlfriend but I'm like, you not even married to her, it's not even real. Cause it seems like as time goes on it's like, just leave me alone. I never had that [a real family] so it motivates me even more to do right so I can provide my kids with that or my mentees.

Audrey believed that nontraditional families (unmarried parents) are growing in the African American communities especially with younger African American women. Audrey expressed the desire for her own mother and father to get back together. Audrey believed having biological parents together is better for the family.

I've seen my uncles and aunts together; but in this generation or day in age, all of my cousins who have had kids are not with the babies' fathers.

Audrey (20 years old) continued:

I would prefer, not many people know this. . . I would prefer for my parents, to get back together because I love my daddy to death. And I love my momma 'cause she does more for me. But, I love my dad. And it's like, you try to walk around [tough]. I came to school big, bad, tough, talking smack. I was never a bully, but if you took me there, I took it with you. But at the end of the day, to be honest, I hate my household. I mean I love my brothers. I love my mom. But you gotta watch who you put around your kids. 'Cause at the end of the day you never know, you could be with this guy for 10 years and

think you know the best of him and at. . . you never know what he does at night. You know, I had my, my step-father to take it an extra mile. He recorded me while I was in the shower and stuff like that. You know what I am saying? So, African American couples stay together. I think it's better for the child 'cause they need that stability. Ain't nobody gonna treat you like your momma or your daddy. Do you feel what I'm saying? So, all these other people coming in and trying to fill in the spots. . . they can't do it. 'Cause at the end of the day, they don't give two cents about; you know, about somebody else's child. They know they didn't give birth to you so they don't really care.

Like many of the other participants, Kathy discussed how her mother functioned in both roles as mother and father, a stereotype but sometimes a reality in the African American community. Still, Kathy expressed a strong desire to have her father in her life. Kathy's statements suggested feelings of rejection, an indication that she has internalized these feelings:

My momma was my momma and she was my daddy. My momma raised two kids. I'm not gonna say me and my sister were perfect, we're not. My momma wasn't perfect; she struggled. But at the same time, my momma went to college. She got a new job. She took care of two kids. I don't knock my momma for that, but at the same time, I wish my daddy was there. He was in prison since I was 2. He got out when I was 16. Now, I am 19 and he still has done nothing for me.

The internalization of racist stereotypes affected how some of the participants viewed the African American family and African American men. This also influenced their self-concept and their perceptions of marriage. The belief and expectation that African American women would remain single parents has shaped some decisions they have made about their future. This

internalization was evidenced in the following comments. When asked to provide one word to describe African American women, (18-year-old) Sandra said:

[Single] because there are a lot of single parents in the Black community. The majority [remain single] but they're also strong-minded.

In considering the singleness of African American women, Audrey seemed to have internalized the stereotype of African American women being difficult and aggressive. Audrey suggested that African American men may prefer to date women of another race/ethnicity because of this stereotype. She stated:

When a Black man sees himself with a White girl, he feels like he doesn't have to worry about the nagging and coming home to an attitude.

Connie's concept of marriage has been distorted so much so that she seemed to lack the belief that the African American woman can find a husband or a life-long partner:

Yeah, it's like a lot of my friends, some of them don't even know their dads and most of them their parents are already separated. So, it's not like, to me, there's nothing to look forward to if you're gonna be separated. That's why I don't want to get married fast. I would rather live my life, travel and do all that stuff before I settle down with somebody and have children and make plans and stuff. Cause for me, right now, it's nothing to look forward to if you're just gonna be separated anyway.

Tammy (19 years old) believed that the majority of African American women remain single.

She stated:

I would say 80%, maybe even 90%, of African American people are going through pressure, because you don't see a lot of moms and dads together. About 90% of women

are single mothers out here. Actually, I think every mother is single from what I've seen. I ain't seen a Black couple together.

Many of the participants felt that African American women struggle when it comes to family and relationships. Some responses indicated that African American women overall function as head of the household. Still when it comes to relationships, the participants believe that African American women may be willing to endure mistreatment in order to have a relationship and in some instances this is an effort to make up for an absent father. Audrey stated:

Women will put up with that abuse. The truth is you gonna stay with that guy 'cause you never had anybody to say, *Baby I love you*. It feels good to hear a Black man tell you that. So, of course, you gonna deal with all that [abuse]. Cause at the end of the day, you didn't get love from your father.

Sandra offered that women will endure a dysfunctional relationship just to have someone to help pay the bills:

But, if they cheat, that woman that he is cheating on, she might need help with her bills and she might be single at the time. She may not accept it but she doesn't have a choice. She needs somebody to help her take care of the home and if you go out there and cheat then the relationship gets worse.

Participants gave examples of the absent fathers being generational. Not only did they give instances of their experiences without their fathers, it seemed that they were observing this as a situation for current and future African American families. There appeared to be more examples of internalized oppression manifesting as distorted perceptions and beliefs about the African American family. Patricia (18 years old) stated:

It's like African American women these days are rushing into stuff. If you take a poll from the time when our mothers and daddies went to school and now just to see how many people are pregnant and in school. . . . It's like they're rushing into stuff. It's like you see 14 and 15 year olds living with their baby's daddy but it's not gonna work 'cause they rushed into it.

Connie's perception is that African American women struggle economically to take care of the family; whereas, White American families are viewed as being intact without having to struggle financially. Connie (18 years old) said:

It all comes from slave days. You know you're not going to get respected because they think you probably won't work as hard and we do work just as hard as White women but you don't see a lot of White women and it's just them and children. You see them with a whole family and they're not struggling at all. They don't understand. They don't know how hard it is. You might have one job and you have 3 children and you have to raise and feed those 3 children by yourself. Nobody sees what you have to go through. You might have more than one job to provide for them. But, they see it as you shouldn't have had all those children and this and that. But, you can't control what a man does. If he wants to leave, that's his option to leave. It's very rare that you see a women leave her children.

*Learning from negative family experiences.* Nicole seemed determined to not follow the same path of the people in her family. She has internalized the perceived mistakes of her family and seems to fear that she could fall victim to this "generational curse" as she calls it. The stereotypical image of the unwed, teenaged mother seems to haunt her. Nicole's behavior appeared to be motivated by this internalization. She stated:

I'm the first female in my family not to get pregnant. I'm the first to get a [high school] diploma. I'm the first to go to college. So, when I see a guy, [I think] are you talking to me? I put pressure on myself. I'm like don't even waste your time with him cause you already know how things are gonna be. Don't even waste your time trying to go to the party. I'm not even the kind of person who likes to celebrate. I'm more like, I need to get on the next project and get it accomplished. So, I just feel like I don't take the time to celebrate a lot. Instead, I'm trying not to make the same mistakes somebody else did. It's like I'm holding back my joy or my enjoyment of my life.

Nicole (18 years old) continued:

It's like a generational curse. It seems like every female in my family has gotten pregnant; every female has dropped out; every male has gotten locked up and I'm the first not to do it. And it's like if I can just stay with what I'm doing now—don't socialize, don't go out to parties, don't do anything—you won't get caught up like those people.

