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# Sociocultural, sociohistorical, and sociopolitical effects on African American women's sense of self

Leslie Carol Leathers  
*University of Iowa*

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SOCIOCULTURAL, SOCIOHISTORICAL, AND SOCIOPOLITICAL EFFECTS ON  
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S SENSE OF SELF

by

Leslie Carol Leathers

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of  
Philosophy degree in Psychological and Quantitative Foundations (Counseling  
Psychology) in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

May 2010

Thesis Supervisor: Professor William Ming Liu

## ABSTRACT

The current study was an attempt to increase understanding within the field about the self-conceptualization processes of African American women given the perceptions/ stereotypes that exist about them. Grounded theory methodology was utilized to ascertain participants' understanding of themselves as well as whether historical and/or contemporary perceptions/stereotypes impacted how they saw themselves. The African American women in this study tended to define themselves in positive terms. Often their self-definitions included perceptions/stereotypes that are typically thought to be socially desirable (e.g., strong and independent). The participants' self-definitions tended to exclude perceptions/ stereotypes that carry more negative connotations (e.g., loud and unintelligent). Future research should investigate the implications of perceptions/stereotypes for self-concepts of African American women who are also members of other traditionally oppressed groups.

Abstract Approved:

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Thesis Supervisor

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Date

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

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has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Psychological and Quantitative Foundations (Counseling Psychology) at the May 2010 graduation.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

African American women contribute much to the diverse tapestry of American culture. When they become our clients, they are entitled to receive the highest standard of care available, and to benefit from the latest scientific gains in the field of psychology (American Psychological Association (APA) Code of Ethics, 2002). The current dissertation is an effort to increase practitioners' cultural competence in order to aid them in providing the highest possible care to their African American female clients.

#### **Overview**

This chapter explores the need for practitioners to understand more about how African American women arrive at conceptualizations about themselves. Chapter 2 will provide a review of the extant literature on African American women's development of a sense of self. Chapter 3 will describe the methodology that was utilized in the investigation of African American women's sense of self. Chapter 4 will present the results of the current study, and chapter 5 will discuss the placement of current findings amongst other research involving African American women's self-concept.

#### **Definitions**

This section provides clarification of some terms that are used frequently throughout this document.

#### *Self-Concept*

Gottfredson (1985) notes that there is little agreement within the field of psychology on the definition of self-concept. However, she acknowledges that self-concept includes two major components – identities and self-esteem. More specifically, identities encompass

the ways in which one perceives oneself. Further nuances exist in the definitions of self-esteem found in the literature referring to African American women. Rosenberg's conceptualization of self-esteem holds that someone with positive self-esteem holds her/himself in positive regard and considers her/himself to be a decent person (Rosenberg & Pearlin, 1978). Turnage (2004) describes self-esteem as being composed of two parts – feeling deserving of love and feeling competent. Moreover, Schmitt and Allik (2005) describe self-esteem as an individual's overall belief in her/his worthiness. For the purposes of this dissertation, self-esteem will refer to the common element within the preceding definitions. Thus, self-esteem is how one evaluates oneself (i.e., negatively or positively).

#### *African American Women*

For the purposes of this dissertation, the term African American women refers to women who identify as African American or Black American, and are of African descent who have lived in the United States their entire lives.

#### *Stereotypes*

Stereotypes are oversimplified, often exaggerated notions of a group or people.

#### *Sexism*

Sexism consists of prejudice, stereotypes, and/or discrimination based on biological sex or gender.

#### *Racism*

Racism consists of prejudice, stereotypes, and/or discrimination based on the socially constructed concept of race.

### **African American Women and Mental Health**

The Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health Care for African Americans notes that good rapport between therapist and client, and therapists' understanding of African American clients' cultural identity and self-esteem may be important components of therapeutic relationships with African Americans. The Report suggests that attention to the rapport with and culture and self-esteem of African Americans may prevent the tendency of African American clients to prematurely terminate, or completely avoid, mental health services.

Likewise, in an article for Women's eNews, Curphey (2003) notes that although many African American women experience some form of mental health concerns (e.g., depression, anxiety), relatively few seek help from mental health professionals. Curphey cites licensed clinical psychologist, Gloria Morrow, who provides therapy to mostly African American female clientele in discussing reasons African American women often do not seek professional mental health care. Specifically, Morrow opined that African American women often maintain a distrust and stigma of mental health care due partly to their trouble finding clinicians with whom they feel they can relate (Curphey, 2003).

Curphey (2003) notes that Latonya Slack, executive director of the California Black Women's Health Project (CABWHP), headed an investigation of African American women's utilization of mental health care services that included 1,300 African American women residing in California. She found that instead of seeking mental health treatment the African American women in her study tended to suppress feelings, allowing frustration to mount and eventually be released via crying or conflict. Slack postulated that African American women's underutilization of mental health care is partially due to

fear of the medical system that, in the past, has exploited African Americans (e.g., the Tuskegee experiment; Curphey, 2003). Other reasons for African American women's under use of professional mental health care include cultural values of relying on spiritual leaders and methods of coping, relying on extended family members and community members, as well as pooling limited resources in times of distress (Curphey, 2003; Gibbs & Fuery, 1994). Furthermore, Slack noted that a commonly held cultural belief among African American women is that they should embody strength at all times. Strength in this context includes "toughness and self-sacrifice" as well as the notion that suffering is part of every African American woman's inheritance. Thus, suffering represents, not an anomaly that requires treatment, but an expected part of life (Curphey, 2003).

Latonya Slack's organization CPBWHP began the "Black Women's Mental Health Initiative" which is intended to counter the distrust and stigma that many African American women feel regarding mental health treatment. The Initiative calls for a series of action steps to be taken by media and clinicians. For example, under the Initiative, members of the media should engage in more positive reporting regarding mental health issues. The Initiative also calls for mental health clinicians to recognize cultural differences, offer help respectfully, acknowledge adaptive as well as maladaptive coping mechanisms, and normalize mental health concerns when working with African American, female clients (Curphey, 2003).

In order for clinicians to recognize cultural differences, clinicians first need to make reasonable efforts to learn about the cultures of their clients and the impact of culture on their clients' realities. One part of understanding African American women's realities involves the recognition that African American women's experiences of

psychological distress are impacted by their membership in two traditionally marginalized groups. Namely, they are simultaneously African American (a socially constructed racial group that has been, and continues to be discriminated against based on phenotypic characteristics) and female (a group that has traditionally been subjugated based on sex). In order to increase the presence of African American women on their caseloads, and to maintain therapeutic relationships with African American female clients, clinicians may need to increase their awareness of what it means to be both African American and female (Davenport & Yurich, 1991).

African American women are a diverse group with respect to skin tone, social class, mental health concerns, and coping mechanisms. However, African American women share a common history, surviving in a country in which social and governmental policies have supported and perpetuated discrimination, sexual and economic exploitation, and relative powerlessness for women of African descent. The 1960s was one decade that produced marked social changes relevant to African American women. Since the 1960s African American women have achieved some educational and economic gains, have navigated the often difficult and uncharted terrain of integration, and have encountered additional stress from mobility and marginalization (Gibbs & Fuery, 1994). As Gibbs and Fuery (1994) note, comprehension of African American women's mental health issues is complicated as it is unclear to researchers and clinicians how much of African American women's mental health concerns are attributable to sexism, racism, or the dynamic interaction of the two.

Due to the intersection of sexism and racism, negative images of African American women have been present in society throughout the history of this country

(Gibbs & Fuery, 1994). Historically, negative beliefs regarding their inferiority have been the basis of policies that have limited African American women's chances for educational, employment and residential upward mobility (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). Stereotypes about African American women have been transmitted via mass media and centuries of literature, and subsequently reinforced through social policies (Gibbs & Fuery, 1994). For instance, some stereotypes, such as the "Black matriarch", have arisen from the perspective that African American women are strong, able to survive adversity and support their families all while creating and maintaining healthy self-esteem. Contrarily, other stereotypes, such as the "sexually promiscuous woman," have arisen from notions of African American women as impulsive, irresponsible, driven by sexual urges, and welfare queens (Gibbs & Fuery, 1994).

African American women exhibit varied responses to the stereotypes that exist about them. Those who are more aware of the stereotypes and accompanying discriminatory treatment may have poorer mental health (Williams, 2002; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). When a group of people becomes discriminated against based on their association with negative characteristics, that group of people becomes stigmatized. Once aware of their stigmatized status, individuals realize that others likely view them as less capable in some way(s) (Link & Phelan, 2006). Negative images of African Americans and objectifying portrayals of women abound in American culture. Such images and portrayals can damage the self-worth of at least some members of stigmatized groups. For one stigmatized group, African American women, this means that for at least some African American women, internalization of negative stereotypes



can undermine their health, creating suboptimal circumstances that may negatively impact their social and psychological functioning (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000).

But what separates African American women who internalize damaging negative stereotypes from those who do not (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000)? Williams & Williams-Morris (2000) note that as a field, we do not yet understand what factors make African American women more or less vulnerable to internalizing or rejecting negative stereotypes. Moreover, how are some African American women seemingly more successful at protecting themselves against the harmful effects of negative stereotypes? Williams & Williams-Morris (2000) assert that researchers need to identify what factors combine to make some members of stigmatized groups susceptible to internalization of negative stereotypes about them. The current study is an attempt at informing the field of African American women's self-conceptualization processes with respect to stereotypes that abound regarding African American women.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to review the extant literature on how African American women conceptualize themselves. This chapter will explore the varying sociocultural factors impacting the processes by which African American women develop a sense of self. Specifically, this chapter will describe work that has been done regarding African American women's self-conceptualizations and conclude with a research question that addresses a gap in the existing literature concerning African American women's processes of self-conceptualization.

Thomas (2004) calls for more research on African American women to understand African American women within the contexts of their lives. Some researchers who have answered Thomas' (2004) call have investigated the multiple identities that combine to shape the way African American women define themselves (e.g., Jackson & Mustillo, 2001; Milkie, 1999; Patterson, 2004; Reid, 2004; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996; Thomas, Witherspoon & Speight, 2004). In a special issue of the *Journal of Black Psychology* (2004) Reid asks the question of how we as researchers are defining African American women. In posing this question, Reid implies that to narrowly define this group of women is to only speak to the experiences of some African American women. African American women come in many different shades, body shapes, sexual orientations, and ability levels, and hail from a variety of regions, family systems, environments, and spiritual and economic backgrounds. To the extent that individuals identify as, and/or are perceived as African American women, they

invariably encounter (whether their experience occurs consciously or unconsciously) racist and sexist messages and acts (Reid, 2004).

Likewise, Shorter-Gooden and Washington (1996) assert that African American women in the United States develop a sense of self amidst a racist and sexist environment. Moreover, this group of Americans comprises a large portion of low-income individuals. Thus, they often encounter a third form of oppression based on membership in lower social class groups (Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). Hundreds of years of racist and sexist attacks have led to some commonly held stereotypes about African American women (Jackson & Mustillo, 2001). Although centuries have passed, stereotypes about African American women have remained relatively consistent. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) postulate that African American women's "lives are still widely governed by a set of old oppressive myths circulating in the White-dominated world" (p.2). African American women have been and often continue to be stereotyped in one of the following: mammy, Sapphire, jezebel, and Superwoman (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Thomas et al., 2004).

The current work is an attempt to add to the extant literature on the psychology of African American women by elucidating the ways in which African American women conceptualize themselves given historical and contemporary messages that would caricature them unfairly. More specifically, this study sought to uncover the impact of historical and contemporary societal messages on African American women's sense of self.

Many African American women are well aware of the stereotypes that the dominant culture has of them (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). But how much do

African American women internalize these stereotypes about themselves? How much do these depictions affect their conceptualizations of themselves? These questions are indicative of the complexity inherent in the self-conceptualization process of African American women. In an attempt to highlight the context in which African American women develop a sense of self, the rest of this chapter is divided into sections: the process of self-conceptualization, sociohistorical context of stereotypes, traditional and contemporary stereotypes of African American women, African American women and healthy self-concepts, conclusions, implications, and finally a research question. More specifically, by studying these topic areas, insight may be gained into how African American women manipulate information garnered from their sociopolitical environments to inform their sense of self. Additionally, we may better understand what it means for them to develop a sense of self amidst an environment that is often hostile towards them.

### **The Process of Self-Conceptualization**

In this study, African American women's development of a sense of self is discussed in terms of self-concept. By understanding how components are formed and combine to compose self-concept, a more complete understanding of the myriad factors affecting the overall development of African American women develops. Moreover, we learn how African American women negotiate all of those factors to arrive at a self-concept. In order to better understand the process of self-conceptualization for African American women, first, a general theory of self-concept will be discussed. Second, the application of a general understanding of self-concept will be analyzed for its relevance to African Americans. Third, because African American women's identity is often

assumed to be subsumed under African American identity models, a prominent racial identity model will be discussed in terms of its suitability for explaining the identity development of African American women. Fourth, a model of African American female self-concept will be explored.

### *Self-Concept General*

Gottfredson (1985) delineates the self as being the “active agent”, and the self-concept as the complete idea the “active” self holds of oneself (Gottfredson, 1985). Likewise, Beauboeuf (1999) noted that self-concept is considered to be the foundation of the self that individuals create to direct and understand their behavior and the behavior of others. Similarly, Demo (1992) considers self-concept to include all the factors that contribute to an individual’s overall perception of her/himself. More specifically, he reviewed self-concept as discussed from biological, developmental and psychosocial perspectives. He then presented an argument of self-concept as the sum of biological, developmental, and sociocultural factors that affect one’s reality over her/his lifespan. Furthermore, he asserted that while there is one part of self-concept that remains stable, the other part of self-concept is fluid. Change frequently occurs to this latter part of one’s self-concept with the addition of new social and personal roles, as well as with the development of more advanced intellectual abilities. Demo considered a generalized self-concept as being necessary for individuals to reference in order to know how they should think and behave across circumstances. Additionally, he argued that other aspects of self-concept are mediated by environment (Demo, 1992; Gecas, 1982).

From biological and developmental perspectives, by early adulthood, individuals are thought to be working to develop identities consistent with their new (adult) roles.

