

Research Statement

Over the past seven years, my research interests have focused on gender socialization and identity development, academic achievement and motivation, and research methodologies. I investigate the intersection of race, ethnicity and gender, and its implication for identity development and educational attainment. I am particularly interested in the socialization of masculinity among African American boys as mediated by their relationships with significant individuals, as well as the micro- and macro-level structures and psychosocial experiences that influence African American and Latino students' educational experiences. My research is theoretically informed by developmental psychology, feminist relational psychology, gender role strain, conceptions of Black masculinity and theories of motivation and achievement. Even more important, my research is guided by the principal that socio-cultural and historical context are important in the study of phenomenon. To this end, I use both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies in my research. Below, I describe my past, current and future research initiatives in the areas of interest stated above.

Gender socialization and identity development

The scholarship on African American boys has focused almost exclusively on pathology and risk. Such research and writing has contributed to disingenuous characterization and limited understanding of African American boys' lives. Noticeably absent from this work is an understanding of the ways in which their behaviors and presentation of self are adaptive and reflective of agency and purpose. As a doctoral student, I began to address this gap in knowledge in my dissertation study of adolescent African American males. One of the main goals of the study was to examine the ways in which they constructed their masculine identity and responded to messages from significant adults and peers about socio-cultural and normative gender behavior and characteristics. A significant finding of this research is that African American boys are active participants in the construction of their masculine identity, as evident by the multiple ways in which they responded to socio-cultural conceptions of masculinity [1]. Another interesting finding was the boys' articulation of rules governing gendered behavior and characteristics, specifically crying and fighting. Their narrative accounts provided insight into the process through which the rules are communicated across generations and within peer groups [2]. Central to the findings of my dissertation is the importance of a contextual understanding of development, and the role of adult and peer relationships in the socialization of gender norms.

Recognizing the impact of early socialization practices on development, I expanded my work on boy's development by co-collaborating with Dr. Oscar Barbarin (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, PI) on a study of African American boys' during their formative years (age 3-8). As a base for understanding the development of African American boys, this project aims to provide insight into how young African-American boys are making sense of their world. Specifically, this project examines the social, academic, and familial environment for clues related to factors that might influence academic, socio-emotional and identity development. Using ethnographic methods, the following broad research questions are under investigation: 1.) *How do African-American boys understand the world around them?* and 2.) *How does the environment influence African-American boys?* Preliminary findings suggest that African American boys' understanding of the world is informed by direct, indirect, and inadvertent/unintentional messages communicated by their parents. These messages are often reflective of parent's race, gender and academic expectations, as well as their lived experiences. We expect this finding to be consistent across all families in the study, and have begun the process of preparing a peer-review manuscript focusing on this typology of messages [3]. Subsequent analyses of the data will have implications for a large-scale intervention project under

the direction of Dr. Barbarin. Within the context of this project (Promoting Academic Success in Boys of Color), I am assisting in the development of assessment and evaluation tools to be implemented over the course of the project, and serve as the lead qualitative investigator. The goals of this project are to build and support the partnership between the families, schools, and communities to improve the academic achievement and socio-emotional development of boys of color. A secondary goal of the project is to provide family-, teacher-, and community-based interventions that have shown some evidence of improving the learning and development of boys of color.

Academic Achievement and Motivation

In addition to gender socialization and identity development, my research explores minority students' academic achievement and motivation. Specifically, I am interested in the factors that arrest and promote school engagement, participation, and performance for minority students attending urban schools. As a graduate student, I collaborated with Drs. Michael Nakkula and Joel Vargas (Harvard University Graduate School of Education and Jobs for the Future, respectively) on a longitudinal study examining the schooling experiences of African American and Latino students participating in the Early College High School Initiative (ECHS). The goal of the initiative is to reduce the attrition rate of African American and Latino students at the post-secondary level by providing access to and support in college-level courses while enrolled in high school. Early analyses suggest that enrollment in an ECHS contributes to increased academic self-concept, engagement, and performance [4]. Having recently completed our fourth year of data collection (senior year), we are in the process of analyzing the data to understand more fully the students' experiences and the implication for academic identity development and educational attainment.

In addition to the ECHS initiative, I collaborated on another longitudinal project with Dr. Janine Bempechat (Wheelock College) that focused on high achievement among low income students of color, and examined individual, family, and school factors that both foster and inhibit academic achievement in public and Catholic schools. Although we continue to analyze the data, preliminary analysis suggests the importance of school structure, school culture, and teacher-student relationships in the differential achievement levels across school type. Like the ECHS study, subsequent analysis of this data will focus on the nuances in the students' perception of their educational experiences.