Nicole also believed that people expect her to fail because of her family's history. Nicole has internalized the stereotypical images so much so that she has determined that if she does not strive for more or if she does not overachieve then the result will be a life like the women in her family. She stated:

But, I feel like I can enjoy myself if I wanted to but when you have people wanting you to mess up, wanting to see you fall or do something wrong, you're like why waste your time. Sometimes I think, you're grown and you're waiting for me to stumble so you can say she's just like everybody else in her family. So, if I do go out with my friends [they say] 'Oh, you're gonna be just like your mama.' But, you don't even know me. You just

want me to mess up 'cause you don't want me to have the life that you didn't have. And it's my fault cause you messed up your life. You're responsible for me? In reality, you did that. I didn't ask to be here.

**Sociopolitical challenges that contribute to internalized oppression.** Participants suggested that cultural challenges contributed to their experience with internalized oppression. Participant responses revealed four subthemes which included struggling with body image; dealing with cultural stigmas; dealing with cultural stereotypes; and the need to prove one's self or represent the race as a whole.

*Struggling with body image issues.* Participants shared common experiences related to dealing with social standards of beauty. Many of the participants dealt with body image issues. A level of frustration accompanied this discussion with both groups because of how others viewed them. The majority of the young adult women participants described a process of accepting their appearance and resorting to inner strength to cope with others' perceptions of them. Relying on the strength of others was important as well. Body image issues related to sexual experiences surfaced. Patricia shared her weight was an issue for her mother when she was younger. As a sixth grader, Patricia's mother put her on a strict diet and exercise routine so that Patricia could meet a social standard of beauty. Patricia's mother seemed to have internalized ideals of body image and was imposing the pressure to be thinner onto Patricia. Patricia received positive support from her grandmother. Yet, Patricia still seemed to internalize her mother's social views of body image. Patricia expressed initial concerns about being a part of the cheerleading squad:

When I was living with my mama, she was always caught up on looks. She switched my school in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and you know being a child, you get depressed—you don't know

anybody. So, I used to have to buy my friends and stuff like that. So, in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, my mama told me that I was too fat and she put me on a strict punishment—[she] made me run on the treadmill for like an hour a day and made me do 6 inches, and running in place. All that ‘cause she was caught up on looks. She was like, ‘Well you don’t look like the children in your class. . .’ Other family members helped me get through that. My grandma used to always tell me, ‘You don’t have to look like the other children. Everybody don’t look the same.’ But, sometimes it is an issue like being on the cheerleading squad. I wasn’t the smallest girl on the cheerleading squad and it made me feel out [of place] but at the same time, I feel like I’m on the cheerleading squad with everybody else. Obviously, I’m doing something to be good enough to be a part of the team.

Nicole, like other participants in this study, uses the term “plus size girl” or “big girl” to describe who she is. This descriptor is a main component in her self-conceptualization. For Nicole and others, the term has a positive connotation and implies a level of acceptance. Nicole and other participants used the term “size 2” to describe thinner women which seems judgmental. Nicole appears to equate a man’s desire to have sex with her as a desire to date her. However, Nicole seems to believe that young men would be afraid to openly date her because of the ridicule they might receive from others by dating someone who does not meet social standards of beauty.

Nicole’s resiliency is demonstrated through her self-acceptance. She stated:

For me, being that I’m a plus size girl, and I’m comfortable with that, but it’s like when I was in school, I really didn’t have a boyfriend. When guys came to me, they were like, ‘I’ve never had sex with a plus size girl before and I wanna sleep with you.’ And I’m looking [and thinking] your girlfriend is like a size 2. . . But, I’m thinking if you are



interested, why won't you just talk to me? You like me, but you're afraid to a point because I'm plus size; and you [think] you will be talked about cause I'm a big girl. I feel like a lot of guys like big girls but it's the look, the stereotype [and people say] 'You date a big girl'. That taught me at an early age, Na, you are beautiful, it's just that they're afraid to say they like big girls.

Patricia used the term "model size" to describe thinner women. However, Patricia appeared to have a level of satisfaction that she has lost weight even though her mother used extraneous methods to prompt her weight loss. She seemed to be proud that she can ignore the advances of young men who ignored her when she was heavier. Patricia stated that she is the same girl she was when she was heavier but previously admitted that she had to pay her peers to be friends with her when she was heavier. Patricia stated:

All men are subject to liking the model type and stuff like that and they have to realize that everybody ain't a model size. Because before I lost a whole bunch of weight, I used to be so big and when I used to be so big, nobody wanted to talk to me. But, then it's like the same boys that I went to school with in 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade, when we get to high school, I'd just lost the weight, they wanted to talk to me. But, I'm the same girl they didn't notice or pay attention to before. Now, I just ignore them just the way they ignored me when I was big.

Audrey appeared to be accepting of her physical attributes. Like another participant, Audrey used the term "size 2," it seems, to refer to the social ideal. Audrey did not refer to herself as overweight but appeared to view her body as curvy—an attribute she attributes to being an African American woman. She seemed content to not perceive herself as too overweight. She also made a reference that she was pleased with her hair in its natural state but admits to wearing

a wig. Audrey suggested that her body image did not reflect the social standard, but she implied that self-concept should be based on acceptance of one's self regardless of the social norms.

Audrey seemed to have internalized some level of social images because she mentions attributes that she "did not get" in contradiction to the attributes she does have, indicating some acknowledgment of what attributes are perceived as desirable. Audrey's resiliency was demonstrated in her mental fortitude. Audrey seemed content with herself no matter what images she has internalized. She stated:

I ain't a size 2 but I ain't a 32, you see what I am saying. I love every curve that I have. I am a Black woman, so I have curves. I didn't get that flat back side or that small bosom but I love myself. My hair is just as nappy (ya'll, I'm gonna take this wig off). I LOVE MYSELF! It's all about how you look at yourself. It doesn't matter if you're big. I have a cousin who is big as ever, but you wouldn't be able to tell her that. Her self-esteem is so high, cause she keeps herself up.

Audrey (20 years old) also recognized the psychological impact of societal portrayals of African Americans:

I don't think it's about how you been brought up. I think, it's all in the mind. It's all about the media or the world or what was in books for us Black kids or Black people. . . So, it's all about how people portray us in this world today. It's about society.

Kathy also referred to herself as a "plus size girl." This self-concept appeared safe for her. The term "plus size" seemed to be a reference that the participants used to describe any body type that did not fit the social norm even though the body types of the participants varied in proportion. Kathy seemed accepting of her physical image and seems to emphasize her conviction in loving herself. Like many of the other participants, Kathy implied that a person's

thought process may help deal with internalized oppression. Kathy's indication of internalized oppression was suggested in use of the word "nasty" to refer to herself when wearing certain types of clothing. She stated:

If you don't love yourself, ain't nobody else gonna love you. If you feel so uncomfortable with yourself, ain't nobody else gonna feel comfortable with you. Okay, I'm big, I will wear some shorts. I'm not about to get outrageous and wear some cut-up shorts. But, I'm gonna wear me some shorts. I want some Capris. I want a little halter top. But, I have to keep my stomach in. I'm not about to sit here and just wear it and look nasty. I also have some big breasts (*background comment, "that's how they like them baby*), and I want to wear shirts that cover up. But, at the same time, I may wear a shirt to show my [cleavage]. But I'm not about to go all outrageous and they're just sitting out here and you're looking at me.