Theoretically, advances in problem-solving capabilities, intellectual functioning and memory facilitate the process of adult identity development as they allow for a more comprehensive valuation of the self. The ability to assess oneself generally improves from adolescence throughout one's life span (Cross & Madson 1997; Demo, 1992).

Moreover, self-assessments are influenced by comparisons with similar others throughout adulthood. However, comparisons with dissimilar others may grow more salient during middle adulthood. Presenting self-concept fluidity in this way allows investigators to consider the potential impact of developmental influences upon the process of self-conceptualization (Demo, 1992). Considering developmental influences implores researchers to appreciate the significance of role changes during young adulthood, as this is a time of much exposure to varying socialization influences, which may significantly affect the acquisition of new values and perspectives. Thus, self-concept may be more susceptible to change in young adulthood (compared to later adult years) as young adults are just learning and beginning to practice the tools they will later automatically use to maintain positive, healthy self-concepts (Demo, 1992).

#### *Self-Concept and African Americans*

Demo's (1992) exploration of self-concept literature, while acknowledging the importance of others in the formation of self-concept, approaches self-concept from a Euro American, individualistic vantage point. However, this is not the only way to explain the development of the self. In many other cultures throughout the world, the self is seen in conjunction with society. In such cultures, self-concepts are seen as evolving out of relationships and social groups. Thus, an individual's identity is intertwined with that of the group.

A Euro American, individualistic perspective is likely inappropriate for the consideration of self-concept of African Americans. This is because African Americans, like some other subcultural groups in the U.S. (such as Asian Americans and Latinos) have traditionally resisted adopting individualistic values and held to more collectivistic ideals (Allen & Bagozzi, 2001; Cross & Madson, 1997). For example, collectivism is a value central to many African Americans' understandings of themselves as it is one of the primary tenets of the Afrocentric worldview (Cokley, 2005). Moreover, Cokley (2005) asserts that in order to truly understand African American identity, it is necessary to explore the Afrocentric worldview, which forms the basis for African American culture. He also identifies elements of the Afrocentric worldview, in addition to collectivism, as being spiritualism, communalism, and a belief that self-knowledge is the foundation for all knowledge (Cokley, 2005). Thus, Cokley (2005) offers a general framework from which to understand African American identity. Let us now explore identity development.

Identity is formed dynamically from interactions with culturally similar and dissimilar others, and societal messages. More specifically, this means that individuals receive cultural cues about how to think and behave both from individuals close to them and those not personally known by them (e.g., teachers, parents, siblings, political leaders, role models; Cross & Madson, 1997). Because identities are born out of complex social interactions and factors, identities are sensitive to positive as well as negative societal messages. Moreover, as identities are susceptible to the negative as well as the positive, there are broad implications for African Americans who receive numerous adverse messages about what it means to be African American (Jones &

Shorter-Gooden, 2003). For example, one implication of the receipt of negative messages is that such information may in turn affect individuals' self-appraisals. Patterson (2004) notes that positive in-group appraisal is one factor that has typically been significant in positive self-appraisals of African Americans. Self-appraisals are important because they inform an individual's self-esteem.

Self-esteem has often been assessed through quantitative, self-report measures. Major and O'Brien (2005) suggest that more indirect measures of self-esteem (e.g., Implicit Association Test) allow for a more complete understanding of African Americans' perceptions of themselves. In protecting their self-esteem against threats arising from dominant cultural propagations of superiority, African Americans have been hypothesized to engage one or more of several methods of coping: 1) labeling negative events as discriminatory, 2) exerting minimal effort in situations in which there is a high perceived threat to one's identity, and 3) identifying more with one's marginalized group. However, Major and O'Brien (2005) note that as a field, we do not well understand how, among oppressed groups, one's perceptions of the group, environmental nuances, and personality characteristics impact self-esteem. They reviewed social psychological literature and found that although stigma has the potential to be extremely dangerous to those who are stigmatized, individual variations in responses to stigma account for much variability within stigmatized groups. As a field, we still need to understand what specific factors and conditions combine to make certain individuals resilient versus susceptible to potentially stigmatizing events in the environment (Major & O'Brien, 2005). The current study, with an investigation into how African American women negotiate historical and contemporary messages regarding themselves, was an attempt to



further our understanding of how African American women form self-concepts. Allen and Bagozzi (2001) worked to advance understanding of self-concept by studying the construct among African American women as well as men.

Allen and Bagozzi (2001) began their work with an assumption that the self as a construct significantly affects individuals from many cultural backgrounds (e.g., marginalized and dominant) and contexts. They studied the self-conceptualization process of African American men and women because they recognized that the legacy of the pernicious system of slavery has meant that African Americans have been challenged to create healthy, positive ideas of themselves in a country that once fueled its economy on the dehumanization of their ancestors. Thus, African Americans have faced many and varied challenges to the formation of healthy self-concepts. Specifically, Allen and Bagozzi (2001) combined items from four scales (African Self-Consciousness scale (Kambon, 1992), Ethnic Identity scale (Phinney, 1992), Black Identity scale (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000), and Individualism/Collectivism scale (Triandis, 1995)) to study African-centered versus non-African-centered self-concepts among African American men and women. They found that the majority of their participants, regardless of African-centeredness or non-African-centeredness, identified with the ingroup (i.e., African American; Allen & Bagozzi, 2001).

The works of Major and O'Brien (2005) and Allen and Bagozzi (2001) inform us that stigmatized groups, such as African Americans, face a challenge in the development of a healthy, positive self-concept. The common challenge among African Americans, regardless of gender, is confronting the myriad messages that if internalized would lead them to believe that they are inferior based solely on their racial group membership.

What follows is an exploration of theory of racial identity progression. A racial identity model is discussed because many African American women consciously explore their racial identity before, if ever exploring their gender identity (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). A prominent theorist in explaining racial identity, Helms (1993) offers perspectives on identity development specific to African Americans, yet does not profess to specifically address the impact of the nexus of race and gender on African American women's development of self-concept. A discussion of Helms' (1993) theory of identity pertaining to African Americans self-concept will be explored to better delineate the rationale for discussing African American women in terms of self-concept instead of a racial identity model.

#### *Helms' Racial Identity Model*

Helms (1993) equates self-concept with "personal identity." She further defines "personal identity" as being composed of the feelings and opinions one has of oneself as well as one's personal idiosyncrasies. Helms is interested in the development of racial identity. She discusses racial identity as being descriptive of how much one identifies with a certain racial group. More specifically, African American racial identity development involves four stages (through which individuals are hypothesized to cycle): 1) Preencounter (during which whiteness is idealized and Euro American culture is considered superior to African American culture), 2) Encounter (during which an African American stops idealizing Euro American culture, but is left with the task of redefining her/his identity), 3) Immersion/Emersion (during which African Americans absorb themselves in a superficial understanding of African American culture, try to exemplify that culture, and eventually develop a healthy, nonstereotypic worldview), and 4)

Internalization (during which an individual's understanding of her/himself includes a healthy "personal identity" as well as an appreciation for one's African American culture and heritage; Helms, 1993).

As an expansion on racial identities, she proposes a diagnostic model of racial identity development as being composed of "personal identity," "reference group orientation" (the degree to which one uses one of the racial groups in this country to inform her/his feelings, cognitions, and behaviors), and "ascribed identity" (one's intentional alignment with a certain racial group; Helms, 1993). Thus "personal identity" is not her primary focus, but one factor that she considers to influence racial identity. In comparison, the current study was focused on clarifying more than the impact of race, the intersection of gender *and* race as they pertain to African American women's processes of developing a self-concept.

The purpose of racial identity models, traditionally, has been to describe how African Americans could develop positive racial identities amidst racist environments. As such, racial identity models suppose that race is the most important aspect of one's identity, influencing how one interprets every other aspect of her/his identity (Helms, 1993). However, we cannot assume that race is necessarily the most salient aspect of African American women's identities. African American women do not experience discrimination based solely on their race, they also experience discrimination from within and outside of their racial group based on their gender (e.g., Brown-Collins & Sussewell, 1986; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Patterson, 2004; Petersen, 2000).

Helms' (1993) diagnostic model postulates that differential personal valuations are associated with various racial identity stages. She presents evidence of the

associations between various stages of racial identity and personal valuations (e.g., Preencounter attitudes are associated with negative feelings about oneself). However, it is not yet known precisely in what direction aspects are related. More specifically, although one's racial identity stage is associated with positive or negative feelings about oneself, there is not yet enough evidence to conclusively suggest that racial identity stages lead to the evaluations of personal identity rather than personal identity perceptions leading to development of racial identity stages (Helms, 1993). Given the ambiguity in how personal identity characteristics and racial identity stages are specifically linked, it remains to be seen whether the specific personal identity marker of gender, for example, contributes to one's racial identity development or whether one's racial identity development contributes to one's conception of her/his gender, or whether the two reciprocally affect one another (Helms, 1993). What is known is that African American women's conceptions of their race and gender both affect their overall self-concept, although many do not consider the two aspects of the identity separately (e.g., Major & O'Brien, 2005; Mays, 1986).

#### *Development of the African American Female Self-Concept*

An examination of a more suitable description of self-concept pertaining to African American women is needed to better understand the development of the African American female self in context. Brown-Collins and Sussewell (1986) present a model of self-conceptualization specific to African American women. The authors argue that because of the historical racism encountered from Euro Americans and the sexism encountered from Euro and African American men, three referent groups developed. Namely, the psychophysiological referent, the African American referent, and the myself

referent are the three groups that Brown-Collins and Sussewell believe have emerged since slavery (Brown-Collins & Sussewell, 1986).

The psychophysiological referent encompasses the African American woman's knowledge of herself as a member of the female sex. Authors argue that the African American woman's similarity to women of other ethnicities and races lies in the biological and genetic traits that make humans female (as opposed to male). Additionally, authors argue that African American women share with women of other races and ethnicities identities that are informed and partly defined by their relationships and attachments to others (e.g., close interpersonal relationships; Brown-Collins & Sussewell, 1986).

The African American referent includes the collective African American identity. However, it is complex in that it involves manipulation of knowledge of another referent in order to exist. Stated differently in American culture, cultures with histories originating outside of an Anglo-Saxon, or other European traditions are afforded less value and access to societal resources (Cose, 2002). African American culture is no exception. Brown-Collins and Sussewell (1986) assert that African Americans develop what DuBois (1903/1995) termed double consciousness as a defense mechanism against the pernicious effects of racism. More specifically, double consciousness involves African Americans' awareness of both African American and Euro American referent groups. The African American referent is composed of ideas that African Americans hold about themselves that form the basis for a shared experience. For African American women, Brown-Collins and Sussewell (1986) site specific ideas that compose the African American referent as including "the group self...the liberating self, the united self, the

disappointed self, the community self, the political self, the strategic self, the frightened self, the o.k. self, and the beautiful self” (pp. 7-8). The Euro American referent is composed of the comparatively derogatory opinions that Euro Americans have historically held regarding African Americans, which originated during the slave era that was defined by economic and physical domination of African Americans.

Brown-Collins and Sussewell (1986) also note that African American women must be cognizant of Euro Americans’ notions of them in terms of: “the slave self, the oppressed self, the [African American] version of the Euro American female self, the matriarchal self, the independent self, the alone self, the ugly self, the unfeminine self, and the trapped self” (p. 8). Manipulation of knowledge of the Euro American referent group involves using one’s awareness of the Euro American referent group to affect safe movement through predominantly Euro American environments (Brown-Collins & Sussewell, 1986; DuBois, 1903/1995).

The goal is to use knowledge of the Euro American referent purely as information and not to allow the content of the Euro American referent group to usurp the African American referent. When the Euro American referent does take the place of the African American referent, for an African American individual the result is internalized racialism (Cokley, 2005). For African Americans, internalized racialism occurs when an individual internalizes the negative and positive stereotypes that exist about their racial group. For instance, an African American with internalized racialism may believe negative stereotypes (e.g., African Americans are intellectually inferior, African Americans are naturally more violent than other racial and ethnic groups) and positive stereotypes (e.g., African Americans are good dancers, all African Americans are good basketball players;

Cokley, 2005).

The myself referent is comprised of two parts, the accumulation of “cognitive experiences” that holistically cause an individual to see herself distinctly as an African American woman, and the specific, unique history of an individual (Brown-Collins and Sussewell, 1986). Nurius (1986) provides a framework from which to understand such cognitive experiences, and how they in turn inform individuals’ behaviors. She comments on the “structural features and information processing mechanisms” that influence the effects of self-concept on one’s behavior (Nurius, 1986, p.430). More specifically, she describes self-schemas (i.e., cognitive stores of mental images of the self) as containing information about one’s previous behaviors and serve as guidance for future behavior. She further notes that there may be considerable variance between the development of different individuals’ self-concepts due to variations in factors influencing their self-schemas and resultant self-talk (Nurius, 1986). For African American women, this may mean that positive as well as negative societal messages become incorporated into their self-schemas and thus inform how they behave in various environments. But from where do these societal messages arise?

One conspicuous vehicle active in the conveyance of societal messages is the media. Allen and Bagozzi (2001) note that race is a frequently mentioned theme in the media, and thus highly influences America’s sociopolitical context. Baker (2005) found that advertisements targeted towards African American audiences depict African American women in a manner consistent with prevalent stereotypes of African American women, i.e., dominant and independent. Baker (2005) estimates that Americans are exposed to more than 3,000 media images daily. Additionally, she argues that the media

play a significant socialization role (Baker, 2005). Taken together, Baker's (2005) assertions imply that the media is a powerful influence on the ways in which we come to view and conceptualize ourselves, and through media depictions African American women are pigeonholed into two roles – domineering and self-reliant. Thus, if African American women only referenced dominant culturally controlled media images for information on who they should aspire to become, they would be left with limited choices for roles to fulfill.