My involvement in these two studies has contributed to my interest in the micro (e.g., school structure) and macro-structural (e.g., racism and discrimination) and contextual factors that impact academic achievement and motivation. Even more, they have increased my interest in the psychosocial experiences that inform one's sense of self and academic achievement. For students struggling to integrate and understand competing aspects of their identity, this area of inquiry seems particularly important. For example, studies have found boys of color to be particularly at-risk for dis-identification, disengagement and under-achievement when they are unable to successfully integrate their social, academic and gender identity (Dance, 2002; Ferguson, 2000). Therefore, it is critical to understand how we can support students, in general, and boys in particular in their academic pursuits while simultaneously attending to their emotional and psychological well-being. This line of research may prove useful in designing multi-system interventions to promote social and academic development of African-American boys.

Research Methodology

In addition to the above research areas, I am interested in exploring more concretely the ways in which qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry can be used in concert to inform an understanding of this phenomenon. Although much of my recent research on masculinity is qualitative in design, I have begun to think about the ways in which survey instruments can be used to facilitate an understanding of gender identity development for adolescent boys of color. While several instruments exist measuring various aspects of gender role and identity development, I know of only one instrument that is designed solely for use with adolescent boys and it is in the infancy stage of development. Further, less than five percent of the boys sampled, from which the scale was piloted and validated, identified as African American, suggesting that the scale may not be useful for diverse populations of adolescent boys (Chu et. al, 2005). Given the history of misuse of psychological measures to pathologize and marginalize African American males, it is especially important to develop scales that are sensitive to socio-cultural context. Therefore, it seems prudent to explore how qualitative data and existing knowledge about masculinity scales can be used together to create a scale that measures the degree to which African American boys internalize messages about masculinity and if the process of internalization is developmental or experiential while considering context. In general, a mixed-method approach will allow for a more comprehensive and contextual understanding of boys' development. To this end, my training and experience as a statistician and qualitative researcher provide a solid foundation for thinking about how these two methodological approaches might be integrated to more fully understand the lives of boys of color, and ultimately contribute to the creation of new knowledge about boys' development.

Future Directions of Research

Over the next few years, I plan to continue my efforts to contribute to the research and scholarship on boy's development. In particular, I will expand the work of my dissertation in two interrelated ways: 1) by examining the ways in which other marginalized male groups (e.g., Latino, Asian, gay youth) narrate, construct, and make sense of their masculine identity. A secondary goal of this research is to investigate the ways boys from diverse cultures are unique and similar in their gender socialization and identity development; and 2) by examining more explicitly the impact of gender socialization practices on psychological and emotional health, and academic engagement and achievement. An important goal of this research is to contribute to the development of culturally-appropriate and sensitive programming and policies that improve the outcomes (i.e., emotional, social, psychological, educational) of boys of color.

Related to my interest in academic achievement and motivation, I plan to continue my collaborative work on the ECHS initiative. Currently, Dr. Nakkula and I are pursuing funding opportunities to follow-up with the students upon completion of their first year of college. A particular focus will be on the sustainability of an achieved academic identity beyond the first year of college. Additionally, I will expand this area of research by collaborating on a study of the middle-school transition. The goal of this project, broadly, is to identify factors that lead to academic success across the transition to middle school for African American youth, and how this process differs for boys versus girls. To this end, I will be submitting a grant application, along with my collaborators (Drs. Beth Kurtz-Costes and Stephanie Rowley, University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill and University of Michigan—Ann Arbor, respectively), to the National Science Foundation, Developmental and Learning Science program, to support this research initiative.

In moving forward, my research agenda has the potential to further elucidate gender socialization processes and identity development for boys of color, in general, and African American boys in particular. Even more, it seeks to elucidate the complex contextual and structural factors that are the underpinnings of students' academic success. Finally, my research will enhance the field of psychology and education in four main areas: 1) gender socialization process in marginalized communities, 2) adolescent development; 3) student motivation and achievement; and 4) research methodology.

[1] Howard, L.C. (*under review*). Performing masculinity: A qualitative examination of adolescent African American boys' response to gender scripts.

[2] Howard, L.C. (*under review*). African American boys' masculine identity: Understanding the rules of crying and fighting.

[3] Howard, L.C., McCrae, M.T., Sterrett, E.M., & Barbarin, O.A. (*in preparation*). Exploring the lives of African American boys during the formative years: An ethnographic study.

[4] Nakkula, M.J. & Foster, K.C. (2007). Academic identity development: Students' experiences in two early college high schools. In N. Hoffman, J. Vargas, A. Venezia & M. Miller (Eds.), *Minding the gap: Why integrating high school with college makes sense and how to do it*, (pp. 151-1570). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.