Kathy (19 years old) suggested that dealing with internalized oppression and coming to a point of acceptance was difficult. She continued:

There was this little White girl that I used to keep [babysit] and she laugh and say, 'You're big.' And it used to make me so angry. So, I would go and exercise. But, you see a lot of White people who are big, too. But my thing is, at the end of the day, I'm still gonna be big and it's not gonna change. I'm not gonna bleach my skin 'cause I'm still gonna be me. I have to learn and I have learned that if you're gonna talk about me, I have to overcome that. I'm gonna keep a smile on my face. I don't care what you think, I'm gonna be me. I had to overcome a lot to realize this.

Tammy's internalized oppression manifested in her discomfort in letting others see her arms.

Tammy seemed to improve her self-concept by changing her thought process. Her resiliency is demonstrated in her determination to perceive herself differently. Tammy (19 years old) stated:

In my relationships, I used to have low self-esteem. I really didn't like to take my shirt off [in front of him] because of my stretch marks. I call them tattoos. But I really never liked for my shirt to come off. In the summertime, I used to try to wear a jacket to hide. I never did like to wear my arms out, but I got to the point—if you don't like me then who will? Then I started wearing my arms out, starting taking my shirt off and I started feeling comfortable. He was the only guy I felt comfortable doing that with.

Tammy detailed another instance when her internalized oppression manifested as discomfort and shame about her body image. She discussed the difference in how she currently dealt with her self-concept issues. She also described her cousin's struggles with internalized oppression.

Tammy (19 years old) stated:

I hated wearing my arms out. For prom, I was about to get a dress made with sleeves in it and a turtle neck. I never liked to wear my arms out, but one day I thought, there's nothing wrong with it, I might as well wear them out. But, my cousin, she has low self-esteem. She's a big girl and there's nothing wrong with big girls. There are pretty big girls. She has so much low self-esteem, she won't even keep herself up. And I tell her, don't cry when people joke about you. See like me, I'll joke back at you. I'm a funny person and I never ever get that down about myself. I can always get back at people because there is something wrong with everybody. Nobody in this world is perfect. So for me, I don't take that in and just get all mad and cry. I know how to take things in

because I'm a funny person and I love to joke. So it's like, I don't have problems with that.

*Dealing with stigmas and stereotypes.* Dealing with cultural stigmas and stereotypes may lead to internalized oppression. The participants described experiences that involved overt racist encounters. Although participants responded that dealing with both race/ethnicity and gender issues was challenging, many of the examples they provided revolved predominantly around race/ethnicity. Camille, 18 years old, described an experience she had while attending a predominantly White high school. Camille minimized the impact of the oppressive act. Camille stated:

I went to a White school, Windbrook High School and when I got there, they kept calling me ghetto but I'm not ghetto just because I'm Black. I guess they called me ghetto 'cause I speak my mind but White people they don't. They mostly stay to themselves. I didn't care. I just said ok whatever.

Nicole also attended a predominantly White high school. However, Nicole's encounter with racism happened while representing her school in a statewide competition. Nicole seemed perplexed by the reaction she and her other African American peers received when they performed well at the competition. Nicole suggested that there was an expectation that they would have or should have performed poorly because they were African American. Nicole believed that people from other cultural backgrounds view African Americans as inferior. Nicole also noted that her peers accused her of 'acting White' because of her involvement with the organization. Nicole stated:

I went to Sage High School and a lot of people didn't have a lot of support. I didn't either but I wanted more for myself. So, people would say I was 'White.' They would

ask, why are you doing that and I would say I just wanted better. When I competed in FBLA competitions, there are not a lot of African American people who make it to the state level especially who make it to the top 10. So, out of a total of 20 people on stage, we were only 4. I was nervous because out of 4 African American people, I'm one of them. So, I have to represent my race. If you could have heard, 'Oh, your presentation was great. They were probably thinking - Oh, the Black girls are smart. Oh, those Black girls, they know how to talk. They were shocked. I was just like wow. I felt like I represented my race well. We are educated young women and we can go out and do exactly what you are doing probably even better.

Although African Americans have to deal with stigmas and stereotyping from members of other cultural groups, there are times when African Americans stigmatize and stereotype each other. Some African Americans are stigmatized by other African American's because of skin color. Patricia recalled an experience when she shunned a young African American man because of his light complexion. Patricia (18 years old) stated:

I used to say that I wouldn't date somebody light skinned because I had a bad experience with a light skinned boy and this light skinned boy came up to me and I was like, 'Naw, I don't want to talk to you 'cause you're light skinned.' And he was like, 'Well, how are you just gonna judge me because I'm light skinned, just because you had that one bad experience with a light skinned boy.' I was like, 'I just don't like light skinned boys. They're all crazy!'" And he was like, 'That's stereotyping light skinned people.' And I had to realize it really is.

Audrey also recognized the stigma of dealing with skin color in the African American community. Audrey (20 years old) stated:

African American women piss me off when they get with White dudes, and say, oh my baby is gonna be pretty, my baby is gonna have long hair. That ain't true. I know a girl who thought this way. It makes me so mad when she says a stupid comment like, 'I'm not going to mess up the family color. My next child has to be the same. I'm not going to mess up the family color.' Black is more dominant [genetically] than any race. Many people don't know that. Black is dominant. For her to make that stupid comment, her baby is just as bright [light skinned] as can be, but it's not about that. I don't care if my baby is born big, bold, and Black, I'm still gonna love my baby. Bald head, long hair, kinky hair, whatever. It's not about that. It's about how you love and treat that child. And most people see a mixed baby and put that baby on a pedestal.

***Proving one's self to others.*** Sandra is involved in competitions and expressed a belief that she had to work harder as an African American to prove herself to others.

When I'm in tournaments against a bunch of people from all over the state of GA, I compete against a lot of Caucasian people. So, I feel like in order for me to make it to the next level, I have to do better than what they're doing 'cause I'm representing my race. I have to do good and by me being Black it's double [work] for me.

Patricia, like other participants, believed that other cultures see African Americans as inferior.

Patricia believed that the expectation of inferiority is an obstacle in itself. Patricia stated:

They have to be determined because it's like so many obstacles they have to go through when they just want to succeed in life 'cause people don't think they will.

After completing the data collection and analysis, the researcher constructed a model to illustrate how the common themes and subthemes support the essence of the experiences with internalized oppression (see Figure 1). In conjunction with the model, a narrative character composite



Figure 1. Influences of internalized oppression in African American young adult women.



(pseudonym “Gloria”) also illustrates the nature of the participants’ lived experiences (Singh, Hays, Chung, & Watson, 2010) with internalized oppression and self-conceptualization.

### **Gloria: A Composite Example**

Gloria described familial factors and sociopolitical factors as having the most influence over her experience with internalized oppression and self-conceptualization. She acknowledged that she was emotionally detached from her father, she had no desire to follow in her mother’s footsteps, she did not look forward to starting a family of her own, and she was afraid of making the same mistakes that other family members had made. Gloria also struggled with body image issues, felt the constant need to prove herself to others, and she struggled with cultural stigmas and stereotypes.