Whether arising from the media or interpersonal interactions, African American women are constantly reminded of what others think of them. Rubin, Jitts, and Becker (2003) recognize that women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups have always had to consciously reject messages purporting dominant standards of beauty in order to see themselves as attractive individuals. The researchers conducted focus groups with African American and Latina women to gain insight into the ways in which they come to appreciate their physical characteristics that tend to differ from, and amidst American cultural values that exalt European standards of beauty. The major theme that emerged from the women's discussions was a value of healthy and proper care of one's body as opposed to striving for any specific body image. Moreover, the African American and Latina women in this study encountered societal messages of beauty with resistance, challenging and ultimately rejecting dominant cultural dogma of beauty in favor of ideals from their own cultures. Their ideas of beauty extended beyond physical descriptions and aspects to more general qualities of health and well-being. Thus, by giving more credence to sub-cultural values, these women were able to forge and maintain self-



acceptance despite conflicting dominant and sub-cultural messages about the meaning of beauty (Rubin et al., 2003).

Likewise, Duke (2002) found that young African American women did not passively accept media depictions of beauty. In a study of how African American adolescents understand body image information from popular teenage magazines propagating thinness and whiteness, she found that African American female adolescents purchased and read such magazines not to adopt or validate dominant standards of beauty, but to analyze the messages for their relevance to themselves as young African American women. Upon analysis and ultimate rejection of the dominant standards of beauty portrayed in the magazines, the teenage girls affirmed their own subcultural values for attractiveness. Duke (2002) also notes that the analysis demonstrated by the participants in her study is a good example of marginalized peoples' potential to actively reject Eurocentric ideals (Duke, 2002).

The preceding studies indicate that the media transmits many overt and subtle messages about dominant standards of femininity. They also indicate that African American women do not give credence to such standards, as they are inconsistent with their experiences. Next is a review of the specific stereotypes that have been transmitted via societal messages first historically, and second contemporarily.

### **Sociohistorical Context of Stereotypes**

The oppression of African Americans began with enslavement in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, at which point dynamics of power and privilege became entrenched in U.S. society (Gomez, 2004). During slavery, those who wielded the most power were Euro American men. Euro American women enjoyed racial privilege but were subjugated

based on their gender. A systemic pattern through which unearned power was bestowed on Euro Americans and men ensued (McIntosh, 1990). Although legalized slavery ended in the 1860s, systemic privilege of Euro Americans and men has continued. Authors from various disciplines have noted that the modern manifestations of privilege in U.S. society (on macro as well as micro levels) are insidious and easily ignored by those who benefit from current power imbalances (e.g., Case, 2007; Hartmann, Gerteis, & Croll, 2009; McIntosh, 1990; Peace, 2003).

Stereotypes are powerful because they help maintain power differentials by depicting Euro Americans and men as normative and people with alternate identities as deviant. Thus, stereotypes serve as tools in maintaining oppression of traditionally marginalized peoples such as African American women. As many common stereotypes of African American women have existed since slavery, and have been readily apparent in mass media, stereotypes have been pervasive in U.S. society for centuries, and are thus notorious and easily referenced (Allen, 1995). The purpose of stereotypes regarding African American women has been to convince groups of people that African American women are inferior, thereby continuing external as well as internal oppressive ideology and practices (Bryant et al., 2005; Collins, 1986).

### **Traditional Stereotypes about African American Women**

While enslaved, African Americans' identity was inexorably tied to their ability to work. Members of the dominant culture did not consider them human, and the very system of slavery operated on the premise that African Americans were little more than workhorses. In the face of such characterizations by the dominant culture, forming an identity based on an ability to be productive allowed them to achieve an identity that was

at least somewhat positive and worthwhile (Mays, 1986). Seeing themselves in this way was essential to African Americans' survival because their productivity afforded them some sense of worth, and thus, humanity in a system that reduced them to objects (Mays, 1986).

It was in this context that the mammy role originated. Mammy was a strong and selfless caretaker who placed the needs of Euro American masters above her own. Mammy, by placing the needs of the Euro American families she served above her own, was exceedingly productive in her service role. Her excessive production sometimes resulted in tangible rewards and being spared from punishment. Thus, exhibiting mammy characteristics was an adaptive strategy for female slaves because meeting Euro American families' needs, often at the expense of their own, helped ensure their survival (Abdullah, 1998; Mays, 1986; Thomas et al., 2004).

The Sapphire image, which also originated during slavery, comes from a long history of African American women having to work for others and simultaneously be responsible for the rearing of their own children. The characteristics that compose the person of Sapphire include being aggressive, overbearing, loud, annoying, and never satisfied (Thomas et al., 2004). These characteristics were generalized to African American women's sexuality, and they were seen as sexually, as well as verbally, aggressive. Furthermore, beginning in slavery, but continuing throughout history, African American women's sexuality has frequently been characterized in direct opposition to the dominant culture's definition of womanhood. Whereas, Euro American women were expected to be diffident and subservient to men, African American women began to be thought of as outspoken and controlling (Davenport & Yurich, 1991).

Similar to the stereotype of Sapphire, the stereotype of jezebel originated during slavery and pertained to female slaves' sexuality. Originating from the sexual exploitation and repeated violation of female slaves, jezebel was someone who was seen as sexually wanton. More specifically, Euro American masters frequently raped African American women. This common occurrence led to a depiction of African American women as sexually promiscuous. By labeling the female slaves as sexually aggressive (as in the case of Sapphire) and sexually indiscriminate (as in the case of jezebel) the Euro American male masters were absolved of any responsibility for the rapes, as well as any attraction to African American women who were so qualitatively different from Euro American women (Davenport & Yurich, 1991; Thomas et al., 2004).

Common to women across the roles of mammy, Sapphire, and jezebel was the loss of their cultural selves. In place of a strong identification with their culture were identities full of insecurities and inferiority (Mays, 1986). They became aware of the conceptions that the dominant culture held of them, yet struggled to forge their own identities that were independent of dominant cultural impressions of African American women. Out of this process, African American women learned to be doubly conscious (DuBois, 1903/1995; Mays, 1986). If, however, African American women were unable to forge positive, separate identities from dominant cultural characterizations of them, or if their more positive identities were unable to withstand bombardment of contradictory messages about their identities, African American women were left with poor self-concepts (Mays, 1986).

Another commonality between mammy, Sapphire, and jezebel is that the issue of sexuality played a large role in the origination of each character. More specifically,

mammy was the slave who was typically dark skinned and obese. Thus she was not considered attractive by dominant standards and was seen as sexually nonthreatening by Euro American women. Contrarily, Sapphire and jezebel were the slave women who were seen as sexually insatiable and aggressive. Thus, ownership for any sexual contact between slave masters and female slaves was placed on the slave women. Because they could not control their sexual urges, they were seen as primal, sexual objects (Baker, 2005). Although the stereotypes of mammy, Sapphire, and jezebel represent traditional dominant cultural thinking about African American women, they also have been postulated to carry contemporary implications for the ways in which African American women conceptualize themselves (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Thomas et al., 2004).

As legalized slavery ended and gave way to Jim Crow segregation, dominant cultural perceptions of African American women persisted. Throughout slavery and the Jim Crow era, African American men, as a group, were systematically restricted from accessing high levels of education and lucrative positions of employment. In order to successfully meet the economic needs of their families, even after slavery was abolished, African American women continued to be productive members of the American workforce.

One positive outcome of an otherwise bleak and oppressive system of segregation was the strengthening of cohesiveness and a sense of collectivism among African Americans regardless of gender. The strong community of African Americans that emerged facilitated the evolution of healthy, positive self-concepts among African Americans (Mays, 1986). Being segregated from the dominant culture served to insulate African Americans from the degrading conceptions that the dominant culture held of

them. In this post slavery environment, a seed of hope for better prospects for future generations was planted. Decades of struggle to achieve upward mobility and social and political equity culminated in black liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The Black Power movement solidified a collectivistic worldview for African Americans, and being African American meant that as a group there was a shared belief system grounded on common values (Mays, 1986). That period in history was also a significant time of change in women's rights.

African American children reared during these decades had more chances for social, political and economic advances than any generation (of African Americans) that had preceded them. However, with the added opportunities for advancement came increased exposure to members of the dominant culture as well as their biases. The increased interactions with members of the dominant culture were occurring in new and varied contexts. By the 1980s and 1990s, African Americans had made some educational and career gains, but as a group were still subject to a range of disparities (e.g., economic, health; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Moreover, Mays (1986) notes that due to the amount of social change that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s, and the resultant differences in the socialization of African American women post 1960, there were many questions regarding the self-conceptualization process of African Americans by the 1980s. Thomas (2004) and Reid (2004) assert that the self-conceptualization process of African American women is still not well understood today. However, King (2003) iterates a long-standing contention that women of color tend to conceptualize their gendered selves in conjunction with their racialized selves.

To this point, the studies that have been discussed describe the historical messages African American women have received. They also discuss how African American women have responded to stereotypes that have been perpetuated about them. We now turn to contemporary stereotypes of African American women. Some of the historical stereotypes about African American women persist in contemporary times (i.e., Sapphire and jezebel). However, although the titles persist, the ways in which the roles manifest are somewhat different consistent with changes in American society. Two additional stereotypes will be discussed (i.e., matriarch and Superwoman).

Most of these stereotypes will be discussed in the context of Thomas et al.'s (2004) work. Researchers designed a scale to measure African American women's internalization and identification with mammy, Sapphire, jezebel, and Superwoman. In their discussion, researchers described each stereotype as well as how each stereotype was likely to manifest in African American women who had internalized each role.

### **Contemporary Stereotypes about African American Women**

Thomas et al. (2004) argue that mammy, Sapphire, and jezebel stereotypes are still relevant to African American women today. Contemporarily someone embodying the mammy role would appear nurturing, supportive and strong, and would work exceedingly hard to meet the needs of others while ignoring her own needs (Thomas et al., 2004). Additionally, although African American women are no longer working for slave masters, those fulfilling mammy roles may still devote more of themselves and their time to their employers/jobs than to the fulfillment of their own personal needs (Abdullah, 1998).

The Sapphire role of today is relatively consistent with the Sapphire depiction of the past. Today's Sapphire may be a head strong, self-reliant woman who emasculates men. Moreover, she may be an aggressive character who is animated in her expression of anger, outrage, and dissatisfaction with African American men, and perceived discriminatory treatment (Baker, 2005). Contrarily, Thomas et al. (2004) suggest that twenty-first century behavioral manifestations of the Sapphire role may include trouble expressing anger as well as other emotions and ideas. Difficulty expressing oneself, for someone who has internalized the Sapphire role, may have come about because of historical reactions to African American women who were perceived as loud, outspoken and aggressive. African American women perceived in this way were not taken seriously. Thus, it is plausible that over decades some African American women have avoided expressing themselves, or have developed trouble expressing themselves for fear of being dismissed (Thomas et al., 2004).

The contemporary depiction of jezebel is also very similar to her traditional image. Jezebel continues to be viewed as having an extremely ravenous sexual appetite. This characterization leads to a conception that she is promiscuous and uses her body for material gain (Baker, 2005). Moreover, today, the jezebel role is likely to be personified by an African American woman who believes that sexuality is all she has to offer to intimate relationships. Contrarily, African American women who have internalized this stereotype may suppress their sexuality in reaction to the highly promulgated misconception that African American women are obsessed with sex (Thomas et al., 2004).



In addition to the stereotypes of mammy, Sapphire, and jezebel, characteristics of a relatively newer stereotype, Superwoman, has been theorized to affect the self-conceptualization processes of contemporary African American women. The Superwoman stereotype emerged post slavery. The Superwoman image is of an African American woman who is strong, nurturing, productive, and self-sufficient. Moreover, she is thought to be unaffected by adversity. In some ways, the Superwoman image can be seen as a reaction to the mammy, Sapphire, and jezebel stereotypes. More specifically, African American women who internalize this image may try to accomplish all tasks and challenges they encounter without any help from others in an attempt to prove themselves independent, capable, and to avoid being labeled as mammy, Sapphire, or jezebel. If these women experience set backs or need to ask for help they may feel inadequate and weak (Thomas et al., 2004).

Baker (2005) describes another contemporary stereotype of African American women – the matriarch. The matriarch is someone who has multiple children and is either the head of her household or yields equal power with her male partner and also works outside of the home. Thus, she is perceived as a strong, hard-working mother and employee. She is also personified in the African American female character colloquially referred to as the “welfare queen” (Baker, 2005).

Yet another contemporary stereotype of African American women is that of the overachiever. Although the labels of overachiever and superwoman are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature (e.g., Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, & Harrison, 2008), Taylor (1999) and Bryant et al. (2005) note an important distinction between the two characterizations. Specifically, these authors describe the overachiever as middle class,

having excelled academically as well as professionally. Moreover, the overachiever is perceived to be financially independent due to her career achievements, and the stereotype implies that she owes her professional success to affirmative action (Bryant et al., 2005; Taylor, 1999).

One reason that stereotypes may be so damaging is that for marginalized group members, the messages that are conveyed, if left unchecked, perniciously degrade significant aspects of their identities (Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005). Moreover, the stereotypes discussed here originated in the dominant culture's efforts to subordinate African Americans. Although subordination efforts of today are subtler than 150 years ago, it seems that African American women continue to be bombarded with depictions of people who look like them in mammy, Sapphire, jezebel, Superwoman, and matriarch roles (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

### **African American Women and Healthy Self-Concepts**

The question remains – how do African American women form healthy self-concepts while constantly being confronted with dominant cultural messages that would deny them the ability to be unique individuals? Work that has been done on this topic is as follows.

Davies et al. (2005) argue that stereotypes inform marginalized people of the ideology that denigrates their cultures. Furthermore, when individuals are consistently inundated with disparaging societal messages about the value of their group, their risk of internalizing those stereotypes increases, rendering them vulnerable to feelings of inferiority. Mays (1986) assumes a pessimistic stance arguing that African American's self-concepts are invariably shaped by the views of the dominant culture. She articulates

that African Americans' identities develop in a "psychocultural framework of oppressed individuals" (Mays, 1986, p. 582). Moreover, she argues that African Americans necessarily develop a sense of inferiority given their exposure to an abundance of negative messages that serve to devalue and negate their culture, appearance, and abilities. Further, she asserts that dominant messages override counter subcultural messages that would promote positive, healthy self-concepts. Given such bleak prospects, Mays (1986) proposes that African Americans are condemned to "unavoidable and irresolvable conflict and struggle for a satisfying identity" (p.583).