To begin, Gloria felt her father was unsupportive and emotionally abusive. She believed that he devalued her as a young African American woman. Although he was absent from the home, she still sought his approval. His detachment made her feel unwanted. However, Gloria’s mother had always been supportive of her and had worked hard to see Gloria through high school. Although Gloria was appreciative of all of her mother’s love and support, Gloria recognized how much her mother struggled to make ends meet. Gloria admitted that her mother became pregnant with her in high school and was not able to go to college. Gloria used her mother’s situation as a learning experience. Even though her mother and several other young women in her family had gotten pregnant in high school, Gloria was adamant about not following that path. Her fear of falling victim to what she called a “generational curse” kept her from engaging in typical teenage behavior like going to parties or even having boyfriends. Gloria had been accepted to college and she did not want to become what she identified as a stereotype—an African American teen mother.

Gloria was excited about going off to college. At one point, she thought she would have to forego college and stay home, get a job, and help raise her younger siblings. But, Gloria had gotten a scholarship that covered all of her college expenses. She knew early on that if she wanted to go to college that she would have to get a scholarship because her family was not financially able to pay for her to go nor was her family knowledgeable of how to file the appropriate paper work. Gloria found herself completing applications and forms without the help of her family and she seemed to resent that. She even commented that it seemed like she was the adult and her parents were children. Gloria recalled when she was younger wanting to have White parents because she felt that they would keep their promises to her. And even though Gloria loved her mother, her mother's past experiences with drug abuse and jail time, Gloria felt, hindered her life as well. Gloria especially felt that her mother had no right to try and control her physical appearance.

Gloria's mother forced her to exercise constantly. Gloria recalled that when she was younger, her mother would make her exercise as a form of punishment. Gloria was troubled that her mother made such a big deal about her weight considering that her peers used to tease her and her mother knew how much that hurt Gloria. Still, Gloria explained that her mother criticizes her appearance on a regular basis. Her mother prefers that she comply with social norms. However, considering all of the stressors that Gloria contends with, Gloria described herself as strong. She expressed that even though she struggled with daily pressures that she had internalized, she felt confident about herself and her ability to overcome any barrier or obstacle.

### **Discussion**

The current study was designed to understand the impact of internalized oppression in young African American women on self-conceptualization. The researcher asserted that lived

experiences are an integral part of shaping one's self-concept. In addressing this assertion, the current study built on previous research by examining the complexities of identity development at the adolescent stage. The study also involved understanding the intersectionality of race/ethnicity and gender and all the mental, emotional, and psychological difficulties that may arise because of oppression (Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha, 2011; Constantine, 2002; Mandara, Gaylord-Harden, Richards, & Ragsdale, 2009). Notably, encounters with racism and sexism have been found to cause psychological distress in African American women (Ward & Heidrich, 2009; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Jones et al., 2007; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006). How young African American women deal with these encounters and stressors could predicate how or whether or not internalized oppression manifests in maladaptive ways, such as aggression, depression, or self-sabotage (Gaylord-Harden & Cunningham, 2009; Gaylord-Harden, Ragsdale, Mandara, Richards, & Petersen, 2007).

A phenomenological approach outlined the procedures for the data collection in this study. An exploration of the experiences of African American young adult women with internalized oppression was conducted using methods and instruments that would extract the essence of the phenomenon under study. The researcher conducted two focus group sessions to collect phenomenological data. Supplemental data was also gathered from stream of consciousness writing, demographic forms, participant feedback, researcher observation, and researcher reflexivity. The study was strengthened by the use of the focus group format by providing the means for participants to share their experiences in a social setting as the concept of Social Constructivism framed their responses. Social Constructivism is essentially a worldview or perspective from which individuals understand and make meaning of their personal realities (Creswell, 2007). Social Constructivism was an appropriate concept to frame

participant responses because experiential meaning can be based on multiple perspectives. In the case of the current study, participants could respond to questions based on the intersectionality of their identity which includes their experiences as African Americans and as women. One challenge of using the focus group format was the outspokenness of some of the participants. Although the outspoken participants provided thick, rich descriptions of their experiences, the participants who were not as outspoken tended to transition into listener mode. The researcher had to be cognizant of participants who had not responded and at times the researcher had to directly address them to obtain a response. The researcher interjections did not distract from the openness of the discussion. However, the open discussion format of the focus group interviews made transcribing challenging because the participants sometimes responded in concert with each other. Therefore, participant feedback or member checking of the transcript was necessary and effective in clarifying responses.

Participant responses were analyzed using a critical race perspective. Using the principles of Critical Race Theory, the researcher was able to identify significant statements that emphasized the effects of social subjugation such as racial/ethnic-related and gender-related oppression on the lived experiences of the participants. Participant responses based on resilience and resistance supported the element of empowerment found in Critical Race Theory. However, a major strength in using Critical Race Theory as the counter-narratives present in the participant responses which challenged dominant ideologies that attempt to define them as African American young adult women.

The outcome of this study has proven to be enriching. The findings of this exploratory study provide insight into the lived experiences of young African American women. The results of this study were consistent with previous research suggesting that young African American

women who have experienced internalized oppression have struggled with self-conceptualization. Albeit difficult to process internalized oppression, the women in this study proposed that inner strength and self-determination helped them to overcome emotional and psychological distress (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Gourdine, 2009; Schilling, 2008). Although, an effective coping mechanism, it is still unclear as to whether or not these women have successfully dealt with their internalized oppression. The researcher did not anticipate responses of resiliency and resistance and did not include questions related to resiliency and resistance in the interview protocol. Further research in this area is needed.

This study found two predominant themes in which young African American women have had experiences leading to internalized oppression. Those areas include: (a) familial influences that tend to foster an environment for self-doubt, insecurity, and a lack of trust and (b) sociological influences stemming from experiences that may be contrary to societal standards or norms as well as in-group contentions that posed racial concerns. Seven subthemes emerged which included: (a) struggling with emotional detachments from fathers; (b) overcoming mothers' legacy of struggle; (c) shaping perceptions of African American families based on lived experiences; (d) attempting to avoid making the same mistakes as others in their family; (e) struggling with body image issues; (f) coping with cultural stigmas and stereotypes; and (g) the need to prove one's self or represent the race as a whole. An underlying subtheme of resiliency resonated throughout the interviews.

Consistent with the research focus, external pressures associated with social standards of beauty appeared to have led to internalized oppression (Gordon, 2008; Nishina, Ammon, Bellmore, & Graham, 2006; Granberg, Gordon-Simons, & Simons, 2009; King, 2003). Most participants stated that they struggled with weight issues and body image issues. Negative self-

perceptions resulted. One participant stated that at one point in life she felt embarrassed by her body image and certain body parts (e.g., her arms because of the size and stretch marks) to the extent of consciously covering herself. Another referred to her appearance as “nasty” when wearing certain types of clothing. However, in contrast, participants expressed high levels of self-esteem. One explanation would be that participants possessed and exhibited traits of resilience. Reliance on perceived inner strength was a common coping mechanism for many of the participants. However, the internalization of social body type ideals was apparent. Some participants used the euphemism “plus size girl” to refer to themselves. This implied that while recognizing that they did not fit the social norm, their body image was viewed with positive regard. This outcome is consistent with prior research examining the perception of African American adolescent female participants on body image and self-esteem. The research suggested that African American adolescent females have higher self-esteem related to body type than their White counterparts (Adams, 2010; Alleyne & Lapoint, 2004). Therefore, it may be expected that regardless of internalizing symptoms associated to social standards of beauty, African American young adult women experience positive self-concept in regards to body image. Additional research is warranted although definitive conclusions cannot be made. A plausible explanation would consider more acceptances of variations in body type in the African American community versus African American adolescent females feeling pressured to meet the social standard set by White dominant culture. This finding supports the assertion that the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender are integral in the self-conceptualization process for African American young adult women (Lipford-Sanders & Bradley, 2005).