Patterson (2004), however, adopts a more optimistic position. She investigates the issue of African American women's self-esteem formation from a black feminist perspective. From this standpoint, multiple oppressions are acknowledged but not given the ultimate power over African American women's identity development. More specifically, Patterson (2004) investigates the coping resources that African American women employ to buoy their self-concepts despite frequent and disparaging confrontations by the dominant culture. The difference between Mays (1986) and Patterson (2004) is that the latter researcher assumes a stance that is empowering of African American women, assuming that they are not merely passive recipients of dominant ideology, but that they actively work to challenge messages of inferiority.

Patterson (2004) also notes that the number of works addressing African American women's strengths in relation to self-conceptualization is increasing. However, she further notes that one major limitation to this body of work is that much of the research has been conducted with children and adolescent participants (Patterson, 2004). As previously discussed, intellectual functioning is at its optimal level during

early adulthood, and many poignant life transitions and other social mediators are likely to occur in early adulthood (Demo, 1992). Thus, if we are interested in learning about the formation and maintenance of healthy self-concepts of African American women, information gleaned from children and adolescents will likely merely contribute incomplete (and perhaps even) inaccurate information.

Shorter-Gooden and Washington (1996) acknowledge that the African American community may insulate African American women from some of the damaging effects of racism and sexism, but many questions remain about how African American women negotiate messages from the broader sociopolitical context (and subcultural messages) to form healthy self-concepts. By the time of publication of Shorter-Gooden and Washington's (1996) work, few studies had addressed specific identity development issues pertinent to African American women, and the sparse literature that did exist utilized quantitative investigation methods. In order to obtain richer, more complete information regarding African American women, Shorter-Gooden and Washington (1996) qualitatively investigated African American women's perceptions of their race, gender, career, region, political allegiances, relationships and sexual orientation. They interviewed 17 African American women aged 18 to 22 in 1993. Most of the 17 women were members of an African American student association and attended a predominantly Euro American university. Researchers learned that racial identity was the most salient aspect of identity for these women. This was true for all of the participants in their study, although there were variations across participants in the extent to which they perceived race as salient, and in their personal battles with racism (Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996).

The participants' efforts to associate with same-race others despite their predominantly Euro American collegiate environment may indicate a heightened awareness of racial issues that is not necessarily present among African Americans in different environments. Participants spoke little about gender identity except in conjunction with mention of their racial identity. Authors surmised that participants might not have discussed gender much because their families socialized them to conceptualize gender and race dependently. Alternatively, authors postulated that participants' tendency to discuss gender and race conjointly was an indication that they considered gender to be less of a significant aspect of their identities than race. Gender has been found to be more of a meaningful concern for African American adult women than for their adolescent counterparts, as African American women have tended to not consider gender as a separate construct of identity until they have already examined their racial identity (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). Thus, the self-conceptualization processes of African American women who are older than early twenties should be examined because, from them, researchers could gain a more complete and accurate understanding of how African American women incorporate racial and gendered notions into their self-concepts.

Patterson (2004) investigated factors that predict African American women's self-esteem. She noted that generally speaking, African American women's self-esteems are not affected by opinions of the dominant culture because self-esteem is formed and fostered in immediate interpersonal circles that for African American women consist of other African American women. Thus, Euro American women do not represent the ideal for these women; other African American women do. Additionally, because these

women do not view Euro American women as the epitome of womanhood, African American women are thought to be impervious to dominant standards of beauty and body image (Patterson, 2004).

In her study, Patterson (2004) surveyed the same 428 African American women four times (in 1979, 1987, 1989, and 1992) to learn if and how these women retained positive self-esteem over a 14 year time span. She measured self-esteem using Rosenberg's measure. She found that the women in her study retained high levels of self-esteem from 1979 to 1992. Moreover, she ascertained that the women's high levels of self-esteem were due primarily to support from the women's families and friend groups, as well as to the effective care of their families (Patterson, 2004). Ultimately, Patterson's (2004) study emphasized African American women's empowering strategy of utilizing supports from close others to maintain healthy self-esteem.

It is noteworthy, however, that the women in Patterson's (2004) sample entered adulthood in the late 1970s, and one of their main sources of support – friendships – referred to relationships, primarily, with other African Americans. Moreover, African American women who reached adulthood in the late '70s were reared in the '60s – a time of aggressive social change, and during the heart of the Civil Rights and Women's Movements. As Patterson (2004) notes, the 1960s was a decade marked by a significant shift in worldviews, which resulted in an increase in racial-esteem of African Americans as a group. Likewise, Mays (1986) notes that a goal of the Black Power Movement of the 1970s (a time when Patterson's (2004) sample would have been teenagers) was to aid African Americans in achieving even higher levels of racial- and self-esteem. Thus, the women in Patterson's (2004) sample were reared and came of age in an era and

sociopolitical environment permeated by messages affirming blackness. No generations of African Americans before or since have been reared in similar sociopolitical contexts.

Similarly, Petersen (2000) explored how African American women define themselves throughout their lives given various role transitions and sociopolitical contexts. Asking participants to define themselves meant asking how women negotiated perspectives about themselves with society's view of them. In essence, they were asked to explain how they mediated ascribed and subscribed identities. More specifically, the hypothesis under investigation was that Euro American women would eschew their personal identity exploration in response to cultural pressures while African American women would not be susceptible to dominant cultural pressures (Petersen, 2000).

Participants were well educated, middle-class Euro and African American women each representing one of four decades – ages 40-80. Petersen (2000) found that the African American women frequently spoke of coping strategies, which they employed in a process of active resistance of dominant standards. Additionally, she found that the African American women did not view as dichotomous many of the roles that the Euro American women viewed as opposing (e.g., employee vs. mother; wife vs. career; self vs. others). More specifically, the African American women readily undertook familial roles but repudiated traditional female gender roles. Essentially, the African American women in this study had learned over the courses of their lifetimes not to give credence to any sociopolitical forces that would dismantle their self-definitions. In part through utilization of this specific coping mechanism, African American women were able to maintain resilient self-definitions. Moreover, they formed their self-definitions early in life due to: 1) being recognized as important to their community, 2)

having chances to serve within their communities, and 3) not being readily compared with Euro Americans, and often being sheltered from them. Thus, the African American women developed their self-definitions within racially homogenous communities, and retreated to those communities whenever challenged with dominant cultural ideals that could potentially corrode their positive senses of identity (Petersen, 2000).

Petersen (2000) explains that the African American women's buoyant self-definitions were partly the result of their enculturation into the traditional African American worldview that perpetuates collectivism. Moreover, family and community members modeled and transmitted the ideals and logistics of collectivism to young African American women during their formative years. However, as with the African American women from Patterson's (2004) sample, the African American women in Petersen's (2000) study were alive during the turbulent decades of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Thus, they were exposed to pro-black and pro-female rhetoric on a scale thereto and since unheard of. Additionally, during those decades, the majority of African American families looked different from many current formations. More specifically, relative to now: 1) the majority of African American households were two-parent, 2) families were more likely to assist each other than to utilize social agencies, 3) African American families traveled less which facilitated greater knowledge of neighbors and nearness to family members, and 4) there were fewer options for career, neighborhood, and college choices (Reid, 2004). Hence, when Patterson (2004) and Petersen (2000) drew conclusions about African American women they spoke to a different demographic of African American women than came of age in the late 1980's, 1990's and who are currently maturing.



Reid (2004) notes that previously, when researchers referred to African American women and studied issues pertinent to them, the experiences of the majority of African American women were addressed because African American women had such similar familial and life experiences. Now, however, increased mobility and opportunities for advancement in career and education have been, at least partially, responsible for decreases in familial closeness and the overall increase in heterogeneity among African American women (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Reid, 2004). By being born in later decades, African American women who were reared in the 1980s and 1990s have not been socialized in the same way as their foremothers. More specifically, many were not privy to the same type of neighborhoods and nurturing communities as African American women of the sixties and seventies. African American women born in the late 1970s and 1980s thus likely have had more diverse friendship groups than their foremothers due to increased education and employment opportunities. Furthermore, African American individuals reared before the 1980s were more likely to have formed self-concepts that were interdependent with their collective racial group's identity than African Americans born and reared in more recent generations (Beauboeuf, 1999).

Jackson and Mustillo (2001) studied the effects of racial and gender discrimination in work environments. They constructed their study around the fact that many racialized minority women, throughout history, have been in relatively low status economic and employment positions, and have thus experienced high levels of distress related to occupancy in three simultaneous positions (i.e., low SES, African American, and female). In an investigation of the relationship between various aspects of identity, self-concept formation, and mental health, researchers queried which aspects of identity

have important implications for the mental health of African American women.

Researchers used Rosenberg's conception of self-esteem in their investigation of self-concept development. Moreover, researchers studied participant's experiences with the following aspects of self-conception: the phenotypic self, the role defined self, the gendered self, and the socially classed self (Jackson & Mustillo, 2001).

Among the African American women studied, investigators found that attractive women, and women who were satisfied with their familial and career roles had significantly better mental health than women perceived as less attractive and women in unfulfilling familial and career roles. Thus, they concluded that the physical self is a significant contributor to the healthy self-concept of African American women.

Likewise, role relationships were significantly positively related to African American women's healthy self-concepts. Moreover, they found various indicators of social class were related to positive self-concepts, although education appeared most influential (Jackson & Mustillo, 2001).

Even the experience of racism is quite different from earlier decades. Most acts of contemporary racism are subtler than those of thirty and forty years ago (Baker, 2005; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). In the mid-sixties African American women were joined with African American men fighting for admittance to public places and the ability to live free of fear of racist hate crimes that could be fatal. Today, with the subtlety of racism, African American women entering adulthood must be ever vigilant lest they become lulled into complacent, silent, subjugation. Another potential consequence of fighting against every racist and sexist act they encounter is that African American women may "burn out" – it would be too physically, emotionally, spiritually, and

psychologically draining and exhausting. Essentially, they must decide which racial and gendered assaults on their identities are worth fighting. Yet, even when African American women do conserve their energy for what they deem substantial threats, there are still costs and benefits of their efforts.

Poorer psychological well-being has been linked to African Americans and women who perceive themselves as being recipients of discrimination (Branscombe et al., 1999; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002). Similarly, King's (2003) research suggests that people with increased ethnic and womanist consciousnesses may in fact feel more stress than individuals possessing less awareness of privilege and oppression dynamics. She was interested in ascertaining the impact of ethnic, feminist, and womanist awareness on African American women's subjective experiences of multiple oppressions. While feminism refers to a commitment to gender equality, womanism refers to African American women's commitment to gender equality and overall improvement of the collective racial group (Bowman & King, 2003; King, 2003).

King presented 123 African American female undergraduates with audiotaped scenarios in which two Euro American men spoke negatively about their pre-assigned partner on a research project. The study participants were instructed to imagine that they were each the assigned partner of the two Euro American men, however, the scenario was ambiguous in relation to what sparked their comments, and no mention of race or gender was made. The women with heightened awareness of societal impressions and consequences of their ethnic and gendered statuses attributed the negative comments to prejudicial attitudes, and felt themselves more personally implicated by the negative comments than did women with less awareness of societal inequalities. Thus, the major

implication of this study is that within the group of African American women, various levels of consciousness exist pertaining to ethnic and womanist ideals. Moreover, with increased awareness of sociopolitical inequities also come increased levels of stress as women are being ever vigilant for evidence of racism and sexism (King, 2003).

Whether or not they actively work to enact sociopolitical changes, African American women still must employ some coping strategy(s) to withstand attacks to their identities. King (2003) notes that despite an established correlation between heightened stress and decreasing health, coping strategies and social support tend to serve as mediators between increased stress and damaging health effects. But, even if their coping strategies are successful in maintaining healthy self-concepts, it is possible that utilization of such strategies may take a toll on African American women's energy reserves and interpersonal relationships. By having coping strategies ready to employ against racist and sexist offenses on daily bases, one might expect these strategies to become automatic. Moreover, should coping strategies become automatic, they may begin to occur outside of an individual's conscious realm. One would expect that only with careful deliberation would African American women decide to trust men and women from racially and ethnically dissimilar backgrounds. If so, are African American women then perceived negatively? Perhaps as distant or overly guarded in even their closest relationships?

As a field, we do not yet know the answers to these questions. Reid (2004) notes that given these new generations of African American women with such potentially varied life experiences, researchers lack understanding of the complexity of their interpersonal relationships and self-esteem. As there were fewer opportunities for

mobility, and integration was so new, it is likely that the women of Patterson's (2004) and Petersen's (2000) studies had friend bases that consisted mainly of other African Americans, and consulted women from those groups when their positive identities were threatened. Today, however, in an integrated society, it is not uncommon for African American women to have close friends who are members of dissimilar racial and ethnic groups. How might African American women with close friends who belong to the dominant culture conceptualize themselves differently? Thomas et al. (2004) imply that as a field, we know very little about the impact of the internalization of stereotypes on African American women's close relationships. Even when one's primary interpersonal group consists of other African Americans, if the African Americans in one's group value standards of and hold the same stereotypes (about African Americans) as the dominant culture (e.g., beauty standards such as long, straight hair; lighter skin; stereotypes of African Americans' intellectual inferiority) African American women's self-esteem could suffer.

Another important characteristic common to the African American women in Patterson's (2004), Petersen's (2000), and King's (2003) studies is that the majority of them either subjectively identified as middle-class or were considered middle class based upon income and education levels of themselves and/or their parents. One African American woman who participated in Petersen's (2000) study stated that she felt Petersen's findings were true of "the middle class culture of which she had been a part all her life," but she questioned the generalizability of her experience to African American women from other social class groups. More specifically, this participant indicated that the middle class, African American culture in which she was reared, and to which she

continued to adhere promulgates the value of actively guarding against efforts by the dominant culture that would serve to promote mental and physical subjugation (Petersen, 2000).

To this point, this chapter has discussed studies of African American women and their reports of their self-concepts. The aforementioned studies have explored African American women's self-concepts by way of investigating their identities and appraisals of their self-esteem. These studies have shown that African American women have not traditionally compared themselves to Euro American standards, but to other African American women. Because these studies were conducted mostly with African American women who were socialized during decades of intense social change (i.e., Black Nationalism and the Women's Movement) the findings reported therein are not necessarily generalizable to women from more recent decades.