Also consistent with the research focus, the perception of physical traits presumably associated with African Americans influenced internalized oppression (Hill, 2009; Sanders &

Sullivan, 2010). Although, most participants recognized that skin color bias was an issue in the African American community, internalization for study participants could not be substantiated (Hersch, 2011; Braboy-Jackson & Mustillo, 2001). However, one participant indicated that she had discriminated against an individual based on skin color, acknowledging that she felt “light skinned men were crazy.” The participant explained that her perspective was influenced by a past experience. The participant expressed regret for her discriminatory act. Overall, none of the participants acknowledged experiencing negativity based on their individual skin color. The data suggested that skin color bias did not influence self-conceptualization in the participants. In contrast, previous studies have found connections between skin color bias in African American adult women and poor self-perception. Additional research in the area of skin color bias and African American young adult women is needed to better understand the extent of this issue and the impact on self-concept. An explanation for this finding could be the lack of a more extensive exploration of skin color bias in African American young adult women on the part of the researcher.

Despite the lack of association of skin color bias to internalized oppression, participants described other physical traits presumably associated with African Americans that led to internalization and, in turn, impacted self-concept (Bellinger, 2007; Braboy-Jackson & Mustillo, 2001; Duke, 2000; Hersch, 2011). Issues with hair texture were apparent in the responses of some participants. Three participants directly experienced situations related to hair texture. One participant wrote in her stream of consciousness piece that she felt pressured to “look attractive” for her boyfriend. The researcher observed that the participant wore her hair straighten and it appeared she wore hair extensions as well, which was later confirmed. The participant’s alteration of her hair and her written statement concerning attractiveness imply that she has

internalized and conformed to a social standard of what is perceived as attractive. Whereas, another participant stated that her hair texture was in its natural state and admitted to wearing a wig. In contrast, the participant stated that she loved herself and her natural hair texture; however, no indication was made as to why she wore the wig. Yet, another participant stated that African American women are expected to straighten and lengthen their hair in order to acquire a corporate job. She suggested that long, straight hair represented success. Another participant described, in her stream of consciousness piece, an experience when she wore her hair in its natural state. The participant expressed that other African American young women made derogatory comments about her hair saying that she looked “stupid.” In contrast, the participant noted that African American young women with lighter skin tones and hair of a different texture than the participant’s hair wore their hair in its natural state and received positive comments about their appearance. Participant stated that she is “happy” when she chooses to be different (e.g., wearing her hair in its natural state). The participant’s statement implied that natural hair for African Americans is “different” from the norm indicating a level of internalization. The researcher observed that on the day of the focus group, the participant wore her hair straightened. The intersection of race/ethnicity and gender are applicable when discussing appearance of hair with the African American young adult women participants. This is a prevalent issue relevant to the African American woman’s experience. Although there may be more acceptance in the African American community to wear hair in its natural state as suggested in research related to ethnicity and ethnic identity, it appears that stigmas may be still attached to African American hair texture and those stigmas may have been internalized by some of the African American young adult women participants (Bellinger, 2007). Few studies exist that explore the association of hair texture to self-concept in African American women.



Additional studies may be needed to examine different levels of internalization and its impact on self-concept in African American young adult women.

Another consistency of the research focus is the need to dispel negative social perceptions and negative stereotypes of African Americans (Gillum, 2002; Hill, 2009; Kit, Tuokko, & Mateer, 2008; Sanders & Sullivan, 2010). Most participants stated that they needed to “prove” themselves or “represent” their race in a positive manner. Previous studies support that African Americans believe that they have to perform better than their White counterparts in order to be socially acknowledged and accepted (Graham & Anderson, 2008). The participants provided examples of experiences of when they felt pressured to “represent” their race. One participant stated that she wanted to “prove them [Whites] wrong.” Participants appeared to be motivated to achieve when confronted with negative expectations or beliefs about them individually or as an African American woman. The internalization of negative messages with the need to “prove others wrong” could imply the belief that there may be some level of truth to the stigma or stereotype. Whereas, with other issues discussed such as body image, the participants appeared to reject social concepts or labels, relying on perceived inner strength to overcome distress. In contrast, when considering performance, motivation to excel seemed extrinsic rather than intrinsic. Congruent with previous studies, one explanation could stem from the dominant culture’s perception that African Americans are inferior to other cultures. However, further research in this area is needed to explore motivating factors associated with performance excellence.

A predominant theme supported by the current research findings is the level of familial influences on internalized oppression and self-concept (Brown & Krishnakumar, 2007; Hurd et al., 2009; Street, Harris-Britt, & Walker-Barnes, 2009; Townsend, 2008; Wood, Kurtz-Costes,

Rowley, & Okeke-Adeyanju, 2010). Many of the participants related absent male figures to presenting issues of their lived experiences (Mandara et al., 2005). Participants suggested that absent fathers or their lack of support affected participant self-conceptualization. Participants conveyed issues with self-worth, feelings of detachment, abandonment, and disappointment. Also relevant was the suggestion of some participants that girls with absent fathers and emotional detachments may need and may search for male affection and male validation which could result in sexual irresponsibility or teen pregnancy. Although eight of the nine participants expressed physical and/or emotional detachment from their fathers, none of the participants have children. Furthermore, most of the participants perceived their mothers' lived experience as undesirable. Most of the participants stated that they wanted to be "better" than their mothers. Some participants stated that their mothers had expressed the same sentiments. Participants stated that they perceived African American mothers as single, implying a disruption in the African American family structure. One participant stated a strong desire to have her parents reunited. Another participant suggested that single motherhood was a typical state of the African American woman. Another participant expressed reservations about marriage because of perceptions shaped by her lived experience. One of her perceptions was that it is easier for African American men to leave a family than African American women because women are obligated to the children. The intersection of race/ethnicity and gender is relevant in this finding because of the perceptions the participants had formed of the African American woman's obligation to family. However, most participants described African American women as "strong." The use of perceived inner strength to cope with difficult situations has been documented in previous studies. Yet, studies conducted with African American adult women suggested that some African American women find the constant display of strength to be

physically and psychologically taxing. What this current study has found is that most of the African American young adult women participants seemed to rely on the concept of inner strength to cope with difficult situations as well. Two participants specifically identified with the “Strong Black Woman” concept. Overall, the perceived possession of strength appeared to be a major component for self-conceptualization for the participants.