### **Summary of the Literature Review**

This chapter has acknowledged that African American women are often aware of the stereotypes that abound regarding them (e.g., Baker, 2005; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). This chapter has also explored how African American women react to such stereotypes (e.g., Abdullah, 1998; Davenport & Yurich, 1991; Thomas et al., 2004). Sometimes African American women internalize the stereotypes about them, while other times African American women make conscious choices to behave in ways that are contrary to the stereotypical images of them (e.g., Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Literature reviewed in this chapter suggests that African American women do not view their gender and race independently (e.g., King, 2003), and while in predominantly Euro American environments, African American women may behave in ways that are

reactionary to the stereotypes about them (e.g., Brown-Collins & Sussewell, 1986). This could include behaving consistent with or contrary to the stereotypes about them. However, once African American women are around others who are racially and ethnically similar to them, they may behave without regard to stereotypes about them (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

Although African American women respond to stereotypes about them in different ways (e.g., conforming to or behaving contrary to stereotypes), they must all employ some strategy for coping with negative societal messages, even if the strategy is to ignore the existence and perpetuation of stereotypes (e.g., Petersen, 2000). If, however, African American women enact a more active role upon encountering stereotypes, and attempt to challenge the validity of stereotypes, they could experience more stress and psychological strain than African American women who deny the presence of, or exhibit complacency regarding the abundance of stereotypical depictions of African American women (Branscombe et al., 1999; King, 2003; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002). Those women who take an active stance against stereotypes of African American women (whether intrapersonally, interpersonally, or systemically) may exert a great amount of energy to counter the added stress and psychological strain of their acknowledgment of oppressive stereotypes.

### **Research Question**

This literature review presents extant research on African American women and their self-conceptualization processes. Moreover, this paper discusses common historical and contemporary stereotypes of African American women. From the literature reviewed it is understood that African American women react (in some way(s)) to stereotypes that

exist about them in their processes of self-conceptualization. What is missing from the existing literature on African American women's self-conceptualization processes is how African American women's self concepts are affected by messages propagated about them. In order to address this gap in the literature, the following question is proposed:

1. What is the impact of historical and contemporary stereotypes on African American women's sense of self?



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter includes descriptions of grounded theory methodology, characteristics of study participants, measures and procedures that were utilized in obtaining data, and data analysis procedures of the current study. As Ponterotto (2005) urged researchers to acknowledge the research paradigm to which their studies belong, first is an explanation of grounded theory and how the theory fits within a constructivist paradigm. The question under study was: What is the impact of historical and contemporary stereotypes on African American women's sense of self?

#### **Grounded Theory**

Originally developed by Glaser and Strauss, grounded theory methodology has been utilized and advanced by numerous researchers to become one of the most respected types of qualitative methodologies. From a review of grounded theory studies published between the years of 1989 and 2003 in *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, Ponterotto (2005) surmised that grounded theory methods have primarily fallen within the constructivist paradigm. As such, several assumptions become apparent. First, grounded theory assumes that not one objective reality exists, but that there are multiple realities. Moreover, reflected is the belief that each individual constructs reality. The goal of this methodology, therefore, is to understand the "lived experiences" of each participant from her/his perspective. Second, there is an assumption that the in-depth information exchanges between researchers and participants (characteristic of grounded theory) permit the exploration and subsequent understanding of participants' experiences. Ponterotto (2005) noted that the emphasis on understanding individuals' experiences

within the context of their “historical social reality” originates from theories of Kant and Dilthey (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129).

#### *Rationale for using Grounded Theory*

Because grounded theory is constructivist, participants’ perspectives are sought and valued for their interpretations of reality. Inherent in this methodology is the recognition that reality is subjective and amenable to various societal factors. As a theory that acknowledges and expects variations in individuals’ conceptions of reality, it was well suited for the investigation of the current study, the purpose of which was to further understanding of African American women in the current sociopolitical context. More specifically, the current study investigated how historical and contemporary stereotypes have impacted African American women’s sense of self.

### **Participants**

#### *Research Participants/Interviewees*

Researchers (i.e., Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996) have found that college aged African American women are more likely to be exploring their racial identity than their gendered identity as African American women tend to actively explore their racial identity before, if ever, considering their gendered identity. Participants were sought for the current study who identified as African American women, and who were between the ages of 24 and 34 in order to access information from individuals who had considered the impact of both race and gender on their realities. An advertisement (see Appendix A) was distributed to various organizations (e.g., student groups) and businesses (e.g., coffee shops) where potential participants might readily be located. Because this study investigated stereotypes in

relation to African American women's sense of self, participants were limited to women of African descent who were socialized and reared in the United States. Polkinghorne (2005) noted that participants are chosen for qualitative studies on the basis of their ability to provide detailed accounts of their experiences relevant to the construct that is being studied. Thus, the quality of participants' responses, not the number of participants, is important in establishing validity in a qualitative study. Six screening questions were designed to help identify women who would likely be able to provide rich, detailed, thoughtful descriptions of their experiences. Only one potential participant was deemed ineligible to participate. During screening she indicated that although her birth certificate lists her race as African American she does not racially identify as such. The decision to exclude her from the study was made because inclusion criteria specified that individuals must identify as African American/black. The final sample of participants included 10 African American women who have reportedly lived their entire lives in the United States, and who answered the screening questions indicating that they: 1) had given considerable thought to the meaning(s) of their blackness, 2) had thoughtfully considered the societal implications of their gender (at least somewhat), and 3) were very aware of opinions and attitudes regarding African American women.

The participants' ages ranged from 24-32 with a mean age of 29 years old (SD=2.71). Seven women reported being reared in the southern region of the U.S., two were reared in the Midwest, and one was reared in the southwest. The formal education levels and occupations of these women were as follows: one woman with a Ph.D. working as a biology postdoctoral fellow, one woman with a J.D. degree working as a

corporate business lawyer, two women with Master's degrees who were full-time students in counseling doctoral programs, one woman with a master's degree working in a management role within a non-profit agency, one woman with a Master's degree working as an elementary school teacher, one woman with some professional school education working as a bank examiner, and three women with bachelor's degrees – one a full-time student in a master's program, and two who worked as medical technicians in a hospital. All of the women identified as heterosexual. Five women reported being married, three women reported being single, one woman reported being in a dating relationship, and one woman reported being engaged. The household incomes of four of these women was \$50,000 or less, three reported household incomes between \$51,000 and \$80,000, and three had household incomes over \$80,000. See Table 1 for a list of participants' pseudonyms and accompanying demographics.

#### *Researcher/Interviewer*

The researcher is an African American female student in a doctoral Counseling Psychology program. She has previous experience working on qualitative research projects. Bott and Myers (1999) highlighted the importance of recognizing and controlling for potential sources of bias that may likely arise when one researcher conducts interviews and analyzes data. If not countered, bias could have compromised the integrity of the current study via selection of participants and analysis of data (Bott & Myers, 1999). In order to control for potential bias in participant selection, the researcher selected participants based upon the criteria for interviewee participation (clarified in the preceding section *Research Participants/Interviewees* and Appendix B, the participant screening script). To control for possible researcher bias in data analysis, a former

doctoral student, Amina Mahmood, Ph.D. with previous qualitative research experience, performed checks of the data. Ponterotto (2005) noted that from a constructivist paradigm, the researcher's values and personal experiences should be explicated but not eliminated throughout the processes of participant selection, data collection and analyses. Thus, the researcher kept a journal of thoughts preceding and following each interview, including brief reflections on her own emotional reactions to interview processes and content.

## **Measures**

### *Demographic Form*

First, each participant completed a demographic form. In completing the demographic form, each participant indicated her age, relationship status, sexual orientation, level of formal education, occupation, household income, members of her household, and the region of the country in which she had lived for the longest period of time (see Appendix C).

### *Interview Protocol*

Second, the researcher interviewed each participant. Fassinger (2005) noted that the most frequently reported method of interviewing in Grounded Theory studies involves using some structure in the organization and posing of the questions. Consistent with previous Grounded Theory interviewing methods, the researcher conducted the interviews with each participant utilizing a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix D). A preliminary interview protocol was developed after a review of the literature on African American women and self-concept. Subsequent to two pilot interviews, the protocol was revised to improve clarity and minimize confusion on the

part of participants. The questions on the final interview protocol addressed how participants believe perceptions of African Americans, women, and African American women impact how others see them, as well as how they see themselves, and what participants know to be the contemporary and historical perceptions of African American women.

## **Procedure**

### *The Interview Process*

Interviews lasted between 47 minutes and two and one-half hours. Upon beginning interviews, verbal consent was obtained and participants completed the demographic form. All interviews were recorded and conducted in a private space (e.g., an office). At the end of each interview, participants were encouraged to provide feedback and ask any questions concerning their interview experience. All interviews were transcribed verbatim with the exception of minimal encouragers (e.g., uh-huh, yeah, etc.). Interviews were separated from identifying information, and each participant was assigned a pseudonym in order to protect participants' confidentiality.

## **Data Analysis**

Fassinger (2005) noted that three types of data coding take place in Grounded Theory methodology – open, axial, and selective coding. The three types of coding were used recurrently as new data was compared to existing data to elucidate consistencies within the data (Fassinger, 2005).

### *Open Coding*

In this first level of coding, transcribed data was closely reviewed and divided into concepts (i.e., “units of meaning;” Fassinger, 2005, p.160). The concepts were

labeled and then carefully examined for alternate explanations of their meaning. Dozens of concepts were generated such as “the blackness mold,” “impact of gendered expectations,” and “protecting self-image.” The researcher compared emerging concepts with other concepts and grouped similar concepts together to form overarching categories (Fassinger, 2005). Some of the concept labels became labels of categories as concepts began to be grouped together (e.g., “the blackness mold”).

### *Axial Coding*

The second level in coding, axial coding, involved organizing categories into larger categories called key categories that also contained subcategories. From this process, 12 key categories emerged: “evolving understanding of race,” “evolving understanding of gender,” “perceptions/stereotypes of African American women,” “the blackness mold,” “perceptions of women,” “vehicles for transporting stereotypes,” “others’ reactions to self,” “inferring others’ perceptions of self,” “wanting to counteract stereotypes,” “defining self,” “historical perceptions of African American women,” and “generational changes in perceptions of African American women.” During this stage of coding, the researcher utilized the comparison method described by Fassinger (2005). Specifically, the researcher compared and connected subcategories with relevant categories, compared categories to new data, described the characteristics and organization of categories, and considered alternative interpretations of the data (Fassinger, 2005). Figure 1 depicts the process by which raw data was analyzed. Although the steps of data analysis are presented linearly in Figure 1, as more interviews were conducted, additional concepts were often created and new data was compared with existing categories. As new data was compared to existing categories, it became

necessary to reorganize the configuration of categories and key categories. Each time data was reorganized, alternative explanations of the data were considered, and the data was interrogated to confirm that participants' voices were being accurately expressed. Characteristics of categories were uncovered as the properties (i.e., attributes of a category) and dimensions (i.e., positions of pieces of data relative to each other) of each key category were explored (Fassinger, 2005). Better understanding the characteristics of categories allowed for logical organization of key and subcategories, made clear the relationships between categories, and revealed a core story.

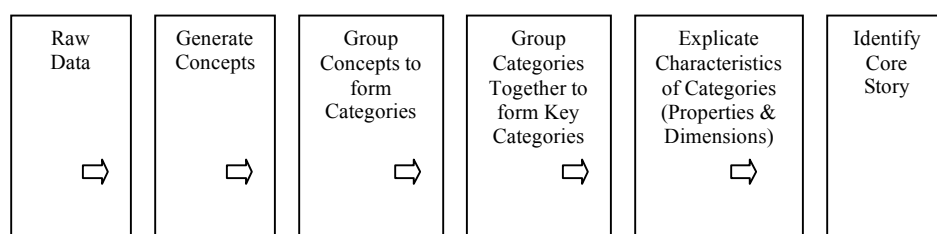


Figure 1 – Steps in Data Analysis

Fassinger (2005) noted that data collection and comparison ends once no new information is being revealed about the categories and their characteristics. Similar to criteria adhered to by other grounded theory researchers (e.g., Noonan et al., 2004), data collection ended once saturation was reached. Saturation was defined as the point at which categories were representative of at least 80% of the participants' experiences.

The study's auditor, Dr. Mahmood, studied transcripts of each interview and reviewed the lists of concepts and categories. Based on her feedback, additional consolidation of categories was undertaken. "The blackness mold" became a subcategory of "evolving understanding of race," "perceptions of women" became a subcategory of



“evolving understanding of gender,” and “wanting to counteract stereotypes” became subsumed under “defining self.” Moreover, “historical perceptions of African American women” and “generational changes in perceptions of African American women” were converted to subcategories of “perceptions/stereotypes of African American women.”

### *Selective Coding*

The third stage of analysis involved creating a “core story” from the established categories (Fassinger, 2005). The researcher gathered together the most significant parts of the data, which included all of the categories, and delineated their relationship to the core story, “defining self.” “Defining self” was the process by which participants became aware of the meanings of and perceptions/stereotypes associated with their identities as African Americans and women, their attention to sources of those perceptions/stereotypes (i.e., media as well as communication and experiences with others), and which, if any, perceptions/stereotypes of African American women they came to incorporate into their ideas of themselves. The researcher continued to compare the core story to the data to verify that it was an accurate representation of participants’ lived experiences. Finally, the researcher compared the core story to extant literature on African American women’s self-conceptualizations in order to increase comprehension of the current study’s findings (Fassinger, 2005).

Utilizing grounded theory methodology, the lived experiences of 10 African American women were sought with the aim of understanding more about how stereotypes have influenced their self-conceptualizations. Through open, axial and selective coding, and the auditing process, seven key categories emerged: “defining self,” “evolving understanding of race,” “evolving understanding of gender,” “perceptions/stereotypes of

African American women,” “vehicles for transporting stereotypes,” “others’ reactions to self,” and “inferring others’ perceptions of self.” As the key categories are explained in the next chapter, the frequencies with which participants expressed similar ideas are indicated. Modeled after methods of other grounded theory researchers (e.g., Richie, Fassinger, Prosser & Robinson, 1997; Noonan et al., 2004) the following words are used: a) “the majority,” “most,” “often,” “typically,” “tended,” “generally,” and “many” indicate ideas expressed by 7 or more women; b) “a number of,” “several,” and “some” indicate ideas expressed by 4-6 of the women; and c) “a few” indicates ideas expressed by 3 or fewer of the women.

Table 1. Participants' Demographics

	Age	Region of Country Lived in the Longest	Relationship Status	Sexual Orientation	Highest Completed Level of Education	Occupation	Household Income	Members of Household
Maya	27	South	Engaged	Heterosexual	M.A.	Doctoral Student/ Counselor	\$21,000- \$50,000	Maya and fiancée
Vikki	32	Midwest	Married	Heterosexual	B.S.	Medical Technologist	\$81,000- \$120,000	Vikki, husband & 2 children
Judy	29	South	Married	Heterosexual	B.S.	Medical Transcription Technologist	\$51,000- \$80,000	Judy, husband, sister & parents
Reelyn	26	South	Single	Heterosexual	Some Professional School	Bank Examiner	\$51,000- \$80,000	Reelyn
Kenya	31	Southwest	Married	Heterosexual	M.A.	Teacher	\$51,000- \$80,000	Kenya, husband & 2 children
Keisha	24	South	Single	Heterosexual	B.S.	Master's Student	\$0-\$20,000	Keisha & 3 roommates
Stefanie	31	South	Married	Heterosexual	M.A.	Doctoral Student	\$21,000- \$50,000	Stefanie & husband
Kim	32	Midwest	Married	Heterosexual	M.A.	Management position for a non-profit organization	\$81,000- \$120,000	Kim, husband, and 3 children
Mary	30	South	Dating	Heterosexual	Ph.D.	Postdoctoral Fellow	\$21,000- \$50,000	Mary
Patrice	28	South	Single	Heterosexual	J.D.	Attorney	\$81,000- \$120,000	Patrice

## CHAPTER 4

## RESULTS

This chapter is organized to present the categories under which the data is subsumed. The seven key categories are explained below, beginning with the key category defining self, which incorporates ways all the other categories are related. Figure 2 presents a visual representation of how the key categories are related.

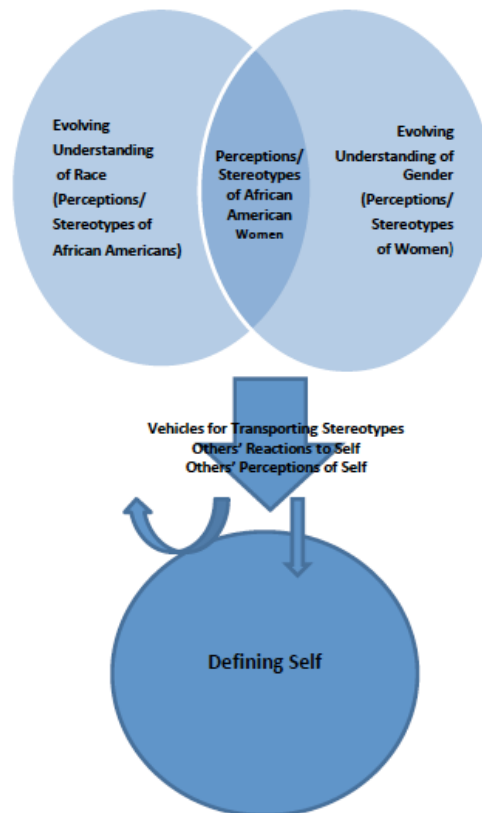


Figure 2 – Relationships Between Key Categories. Top circles depict the intersection of race and gender for African American women, and the associated perceptions/stereotypes. The large arrow indicates how perceptions/stereotypes are transmitted to African American women. The straight, slender arrow represents the perceptions/stereotypes that become a part of the women's self-concepts. The curved, slender arrow depicts the perceptions/stereotypes that do not become a part of the

women's self-concepts. The bottom circle represents the ways in which the women define themselves to create self-concept.

Table 2. Keycategories, Subcategories, and Subsubcategories

Defining Self (Core Story)
Perceptions/Stereotypes Impacting Thoughts and Feelings
Perceptions/Stereotypes Impacting Actions
Wanting to Counteract Stereotypes
Evolving Understanding of Race
The Blackness Mold
Evolving Understanding of Gender
Perceptions/Stereotypes of Women
Perceptions/Stereotypes of African American Women
Historical Perceptions of African American Women
Generational Changes in Perceptions of African American Women
Vehicles for Transporting Stereotypes
Others' Reactions to Self
Inferring Others' Perceptions of Self

### **Defining Self**

Defining self captures the perceptions/stereotypes (about African American women) that these women have received (via media outlets, personal communications and experiences), the sense that they have made of those messages, which, if any of those perceptions/stereotypes, they have come to see as being true of themselves, and ways in which they feel motivated to act in response to the myriad perceptions/stereotypes that abound regarding them. The majority of the women in this study described themselves in mostly positive terms. Roslyn's statement below suggests one possible explanation as to why most of these women's thoughts about themselves consist mainly of positive descriptors with few, if any, negative characteristics.

“Oh, you know, that's what I'm talking about, black women are strong you know, but when I hear that it's more of a thing that black people would say...I guess in that case it does make you feel good about yourself and about black women in

general or women in general, well black women in general, so. Cause it's kind of a reinforcer like you know you already think positive things about yourself and so when other people are talking about it, you know your mom or your sister or your grandma, or whoever, you know it's just kind of a reinforcer, you kind of feel good about yeah you know we are, you know and you kind of agree with the positive things you hear.”

For Kim, disparaging messages from others not well known to her in and outside of her ethnic community were countered with affirming messages from close others within her ethnic community:

“The process would be that I didn't, I would then not feel that I was as pretty as maybe one of my friends because my skin or my hair was a different texture than theirs were. I would start to instantly think that the lighter skin counterparts are more attractive than I was. And so that process, like I said, it was a strange process because I would have those thoughts but it would be weird because then I would also counter those thoughts often. And I'm trying to figure out why. Like I said I think it was just because I did have such a strong family base that were very verbal that just really fed into my self-esteem. And so it was a real balance walk between how much do I consume of what my friends are saying and then how much do I believe those that love me; those that are telling me "Oh my God you're so pretty, you're so beautiful" and feeding me those. I would find myself, I guess kind of like at war at times. Of, you know, well which one is true? And I think some of that had a lot to do with the fact that I was preadolescent and those are the things that are natural I think to any ethnicity. You're gonna go to that am I too skinny, am I too big? But a lot of that also was extra because of my ethnicity.”

One subcategory that emerged was “perceptions/stereotypes impacting thoughts and feelings,” as perceptions/stereotypes about African American women seem to have evoked cognitive and emotional reactions among participants. These women varied in how much they identified with common stereotypes of African American women. A number of these women described themselves in terms consistent with common stereotypes of African American women. For example, Patrice expressed:

“I see myself as strong, independent...I mean I feel like I have to live up to [the perception of me as strong], you know...I can't think of any situations where I was, you know, faced with some issue where I needed to be strong...but I think it just places, you know, a burden on me to live up to that in different situations.”

Several women described a process by which they were able to prevent negative perceptions/stereotypes about African American women from entering their conceptions of themselves. Specifically, they were apparently able to prevent entertaining certain perceptions/stereotypes by reminding themselves of their experiences of African American women who presented alternative images. For instance, from Keisha:

“I would say, I would say like when it comes to dating, like if someone was trying to hook someone up and they're like 'no cause I heard that, you know black women have attitudes...' About myself? I didn't feel any differently. I just felt like he was being ignorant cause it's not true of all black women. So I didn't feel any differently about myself.”

Similarly, Roslyn stated:

“It's kind of like well, you know gosh I wish they would portray, you know more people that were, you know doing well or that were more successful and that weren't you know exactly, wouldn't handle situations the way that you know New York would on “Flavor of Love.” But you know it doesn't make me feel any worse about myself because it's again, it's one of those things that I know not to be true.”

Only two participants tended to reject stereotyped labels altogether to describe themselves, Kenya and Judy. Kenya and Judy's blanket rejection of stereotyped labels may have been related to their consistent reports of personal experiences with African American women who they viewed as embodying negative perceptions/stereotypes. For instance, Kenya reported:

“The loud, obnoxious, I guess over zealous, kinda over confident attitude that some women will carry. The kinda, oh goodness, the oppositional attitude, the defiance that often comes with, just that whole attitude that might be characterized by the, you know the neck rolling and the eyes rolling and all of that stuff. The loud talking... Just other women in general. Just seeing women in my family...these are qualities that I've seen...that I've observed. For the most part none of those qualities [describe me].”

Additionally, Judy stated "...my mother and I are very...I don't wanna go with the stereotypical strong and independent but, you know I would say a lot less submissive and nurturing..." Judy also stated:

"... feeling like the images that society has had for us are not applicable to me but people sometimes try to do their best to put me in that box or you know make me like what they see in maybe not necessarily the most well doing of our demographic."

Another subcategory "perceptions/stereotypes impacting actions" emerged as the women in this study also discussed how perceptions/stereotypes about African American women motivate their behavior and inform their understanding of their roles in relationships with dissimilar others. For example, Vikki stated:

... how I'm perceived at work where there's not as many African American females and so yeah, I'm just like...just you know just trying to show that, yes this is who I am, but this is also who I can be so I want to show you that you know I'm not ashamed. I'm not ashamed of you know showing that you know I talk a little different you know to my peers or like I said my family, but I can also be very professional and I guess be how the majority is perceived as well. So I just try to blend. I think it's just a, yeah definitely a balancing act trying to; I call myself a chameleon cause I can, you know, get along with just a little bit of everybody and just become a little bit like everybody to make everybody else feel more comfortable.

"Wanting to counteract stereotypes" arose as a sub-subcategory as the majority of participants seemed to believe that the negative perceptions/stereotypes that exist about African American women are so disparaging that they need to be challenged. In essence, the majority of these women were not satisfied with their singular knowledge that perceptions/ stereotypes were not characteristic of them. They acted to ensure that others also knew that negative perceptions/stereotypes did not describe them. For instance, Vikki reported her desire to counteract negative perceptions/stereotypes:

"You know I can't sometimes watch certain shows especially certain sitcoms without you know cringing cause it's like ughh, you know that's exactly what I'm



fighting against. That's exactly what I don't want, you know, how I don't want people to see me.”

Roslyn stated:

“... you just look at the shows on tv, you know like “Flavor of Love” and all that where you have all these women who are always getting in fights and they're always loud talking, you know, and some people tend to think that's how black women are just because that's how we're portrayed most often on tv... So it's just kind of like...in a way I guess it is more weight on your shoulders cause you're thinking okay well this is how people might automatically perceive me so it's something that I need to work I guess to counteract or to you know show a different side of you know who we are as a black, as black women.”

Over half of the women reported believing that they have at some point countered at least one negative stereotype about African American women through their actions. Keisha expressed: “You know I would like to change people's perceptions and I think I do that, you know when I meet people.” The women held varied opinions regarding how important it was for them as individuals to purposefully act to try and alter other’s opinions of African American women. A couple of women endorsed a strong desire to counteract negative perceptions/stereotypes of African American women, such as Kim.

She stated:

“In a school situation with my children. They go to a predominantly white school so my perception is that I have to, or what I believe the perception is is that there are lower expectations for my children because they are black. And so I have to work harder to make sure that those perceptions are countered...”

A number of women, however, endorsed less desire and commitment to counteracting negative perceptions/stereotypes. For instance, Keisha stated:

“...it feels good to change people's perception of black people but I don't feel like...it's my job to do that so, you know, if I change someone's perceptions then that's good. And if I'm unable to do that then, you know, I don't know. But, you know I would like to change people's perceptions but I don't feel like, you know, that's my mission or that's my job or anything like that, so.”

Overall, these women tended to define themselves in positive terms, and the commonly promulgated perceptions/stereotypes with which most of these women identified also tended to be those that are generally considered socially desirable (e.g., strong and independent). The ways in which they behaved and presented themselves to others were also heavily influenced by the perceptions/stereotypes of African American women of which they were aware. The following key categories will explicate how these women came to understand the meanings of and general perceptions/stereotypes associated with blackness and womanhood, their understanding of historical and contemporary perceptions/stereotypes specific to African American women, the ways in which they became acquainted with general perceptions/stereotypes, how they came to understand others' reactions to them as racialized, gendered beings, and inferences they made about others' perceptions of them.

### **Evolving Understanding of Race**

These women's conceptions of race appeared to change over time. At some point, the majority of these women began to believe that race carried some importance. Most of the women in this study gained this recognition when they were children. For instance, Kenya stated: "... I think as early as elementary school is when I became aware of the differences and the stigmas that went along with being black." Kim stated:

"Well I guess I would go back to elementary school. And I grew up in a small town and it was a mixed town but we still had sides of town. So we had the black side of town and we had the white side of town and of course I lived on the black side of town. And my family, my extended family, we were very close. And I had probably about three first cousins that were biracial and so we were aware of race, ethnicity at a very early age. And so my best cousin, we're the same age and he's biracial. And so at school we found a difference pretty quickly as far as he looked to be more white than he was black and I guess my experience came through his experience of taking up for him a lot of people picking on him because he sometimes, you know because he hung around us and, but we, the

both of us, we still had a lot of white friends. But I would say that would probably be, just early on in elementary school when I first realized that being black was different. Not necessarily bad or good, but that my peers, my friends were aware of skin color and, as was I.”

Judy and Vikki appeared to recognize that race carries some importance closer to adulthood. Most of these women tended to view race as important in that they seemed to believe that race, or more specifically, blackness impacts the ways in which they move about and within the world in meaningful ways. All but one of the women who participated in this study appeared to believe that race significantly impacts multiple facets of their lives. Below is Stefanie’s recollection of a meaningful event that caused her to begin to view race as significant.