An unanticipated finding of the current study was the participants’ perception of the African American woman’s social condition versus the African American man’s social condition. The participants were asked, “Do you experience more external oppression related to race/ethnicity or related to gender?” The participants overwhelmingly responded, “Both,” supporting the assertion that the intersectionality of race/ethnicity and gender is necessary in understanding the lived experiences of African American women. However, two participants suggested that African American men experience more social oppression than African American women. The participants explained that negative perceptions and low expectations of African American men placed African American men at a greater social disadvantage than African American women. One of the participants made a reference to President Obama, it seemed, as an effort to refute society’s negative perception of African American men. Despite experiences of gendered racism, participants seemed to perceive race/ethnicity as a more salient factor in determining social condition and level of oppression. Race/ethnic-related studies focusing on oppression and identity are well documented. However, studies that focus on sociological issues related to multiple oppressive constructs, such as race/ethnicity and gender, are scarce, especially qualitative studies that focus on the lived experiences of the targeted group.

### **Limitations of Study**

While the findings of the current study raised awareness of African American young adult women and their experiences with internalized oppression, methodological and researcher limitations should be noted. First, the methodological design used for this study was phenomenology with critical race as the theoretical framework. The researcher conducted two separate focus group interviews – one group with four participants and one group with five participants. The researcher did not have a follow-up interview session with the groups. A second interview session with each focus group may have generated data not obtained during the first sessions. A second session also could have given the researcher the opportunity to explore the underlying theme of resilience and resistance more deeply. Although Critical Race Theory allowed the researcher the opportunity to explore social issues related to race and gender, the additional use of Black Feminist Theory may have allowed the researcher to capitalize more on the exploration of resilience and resistance as forms of empowerment for African American women. The use of focus groups relies on participant self-report. Scholars should remain cognizant that participants may have responded based on selective memory, exaggeration, or reluctance to provide full disclosure. Also, the small sample size hinders generalizability and transferability of the findings. However, generalizability was not a goal of the current study. Still, the reader may utilize participant statements in determining the possibility of transferability.

Additional limitations must be considered as well. The researcher focused the study primarily on the concomitant relationship of race/ethnicity and gender and may not have fully addressed identity and self-conceptualization with regard to sexual orientation and socioeconomic status. Consideration of socioeconomic status may have provided more insight

into the level of participant exposure to forms of oppression, social inequalities and privilege and may have been influential in how participants responded to certain questions. Lastly, the study concentrated on the age range of 18-20 years old. The age range represented the adolescence stage of development; however, the study did not account for developmental differences within the participant sample. A longitudinal study may help to investigate the impact of internalized oppression at various developmental stages for African American young adult women.

### **Future Research**

In addressing the aforementioned limitations, future research would benefit from the inclusion of additional identity indicators such as sexual orientation, immigrant status, disabilities, socioeconomic status, or residency. Some participants suggested that African American young adult men were more at a social disadvantage than African American young adult women. Future studies with African American young adult male participants would be beneficial or a study with male and female participants may be revealing. An exploration of coping mechanisms may provide more insight into how African American young adult women manage psychological distress. Future research should particularly examine resiliency, the origins of individual strength, and the relationship to overcoming adversity. Findings of the current study suggest that family dynamics influence internalized oppression in African American young adult women which impacts how they self-conceptualize. Additional research related to familial contributions to internalized oppression could be useful. More qualitative studies may provide better insight into personal realities and perceptions and possibly validate the experiences of marginalized groups that have traditionally been ignored in research studies and devalued in society. A longitudinal design may enhance understanding of the phenomenon. Using a phenomenological research design coupled with a critical race

approach will enable the researcher to consider and understand that racism and sexism are two forms of oppressive intolerance that could affect the lived experiences of African American young adult women.

### **Implications for Practice**

Programs such as empowerment groups, all female assemblies, and leadership skills building are needed to empower African American young adult women and promote resilience. Careful consideration should be taken not to confuse the ability to cope and self-protect with healthy emotional and psychological functioning. Particular attention should be given to outward manifestations that could be indicative of internalized oppression, such as binge eating, promiscuity, or aggression. Also, aggression should not be confused with assertiveness.

Practical methods to address internalized oppression in African American young adult women include the use of group work. Studies have shown that communalism is a cultural trait for African Americans (Phinney & Alpuria, 1987; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Group work could provide opportunities to engage in dialogue with others who have expressed experiencing pressures that they have internalized (Singh & Salazar, 2010). Group work should focus on gendered racial issues such as deconstructing negative stereotypes and stigmas related to physical attributes. Group work should also be affirming of identity and positive self-concepts (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). Stream of consciousness writing is an authentic means of recording experiences without censor. This will allow African American young adult women the opportunity to reflect on negative experiences that may be sources of internalized oppression and analyze what influence the experience may have had on self-conceptualization.

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## **CHAPTER 4**

### **CONCLUSION: A THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION BASED ON RESEARCH CONDUCTED WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUNG ADULT WOMEN**

This introspective account of research conducted with African American young adult women represents a deeper understanding that I have gained of myself as a researcher and of the research process overall. Highlighting aspects of my reflexivity, mostly drawn from reflective journals and field notes, I explore how my personal experiences and positionality may have affected various stages of the research process. From the beginning of this research process, I relied on reflexivity as a way to process my personal feelings related to aspects of the study. As the researcher, I critically examined my biases, values, personal background, and past experiences with the related topic and I engaged in continuous self-analysis throughout the process in an effort to minimize the influence of personal assumptions on the interpretation of the data (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010). I found it most beneficial to reflect, in writing, those personal experiences and those social and cultural elements that prompted my desire to research this topic. One of my goals as a social justice advocate is to empower young African American women so they can identify and deal with internalized oppression in order to deconstruct negative self-concepts and reconstruct healthy, positive self-concepts. These reflections have provided me with a better understanding of my strengths and challenges. I am fully aware that my struggles, my victories, my means of support, and even my privilege all have influenced the way I view myself as a researcher and as an advocate.

### **Personal Context and Topic Choice**

My chosen research approach and theoretical lens for this study supported a social justice research exploration which strengthened my motivation for social justice advocacy. When I began my doctoral studies, I was uncertain about what topic I would explore and I was unsure about what methodology I would utilize. However, over the course of my studies, I was fortunate to be exposed to theories, analytical frameworks, and subject matter concentrated on the principles of social justice advocacy. I was able to delve into the literature and make connections between my own experiences and those detailed in scholarly journals. Throughout my reading, I was dismayed to find a lack of information related to the experiences of young African American women. Much of what I read emphasized issues primarily related to race/ethnicity. Other literature covered issues about gender. Furthermore, a wealth of the research available was quantitative in nature. Very few readings addressed the intersectionality of race/ethnicity and gender and how these social constructs impact the lived experiences of African American women, particularly African American women emerging from adolescence into adulthood. Even more disappointing was the realization that the experiences of young African American women was either absent from so many studies related to human development or they were included as somewhat of a footnote. This prompted me to view the gaps in the scholarship as a social justice issues that needed to be addressed.

As a result of my reflexivity, I elected to focus my research study on African American young adult women in an effort to give voice to a population that has been virtually ignored or overlooked in the realm of research. For me, the implication was that the devalued existence of African American women in society was just as devalued in the world of research which compelled me to move forward with my study. My goal was to add to the scholarship as well as

provoke a level of awareness of the impact social injustices have on the lived experiences of African American young adult women. Therefore, I needed a methodology and a dissertation format that would enable me to accomplish this goal. Creswell (2007) suggests that research should be presented in a variety of ways, journal articles being one. A qualitative research design coupled with a Critical Race theoretical lens provided the means and the scientific rigor to gather data (Hays & Singh, 2011) for this study and the nontraditional manuscript format for this dissertation allowed for possible journal submission opportunities in the future. “Using an interpretive lens may also lead to the call for action and transformation – the aims of social justice—in which the qualitative project ends with distinct steps of reform and an incitement to action” (Creswell, 2007).

### **Phenomenology as a Research Method**

As noted in my reflective journal, initially, I struggled with what I would examine specifically as it related to African American young adult women. I felt it was important to focus on young adult women ages 18-20 years old. I have worked in education for over fifteen years as a teacher and a counselor at the high school level. I have observed the effects of race/ethnic-related and gender-related stressors on the emotional and psychological health of African American young adult women. I have observed the detriment that oppression has on their self-conceptualization. But, I have also observed the resiliency and resistance they exercise when confronted with deplorable, unjust circumstances. My interest in their personal truths lead me to a suitable guiding research question: What are the experiences of African American young adult women who have internalized oppression? Additionally, I ventured to examine the impact internalized oppression has on self-conceptualization for this particular group. My quest

to understand the essence of their lived experiences with internalized oppression led me to select a phenomenological approach.

Although I had battled my own encounters with oppression and acknowledged my own benefits of privilege, I prepared to learn from each of my participants. Even though the expectation was that common themes would emerge from the data analysis, each of their stories illuminated the human condition in unique ways. However, one participant made a comment that supported an assumption I had previously made about the African American woman's experience:

They [African American young adult women] have to be determined because it's like so many obstacles they have to go through when they just want to succeed in life 'cause people don't think they will.

When I see young African American women struggling with the same things I struggled with as an adolescent, I want to scream *enough is enough*. Because there was someone who advocated for me during my times of contention when I was an adolescent and because there was someone there for me to encourage me when I faced challenges, I now have a strong desire to do the same—to uplift those who are being oppressed and to stand up against those offenses that are keeping them oppressed.

As a phenomenological researcher, I was enriched by the experiences the nine participants shared. Although, I wondered if nine participants would be enough to capture the essence of the African American young adult women's lived experience. In selecting the young women for the study, I was dismayed when one of the participants did not attend the sessions. I had gotten her name through the process of snowballing. One of the other participants recommended her for the study and during her phone screening, she willingly answered the

questions. I was later told that she had to work. Nonetheless, the young ladies who did participate provided a wealth of enlightening information. I was excited to hear the commonalities and differences of their experiences. I found myself asking quite a few follow up questions which made my transcriptions even longer but to see their words on paper brought a sense of satisfaction. Initially, I was concerned as to whether or not the participants would be forthcoming with their stories or would they try to hide their true feelings and perspectives (Creswell, 2007).

I also found interesting that some of the information they shared was consistent with the literature such as their frustration of dealing with stereotypes and stigmas and their high level of self-esteem despite their struggles with body image. Their reliance on “inner strength” or resiliency was a commonality. However, their levels of vulnerability were obvious when discussing issues concerning their mothers and fathers.

Shortly after my data had been collected and tapes had been transcribed, in my journal, I began to question what sharing this information would mean. I had an increased concern as to the impact my interpretation of the data would have on the participants and the readers (Creswell, 2009). Would readers take the findings and dismiss them as if there is no value in what these young women had to say? Will their voices be ignored yet again? Will someone misconstrue the information and use it as a form of defamation or as a way to pass judgment? Will this study actually help bring awareness to other cultures? Will their voices matter? Will anyone care? These are all questions that I still ask myself as a result of conducting this study. But, I believe this research was significant and relevant to understanding the human condition of a marginalized population disproportionately represented in areas of research.

In my journal I wrote that I could identify with their struggle. I understood the inner turmoil one goes through when conflicted about your place in this world. Because of my connection to this topic, the use of the reflective journal was invaluable. In the reflective journal, I was able to express my frustrations, my disappointments, my sadness, and even my excitement at knowing the great potential each participant has without transferring those feelings onto the participants. Although the study is complete and the member checking is done, I still think about them. Some of them shared their summer plans with me and now I envision them happy and achieving their goals with anticipation for what is to come in the future. These young women are at a stage in their life when they are seeing the world for what it is and what it could be. When they leave the somewhat secure environments of their homes, will the “strength” that they say they have, be enough to help them achieve the quality of life they hope to have? I want to hear from them in the future. I want to know that they are doing well and that maybe they are doing something to empower other young women to overcome adversity.

### **A Critical Race Theoretical Lens**

The methodological implication of using a phenomenological research design coupled with a critical race approach is that this method will affect the way I, as the researcher, interpret and present the data as well as how the reader perceives the information (Creswell, 2007). For instance, a critical race theoretical framework enabled me to consider that racism and sexism are two forms of oppressive intolerance that are embedded in U.S. society. Therefore, the critical race theorist/researcher positions racism and sexism as central factors of the research process as a means to challenge and “offer transformative solutions to racial, gender, and class subordination in our societal and institutional structures” (Creswell, 2007, p. 28). That being the case, the researcher must acknowledge that issues with racism and sexism are so closely connected for

African American women. Like the participants in this current study, it is difficult to assess which is more oppressive. However, literature tends to focus more on race/ethnic-related issues in regards to African Americans and although the participants expressed the interconnectedness of their oppressive situations, that is race/ethnic-related and gender-related, many of their responses reflected more race/ethnicity salience.

Definitely, racism and sexism have impacted my life in significant ways and the challenges I have had to face because of it have spawned a desire to involve myself in activism that could lead to revamping the social conditions in this country that impeded the goals and aspirations of young African American women. Hopefully, like the efforts of those in various relevant social movements, my efforts will reach beyond my targeted group of interest and help destroy barriers that oppress other targeted groups as well. However, through the process of reflexivity, I was able to bracket my thoughts and attitudes related to racism and sexism and the use of Critical Race Theory allowed me structurally address these social issues in relation to my study of African American young adult women. According to Torres, Howard-Hamilton, and Cooper (2003), “theory protects us against our own unconsciousness.” As a researcher, I was able to hear the stories of other young African American women who have experienced the phenomenon of internalized oppression and how it was exacerbated by issues of race/ethnicity and gender without impressing upon them my feelings and attitudes about racism and sexism.

Additionally, the study confirmed for me that Social Constructivism—a worldview which posits that individuals understand the world in which they live and make meaning of their experiences based on multiple views and their perception of reality (Creswell, 2007)—was an appropriate lens to use in conjunction with Critical Race theory. The participants’ motivation toward success would support the tenets of empowerment related to Critical Race Theory and

also the intersectionality of race/ethnicity and gender. Yet, I wonder how to empower more and exact organizational change. Although it is apparent that some young African American women can endure under the weight of oppression, why do they even have to? Although utilizing strength to make it through daily challenges is admirable, I still ask why young African American women have to cope with the ills of the society? What is the cure? Will there ever be a time when everyone's life has a sense of value and relevance?