“So a lot of the people that I spent most of the school day with were white. And I remember...one of the friends that I was in classes with and then there was a group of other black students. One of the black students had done something to upset this other girl. And she made a negative comment about them as a group. And then I guess she realized that I was standing there and she turns to me and she says 'oh not you [Stefanie], you're not like them.' As though, yeah you're the same ethnicity as they are but there's a difference between you and them in some way. And so that was kind of one of the, I guess major events that stood out to me, the most significant one that sort of helped me to see that race was a really big deal. And that there was something about my race that sort of stood out no matter what kind of other things people knew about me. The fact that I was of this particular race was gonna set me apart or make me seem very different or whatever.... So it was a mix of things and I think I was...maybe fourth or fifth grade so it was at a point where I wasn't really able to understand all of the implications of the whole race thing and what that all meant and how I was supposed to react. But I knew it was significant cause it stood out and it kind of bothered me after a while. And I think that was one of the things that made me start to, yeah really view the race thing a lot differently. And the white classmates that I really spent most of my time with, beginning to view them very differently and so oh okay, so now I see what is most important when they look at me, you know, sort of this race thing is a bigger deal than maybe I realized before...”

Keisha is the one participant who did not ever come to believe that race carries much importance. Below is a quote indicating Keisha’s apparent belief that race plays no significant role in her life.

“But I just still feel the same way. I don't think of [race] as that important and I don't feel like other people treat me that way, so... You know just a few instances but other than that I don't get treated differently than anyone else or than the majority, you know white people, I don't get treated differently than them... I think some people still have opinions but in general people just see me as, you know like them, just a regular person.”

Many of these women found meaning in racial differences, as most believed that there was some sort of difference between African Americans and Euro Americans. This difference seemed to exist on a continuum between superficial or minor differences to significant or stigmatizing differences. A few participants, when young, seemed to believe that the racial differences that existed were merely superficial and/or minor in nature. This idea is evident in the following sentiment from Mary:

“But I mean like with the hair, it was different. That was the big thing. It was like your hair doesn't do what theirs does. And so, mine was thick and I would have ponytails, big clunkers. And theirs was always kinda down and I always wanted mine to be like that, so... I mean it's just like the skin. That was basically it for me. And the hair. But I mean that was a big thing. I felt on the same level because education wise I was doing just as well as the other kids so I didn't feel anything there.”

However, as they aged, all but one participant who had indicated that differences were only superficial began to believe that racial differences in perceptions of African American and Euro Americans were actually significant if not stigmatizing. Typically, these women seemed to find or expect that their blackness significantly effected how they were perceived as they moved throughout the world. Keisha was the only participant who seemed to believe that racial differences held no deeper meaning than physical variances. The idea that they were different typically meant that they felt they were perceived as different by themselves and/or by others. At least at first, many of these women understood different to simply mean that something was different about their skin color. “Different” began to take on new meaning, however, at some point for half of

these women. Their understanding of what it meant to be different changed and took on some new significance. Judy stated:

“I don't think that color really even started to come into my vocabulary until probably high school... before then [high school] it was probably just she's different. And now it's she's black and that was the prevailing sort of thing.”

Similarly, Mary reported:

“That one incident, it was in fifth grade and the boy called me a nigger... That was it but they never...I don't recall feeling like an outsider, per say, with my friends. But, the incident I did have with the guy. So then I was kinda like, oh. That kinda stood out to me where I was like, oh I really am different. But, before it was like the hair, that was common there – ‘oh your hair does this, mine doesn't.’ That's the kind of thing that stood out to me.”

Not surprisingly, Keisha did not indicate having any experience(s) that caused her to view her understanding of difference in a new way.

The subcategory “the blackness mold” arose as the participants recalled how they came to become aware of and understand the specific perceptions/stereotypes that exist about African Americans. The most commonly mentioned perceptions/stereotypes were that African Americans are expected: to under perform (in academic and career settings; n=5) and steal (n=3), to have children (n=2) to possess poor, disagreeable attitudes (n=2), and to be lazy (n=2). The majority of the participants described mostly perceptions/stereotypes that position African Americans in negative societal positions.

For example, Kim stated:

“So I think that my thoughts of people's perceptions of, because solely I am black, that is those negative stereotypes often overpower the positive ones so that, you know, well there's simply extra eyes on me when I'm shopping. And so of course my assumption is that that's a perception because I'm a black female.”

Similarly, Kenya reported:

“Depending on the circumstances I think often people perceive, people have that threatening image of black people or expect black people to have a lack of understanding, or a lack of sympathy or to enjoy hip-hop. Or maybe they think

all black people watch BET or whatever the popular social norm is for black people. People expect all black people to be that way.”

A couple of the women who described negative aspects of the blackness mold also described a few perceptions/stereotypes that would position African Americans in more positive social positions. For instance, Stefanie stated:

“But I think now there are some...some times [blackness is] perceived positively depending on, you know, what circles you're in or what context you're in. You know as far as sports are concerned, you know maybe in that arena blacks are seen positively because they excel and they're seen as fast and strong and that sort of thing.”

The majority of these women's ideas of what perceptions/stereotypes compose the blackness mold appear to have originated mainly from others' ideas about African Americans. Stefanie reported:

“On the one hand I still see my ethnicity as being a negative thing when it comes to perceptions of people, you know, looking at African Americans as being lesser, as being lazy, as being not as intelligent, as being, you know, if they do well it's because they've been given some opportunity that they probably didn't deserve.”

Several participants' understandings of perceptions/stereotypes arose, at least in part out of their observations and experiences of other African Americans. Kenya reported:

“... these things that in black culture or in...where we were in Tulsa black culture, we weren't raised to appreciate the arts so much in the black community. And so we didn't know what to expect. A lot of times, you know we expected, oh it starts at 8, well there will be an intermission. Or there will be a lag. It may not start at 8. I can be 5 minutes late. And that isn't the case with a lot of things. I mean you need to be on time if not early for things. And it's one of those things that...it was hard to stress with, you know, with my friends or with people I was dating.”

With the exception of Keisha, all of these women's understandings of the meaning and impact of their race changed significantly over time. All but Keisha came to believe that the prevailing perceptions/stereotypes about African Americans tend to position them negatively, and as generally less capable than Euro Americans.

### **Evolving Understanding of Gender**

Similar to their knowledge of race, the participants' understanding of gender seemed to change over time. Specifically, most of the women indicated that at some point they began to notice differences in others' treatment of them as compared to boys and men. A couple women reported recognizing some difference in early childhood. For example, Vikki reported:

“Having a younger brother, you know it was just the 2 of us. And so I really got to see the difference between male versus female. And at this point, through the eyes of my parents you know obviously there was no, you know oh I like this one better cause you know she's this color or anything but it was just he was a male and I was a female.”

A few participants reported recognizing difference during their middle and high school years, yet more reported not noticing a difference until they were adults. Mary stated: “It's always been, being black has kinda been the thing. I think like now, kinda, I see it more versus growing up. I don't think I was aware of it too much, being female. It was just always like okay, cause she's black.” A few participants reported having received the message that different rules existed for them as opposed to boys and men. For instance, Kim stated:

“I would say that my dad had a, played a big part in that. He was a manly man and he would, we were brought up saying that, you know, these are toys that boys play with. These are toys that girls play with. This is how you behave as a girl. This is how you're, you know, you behave as a boy. When my cousins would spend the night - oh well these are boys, you guys don't sleep in the same places. Or, you know, yeah the boys can go outside and play while the girls, you're a girl, that's why you have to come in, because you're a girl. Yeah they can walk to the store by themselves but you can't, it's different being a girl. So I would say that I realized that at a very early age. And of course my mom helped to bring the balance to it. Well these are the perks of being a girl. You get to be in the kitchen; you get to taste the food. No, boys cannot, you have to stay out. And so it was then when I knew that there was a difference between the two.”

These women also typically indicated that their parents' messages regarding the roles of women and men have been influential in their lives.

The subcategory "perceptions/stereotypes of women" emerged as women discussed their evolving understanding of society's opinions and expectations of them as female. Few perceptions/stereotypes specific to women regardless of ethnicity were proffered. The two most frequently stated perceptions/stereotypes were that women should complete domestic tasks (n=4) and that women are too emotional (n=2).

Although none of the other perceptions/stereotypes that were proffered were mentioned more than once, the majority of perceptions/stereotypes given carried negative connotations. All but one of the participants reported believing that varying expectations for women's behavior exists as opposed to men. For example, Kenya stated:

"For example a few years ago I had, I was having problems with my car and I knew the problems I was having with my car I just didn't have time to work on it myself. And so I went to a mechanic...and I told, explained to him what the problem was. Well instead he decided to troubleshoot... Yet he wanted to charge me for the troubleshooting that he had done on my car. And I told him no you're just not listening to me because I'm a woman. If I'd been a man who came in here and said hey man my whatever is broken on my car and explained...you know and this is what I need to fix you'd have taken my word for it. And he was like 'nah, I didn't know, I didn't realize you knew what you were talking about...' and so this guy's like 'oh well I just, you know figured you didn't know what you were talking about' and I'm like simply because I'm female. And I was dating my husband at the time and so of course, you know this guy wasn't going to give me a break...he's like 'well no I can't make those accommodations for you' and when my husband stepped in...and said the exact same thing to him, all of a sudden there's no problem. 'Oh okay yeah I can just charge you for this'... [I was being perceived] as a woman who didn't know what she was talking about. Someone who was just guessing or someone who just wasn't knowledgeable because why would a woman know about a car? It's a stereotype that women don't know what they're talking about."

Half of the women believed that perceptions/stereotypes of women negatively effect personal and business situations or relationships. Patrice reported:



“...but it's like everyone goes out of their way to say, you know, if a woman wants to have it all, we should do everything we can to make that happen. And you know, it's more of like, a accommodating attitude. But at the same time it's still sort of like you wanna label a woman who maybe puts her career first instead of the family aspect of it, and it might have some negative undertones to it because you're also applauding or really praising the women who do it all... Whereas, you know, I don't have kids or a husband, but I'm working just as hard... I just feel like it puts more pressure on women when that's the case because it's kinda like, I don't know. Like, me, I would prefer to not have to work. You know what I mean? And that's not really an option at this point so I feel like since I don't have sort of the excuse of a family, then I'm expected to get more done in my career, and to be, even achieve greater things.”

One of the women reported feeling that perceptions/stereotypes of women, depending on the context, may positively or negatively effect situations or relationships. One woman tended to believe that perceptions/stereotypes of women, without regard to ethnicity, are generally positive. Keisha was the only participant who reported believing that perceptions/stereotypes of women have no effect on situations or relationships positive or negative.

The women in this study tended to agree that they have received various messages throughout their lives from which they have understood that different things are expected of them than are expected of men. They also believed that the prevailing perceptions/stereotypes of women tend to position them negatively, and as generally less capable than men.

### **Perceptions/Stereotypes of African American Women**

The most frequently mentioned contemporary perceptions/stereotypes of African American women were that African American women: have attitudes (n=6), are independent (to an extreme degree; n=5), promiscuous with various “babies’ daddies” (n=5), strong (n=5), have many children (n=4), are lazy (n=3), violent (n=2), caretakers (n=2), late (n=2), irresponsible with money (n=2), loud (n=2), oppositional (n=2),

matriarchal (n=2), high maintenance (n=2), and aspire to live off of the government (n=2). All of the participants endorsed the idea that perceptions/stereotypes of African American women tend to position them negatively or unfavorably in terms of ways in which they are viewed by racially similar and dissimilar others. Mary stated: "...as a black woman? I always kind of think that you're gonna be last... Last in pretty much whatever you do. Well they assume that's where you'll be at - that's my assumption."

Maya reported:

"... they're lazy, lot of kids, always looking for their baby's daddy or, and these are the things that people, like really think of black women, you know. So just those things, lazy, baby's daddy, that's the first thing you hear, my baby daddy. Single parents, welfare, living off the government, projects, where I'm from, there are a lot of young, black females living in the projects. Those are some of the things that I've heard."

A few of the participants also reported that perceptions/stereotypes of African American women sometimes position them positively, although in such instances, positive sentiments typically emanated from within their own communities. Stefanie stated:

"Yeah, I think it was a Mother's day program at church and someone was kind of doing a speech or it wasn't a poem, I think it was just like a, I don't know, a little recitation or something. And just sort of talking about black women and how much they take on and how many roles they play in the home and at church and other areas. So yeah kinda talk about their strength and how they're able to take on so much and how they're caretakers and how they keep things together and structured and organized. And even with the strength they also have like the sensitivity and caring for others and protecting others. And I think it also talked about like how they have their own vulnerabilities and how it's important to take care of them and treasure them and appreciate them."

"Historical perceptions of African American women" emerged as a subcategory as the women in this study discussed their understanding of the perceptions/stereotypes of African American women that prevailed when their mothers and grandmothers were in their 20s and 30s. Most of the women in this study agreed that historical perceptions/stereotypes of African American women that originated from outside their

ethnic communities generally carried negative connotations. For instance, Stefanie stated:

“Well I guess from outside their community, I guess as far as other races are concerned. Maybe those other races perceived them as being not as capable as other races. I would assume they were perceived as less intelligent, as less valuable compared to other races.”

Several women believed that historically, positive perceptions/stereotypes of African American women existed within their own ethnic communities. Mary reported:

“I think within - from what she's told me - in her community, she was considered very smart, intelligent, a good role model for others, like her sisters and other kids in the community. But I think outside of that it was a lot harder. I guess [from] white males and females, and other people they interacted with, it was, they probably were not perceived in a positive light. Just like, okay, you're at the bottom and we're above you.”

The most frequently mentioned historical perceptions/stereotypes of African American women were: not equal to Euro Americans (n=6), fit only for domestic tasks (n=6), strong (n=4), less capable and intelligent (n=3), nurturing (n=2), and not powerful (n=2).

Another subcategory that arose was “generational changes in perceptions of African American women.” The majority of the women believed that perceptions/stereotypes about African American women have changed, at least somewhat, since the perceptions/stereotypes that prevailed when their grandmothers and mothers were their age. For instance, Maya stated:

“Things have changed, we have just as much rights, I mean, access to the same things they have. We can't, they can't deny us to sit at the counter. We can sit at the same, use the same bathrooms, we can use the same water fountains, we, we're just doing the same, so we're not nobodies now, we are somebodies...”

Patrice and Mary were the only two participants who reported believing that most of the historical perceptions/stereotypes of African American women continue to prevail today.