As I reflect, ways in which racism and sexism have impacted my life can be explained mostly through perceptions of image and voice. Images presented as the norm or most desirable by the media have caused a constant struggle for me and likewise for my research participants. External pressures become internal pressures. Extreme dieting, skin bleaching, and hair styling have all been manifestations of racist and sexist views for many African American women at one time or another. Via the media and other various external sources, African American women have been criticized for body size and given dietary advice; they have been offered skin bleaching cream to "even out my skin tone;" they have been told that they shouldn't wear their hair too short because it's not feminine enough or they shouldn't straighten their hair because it is not "Black enough" or they shouldn't wear braids because it's "too Black." They have been warned that men like sexy, mostly defined as large breasts, a slim waist, long hair, and revealing clothes. They have been pressured to get married and have kids as if their existence is purposeless if they didn't. They have been called a bitch, and a "ho," and a "nigga," and fat, and the assumption has been made, just by looking at them, that they are ignorant, lazy, and angry. When they speak, their voice is dismissed; their concerns are ignored and are chalked up to simple anger and bitterness. Their voice is not valued, especially when their concerns, issues, or even ideas are presented to the culture of dominant White men. They are constantly proving



themselves, trying to validate that what they have to say is important. One participant recognized the psychological impact of societal portrayals of African Americans:

I don't think it's about how you been brought up. I think, it's all in the mind. It's all about the media or the world or what was in books for us Black kids or Black people. . . So, it's all about how people portray us in this world today. It's about society.

As I reflect, there have been times when I have felt disempowered and limited. Being bombarded with such negativity as it relates to my race/ethnicity and my gender has caused internalized oppression which has constructed emotional barriers of fear, frustration, and feelings of inadequacy. Even with my support systems, my education, my knowledge of self and cultural heritage, I still struggle with those emotional barriers from time to time. Permanent scars have developed, but my proclivity to challenge those social injustices medicates my wounds. I am stronger because of the offences I have experienced and have overcome. I am wiser because of the knowledge I have sought and have put to use.

### **Recommendations and Implications for Future Researchers**

Future researchers should realize that education and personal growth are a continuous part of the process and practice of advocacy. By studying and understanding theories of oppression, researchers can better analyze systemic development of oppression and explore solutions and offer recommendations that address such issues. There are three theoretical concepts that I examined in order to dissect the systemic problems of racism and sexism and that I recommend to future researchers: (a) Critical Race Theory which served as my analytical framework; (b) consciousness raising; and (c) ideas surrounding multiple identities.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was birthed out of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Two prevalent ideas emerged—that racism is systemic, affecting both the targeted

group and dominating group; and that acts of racism can be overt as well inconspicuous. The Civil Rights Movement forced an effort to raise public awareness and created a platform to peacefully protest racial injustices. However, the origin of this problem dates back to slavery. Because of legalized enslavement, African Americans have suffered years of systemic oppression. Unfortunately, even after emancipation, the dominate culture continued to enforce actions of iniquity, segregation, and discrimination. This historical and continued subjugation has branded African Americans as a dejected race causing us to still have to struggle against a system that is structured to deny economic and social advancement to the collective.

Interestingly, I read that “a father’s economic status continues to be the best predictor of the status of his offspring. . .” Growing up, my father consistently made it a point to express that he wanted his children to be more successful than him. This is why he worked so hard to provide for us and send all four of us to college. Although he had experienced more severe forms of racism than me, and even understanding the extent of systemic racism, he felt education was the key to his children’s betterment. This, of course, is a cultural mindset reflected in the responses of the participants in this current study.

So, where do we go from here? Future researchers should consider utilizing qualitative methods of research to fill the gaps found in current literature. Deciphering the best possible way to examine issues related to young African American women is integral in how the data is interpreted and presented in writing. Although quantitative data can provide data gathered from numerous participants, qualitative methods allow the researcher the opportunity to “explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). Qualitative research allows the researcher to embrace multiple realities (Creswell, 2007). Further, interpretive frameworks provide the structure for data analysis. For instance,

Critical Race Theory is a means to challenge racism and dominate assumptions about African American culture. The idea is to have people of color share their perspectives and experiences. Personalizing the voice of the oppressed may be an effective form of empowerment.

Consciousness-raising is a main staple of the feminist movement. Like Critical Race Theory, the use of storytelling is an effective strategy of empowerment. For example, the use of women's individual stories prompts discussion about women's experiences as a whole. The goal is to provoke critical self-evaluation moving women towards a personal awareness. In order to have collective liberation, there must be personal liberation. After self-reflection, there should be a move to action. Over time, women have been conditioned to believe that they should accept an oppressed station in life. But, what has hurt us most is a lack of knowledge. Through consciousness-raising, women should be compelled to challenge oppressive beliefs and to change oppressive patterns, thinking, and behaviors.

The range of personal experiences has moved theorists to consider the connection of multiple issues. Each person is complex and has multiple identities; so, an advocate must take that into account. As I stated before, the issues that my research participants shared related to racism and sexism tend to overlap. So, I pose the question—what connects the “isms”? For the most part, the ingredients of oppression are the same across the board. Pervasiveness, restrictions, hierarchy, and internalization all make up the recipe for systemic oppression. Although the targeted group varies, the elements of oppression remain constant. Therefore, common strategies to oppose it are appropriate. For instance, it is no wonder that both critical race theorists and feminist theorists utilize the narrative to illustrate personal perspective and experience in order to challenge injustices.

Writing this dissertation was an amazing journey for me. The more I discovered through the literature and the focus group interviews, the more I wanted to know and the more I wanted to write. Generally, I have always believed that we all have a social responsibility to help eradicate oppressive social conditions. Now, after writing this dissertation, the belief that people should be able to develop their full capacities has been made stronger and my desire to aid in this movement is more intense. As noted in my reflective journal, I was not only moved by the stories the participants shared but I was also inspired by their resilience that despite their circumstances, they have learned to rise above their predicaments and their strength was evident in their optimism for the future.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**







**APPENDIX B**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC FORM**

**Demographic Form**  
Please complete the following

Focus Group #:

Identification Number:

Age:

Highest educational level attained:

High School

College

Freshman

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

Check all that apply:

Student

Military

Employed

Unemployed

Single (not in a relationship)

Single (in a relationship)

Married

Have child/children

Currently live in the state where you were born

Get along with parent(s)

Involved in African American Organizations

Attends church regularly

Heterosexual

Lesbian

Bisexual

Health issues

Sometimes I have negative feelings about myself as a young African American woman. YES / NO

Sometimes I have negative feelings about African American women as a group. YES / NO

Sometimes I think that being an African American woman is an obstacle for me. YES / NO

Sometimes I believe that I could be more in life if I was not an African American woman. YES / NO

Sometimes I am angry or embarrassed about being an African American woman. YES / NO

After the data of this study is analyzed, would you like to be contacted to provide feedback?

YES

NO

If yes, how would you like to be contacted?

By Email      email address: \_\_\_\_\_

By Phone      phone number: \_\_\_\_\_