Mary stated:

“So, I guess [black women of my generation] are still, yeah still perceived as kinda like we're not equal. But, I think, yeah. It's not...I don't know it's not as...I think you have more opportunities to do things but you still have the same type of obstacles that [black women of my grandmother's generation] had. I mean it's good when there's somebody else there that can kinda help guide you along, but you still have the same problems that they probably... I don't think it's like, you'll get hosed or anything like that, or somebody's gonna come burn anything in your yard. But, you still have, I think people are a little bit more accepting but you still have the same problems. They're not completely gone.”

Of the majority of participants who reported believing that perceptions/stereotypes of African American women have changed, at least somewhat over time, about half tended to believe that the changes have been mostly positive. Vikki reported:

“...you know when we go from my grandmother to my mother to me and then to now to my daughter, you know I feel like I'm trying to create this super creature [laughter]. Because you know the leaps and bounds that have been made in our perception, in how we perceive ourselves, and how everyone else perceives black women...”

The other half tended to believe that some perceptions/stereotypes have changed in a positive direction while others have changed to position African American women more negatively. Stefanie stated:

“... I think in some ways they were perceived as hard working but maybe, you know less intelligent than other races. Not as able to do certain things compared to other races. Like certain types of jobs or going to certain schools, driving cars, things that we kind of take for granted now that maybe they wouldn't have even been, they weren't even given the opportunity to do cause it was assumed, you know that something was too hard for them, that it was something that they were not qualified to do or valuable enough to do. So I guess, yeah I guess they were seen as less valuable to society. That their roles were seen as being pretty limited. That their roles were sort of taking care of the household task and having kids and taking care of them. I think within the home they were seen very positively though. Maybe given more respect than mothers are nowadays. And even maybe given, you know, I guess along those same lines, given more authority in the home than women maybe now are nowadays. I think they were seen as more spiritual than women of my generation.”

The women in this study generally believe that the contemporary and historical perceptions/stereotypes of African American women tend to position them negatively.

Although some of the perceptions/stereotypes that abound regarding African American women would position them favorably (e.g., strong, independent), there was a feeling among some of the women that the negative opinions tend to have more impact than the more positive ones. There was consensus among these women that over the past 70-80 years, perceptions/stereotypes about African American women have changed, at least somewhat, to position African American women more positively in some areas.

### **Vehicles for Transporting Stereotypes**

Generally, these women's ideas regarding the perceptions/stereotypes that exist about African American women were informed by media sources. The perceptions/stereotypes that they saw as being proffered by the media were overwhelmingly negative (e.g., violent, uneducated, disagreeable attitudes). Keisha reported:

“I guess again like on tv, it's kind of hard, I would say, yeah just people's maybe perception that black women like don't graduate from like even high school and they just have babies out of wedlock and that's all that they do. Like that they, what's it called, that they live off welfare or whatever and they don't really do anything else.”

Likewise, Kenya stated:

“The opinion that black women are, have the physical, I guess, not just sensuality or sexuality but that they project a negative image physically and sexually. And that black women are only viewed as such with the dancing and the video girl and the being in videos or being models. That black women are only viewed that way.”

Some of the women mentioned that their understanding of perceptions/stereotypes about African American women was also heavily informed by their personal experiences with individuals. Maya reported:

“Just sitting around my grandmother's house I can, it can be even my aunt or, even sitting at my mama's house there's certain things talked about each other, you know like, my sister, they just having babies, having babies and they don't

have no education. And their goals and aspirations are to make it to the projects. So it saddens me but whereas my goal may be to go to college, their goal is to make it out their mama's house and into the projects. I see it. You know I don't necessarily have to hear nobody talk about it. I live it. When I go home I have 2 sisters, both of them have 1 son. My other sister's pregnant with another child and none of them have a high school education and the both of them are striving for public housing, which is the projects. So it's not necessarily what I hear, but it's what I see."

A couple participants reported that the notion that African American women are strong and/or intelligent was heard mostly within their own African American communities.

For instance, Stefanie expressed:

"But within, I would think within their communities, you know how they were seen by other blacks was a bit more positive. As you know hard working, strong, caretakers, independent, spiritual, yeah."

This key category presents the sources from which the women in this study learned about perceptions/stereotypes that exist regarding African American women. Influential sources appeared to be media outlets and interactions with and experiences of other African American women.

### **Others' Reactions to Self**

The women in this study recounted interactions during which others reacted to them in some sort of meaningful way(s). All except one of the women recalled interactions in which others responded to them as if they do or should live according to stereotyped roles for African American women. Patrice noted:

"I think [being perceived as independent] can be a barrier when you're in a social setting, sort of. It can be intimidating to men. It's sort of like, oh I can give you an example... But, like, I was dating this guy in law school. And he actually said to me at some point, you know, "why would you want to be with me; what can I do for you," or whatever, something along those lines. And so that's an instance where I think, you know, he's perceiving that I'm so independent that I, what could he possibly bring to the table. And so that just reminded me of like I think that in dating situations the independence can be a turn off to men. It's more intimidating. It's sort of like, you know, I have to be at a certain level to even talk

to this woman because she's, you know, miss independent. I think that's how it's, I'm effected by that perception.”

Vikki reported:

“...you know again before I even had kids... like when I worked even in high school, I worked at a grocery store and you know just talking to the customers it was just so often that people were like, you got kids at home? No sir, I'm just 17 years old, I'm still in high school, I don't have kids...As far as how it made me feel, annoyed, irritated. Because it's just like why do you assume? You know why would you assume and that was always the tendency to assume that I had lots of kids and so it just got annoying...”

Half of the women reported that they are frequently met with expressions of surprise once others learn that they do not fit negative stereotyped roles of African American women.

Mary reported:

“...he was telling me that he got a fellowship. And I was like oh I got the same one. He was like ‘really?’ And I was just like I didn't question you when you said it. So it was kinda like, why is it like a surprise that I got one too. So from there kinda looked again, it's perceived as you're, I guess limited. Or you're not able to compete on the same level as say someone else - I mean as he would. So, that kinda stood out. So, it's that surprise, just like, oh... But I kinda look at it like you're able to do it so why couldn't I?”

Kenya stated:

“... local news often portrays black people with this menacing, you know persona. And people expect that and then they're like 'oh wow,' you know once people actually got to know us it's like 'oh wow you're a teacher...well can you help me with this or can you do that...oh you jog,' or just you know whatever the thing is it's like people have this shock thing. And I don't think they would have the same shock if we were a white family.”

Not surprisingly, most of the participants reported feeling offended when others' reactions to them were laden with implications that they personified negative stereotypes.

For instance, Judy expressed:

“... professors would say things to me like ‘oh [Judy] if you don't have money to go on that field trip we can do a scholarship for you.’ And they would never say ‘hey [Judy] why are you not going on this field trip?’ Well it would be because I didn't want to. It wasn't ever a money issue... Made me more upset than

anything. You know why am I not allowed to, why do you assume that I don't have the same privileges you do just because I'm brown?"

This key category describes ways in which others have interacted with and reacted to these women. These interactions and reactions seem to have held some significance for the women of this study as often the women felt that others expected stereotypical behavior and characteristics of them.

### **Inferring Others' Perceptions of Self**

The women in this study described a number of incidents from which they surmised others' perceptions of them. All but one participant reported believing that acquaintances and strangers probably tended to perceive them negatively, in terms of negative stereotypes. Vikki stated: "... being an African American woman...I think it has probably a, I definitely would have to say a more of a negative effect of how I'm perceived." Patrice reported:

"So, I think that that's, I mean the perception might be that, you know, she wouldn't, you know wanna talk about certain things that I'm interested in. So, that's one thing that I can think of as far as what [my coworkers'] perception of me might be. But, beyond that, I really don't know what the perception is. I think that some people might feel that I might be less qualified. There might be an assumption or misconception that if you're black your grades don't have to be as high to get a job. So, some people might think, you know, she's not as capable because, you know, she's black."

Additionally, Kim noted:

"It would be maybe like a parent-teacher conference with my son's pre-K teacher. And just my husband and I being there and the quivering of the voice when she's talking to us, and the constantly missing the table when she's trying to put her elbow on the table. And just the turning red and we're just having a simple conversation about, you know, my son's performance in school who's only 4. That's kind of the situation to where I felt like obviously [she's] just been so sheltered to...there's only been a few words that's come out of my mouth and you're already flush red and your voice is quivering. And you work with my son on a daily basis. That would be one of those situations where I just felt as if she didn't have; she'd led a very sheltered life or her past teaching experiences would be those of, you know, teaching predominantly people who are of her ethnicity



and just lacks the cultural sensitivity in the assumptions that are made... That ‘oh my God if I don't say the right thing maybe they'll lash out at me.’ Or fear, I guess would be the perception. That we were...people to be feared or intimidated. Not even necessarily intimidated but feared.”

Three of the women believed that people who are close to them have also perceived them in terms of common negative stereotypes of African American women. For instance, Stefanie stated:

“I don't think I often have attitude. But probably a lot of times when I was younger and like out at a party or something and a guy tried to talked to me, he probably perceived me as having attitude. I think my husband often perceives me as having attitude.”

Most of the participants also reported believing that others, including those well known and unknown to them, perceived them in positive ways at times. Stefanie expressed:

“I'm trying to think if there are any positive...I don't know I think even maybe the whole strong black woman idea at some point maybe has effected people's perceptions of me. I don't know maybe their expectations of me in some way have, expecting me to be able to take on a lot of challenges or excel despite challenges or whatever.”

Mary noted:

“I get [smart, intelligent] all the time at home. My mom says that about herself. She says it about me. She says it about other of her friends, other family members. I've got it at school from other friends. My advisor said it - I was shocked, a little bit. I've got it from like my close friends. The one guy in lab said it, the one that I was telling you about. I didn't really think he was serious. I didn't take his opinion seriously.”

This key category discusses how these women believe others have perceived them. The women generally suspected that they have been perceived in ways consistent with common negative stereotypes about African American women.

## CHAPTER 5

## DISCUSSION

The current study is situated amongst a broad body of burgeoning research that acknowledges that ways individuals define themselves are influenced by their membership in social groups (e.g., Allen & Bagozzi, 2001; Beauboeuf, 1999; Jackson & Mustillo, 2001; Oyserman & Lee, 2008; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). The current study explored ways specific, intersecting group memberships affected self-definitions. The question under study was: What is the impact of historical and contemporary stereotypes on African American women's sense of self?

Thomas et al (2004) urged researchers and clinicians to consider the effect(s) of stereotypes on the self-conceptualization processes and functioning of African American women. The current study, with focus on how African American women conceptualize themselves given historical and contemporary perceptions/stereotypes of them, acknowledges the importance of clarifying the linkages between stereotypes and African American women's self-definitions.

Patterson (2004) noted that much of the previous research done on African American women's self-concept has been conducted with mainly children and adolescent participants. This study adds to existing literature by elucidating the self-concepts of a little studied group of African American women – young adults post college. As previous researchers have acknowledged, young adulthood is an important developmental period because individuals may be moving into new social roles and undergoing significant biological changes, such as peak intellectual functioning (e.g., Demo, 1992). Because individuals in American society may be encountering new social challenges

during early adulthood, such as beginning careers and having children, young adulthood may be characterized by many significant social changes. Although self-concept is thought to be generally stable, it is susceptible to change as individuals undergo life transitions and take on new challenges (Demo, 1992; Wakslak, Nussbaum, Liberman, & Trope, 2008). Thus, during young adulthood, self-concepts of individuals may be fluctuating more than at other points in life.

The participants in the current study discussed their evolving awareness of, and responses to the societal opinions of African Americans, women, and African American women. The majority of the participants reported that some memorable event(s) triggered their initial beliefs that their race and gender held significance in U.S. society. Most of the women began to believe that their race was significant during childhood. Comparatively, most women who came to believe that their gender was significant did so in late adolescence to early adulthood. This is consistent with other researchers' findings that African American women tend to consider the impact(s) of their gender after exploring their racial identities (e.g., Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; King, 2003). On their demographic forms, seven of the participants noted that they had lived most of their lives in the South. One participant noted that she was from the southwest and two noted that they were from the Midwest, yet all three were born and raised in Oklahoma. Oklahoma is a state historically similar to other southern states in terms of its overtly racist norms and politics (Perry & Hughes, 1956). Thus, all of the women were socialized amidst southern mores. Compared to other regions of the country, the south is notorious for overt racial tension (e.g., Jones, 1998; Perry & Hughes, 1956). It may be that from an early age, living amidst southern cultures, these women encountered more

negative messages regarding their race than regarding their gender. As Smith (1995) notes, for African American women in the south, race is often experienced as the most conspicuous form of oppression they face. For many of these women, the only time they noticed any impact of their gender was in their homes with their racially similar families, particularly if their parents conveyed different rules and expectations of them compared to the boys and men in their families. This is contrasted with the myriad of strangers, acquaintances, and friends that they encountered outside of their homes to whom these women's race may have been more salient than their gender. Another reason these women may have explored the meaning(s) of their race before gender is because they may have received the message from their parents that race is more important than other aspects of their identities. A few women reported that from an early age their parents prepared them for racist acts they would likely encounter. These women, however, did not report that their parents similarly attempted to prepare them for any sexism they might encounter. Their parents may have been more concerned with race because race was the most salient aspect of their own identities. Alternatively, while their parents may have been frustrated with racist practices, they may have tended to accept traditional gender roles without much thought of how doing so reinforced sexist models.

The women in this study discussed historical and contemporary perceptions/stereotypes of which they were aware and ways such perceptions/stereotypes affected them personally. Their understanding of historical perceptions/stereotypes of African American women seemed to have been informed by personal communications with older women in their families, and through media accounts of historical perspectives of African American women. There was a belief that historically, negative perceptions/stereotypes

of African American women emanated from outside of their racial communities. These women assumed that the dominant culture held low opinions of AA women based on the sociopolitical norms that dictated unequal treatment for this group of Americans.

Comparatively, the participants believed that historically, positive perceptions/stereotypes of African American women originated from within the African American community. Since the period of legalized slavery in the Americas, African Americans have always needed to define themselves separately from Euro Americans' opinions of them in order to view themselves positively (e.g., Collins, 1986; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

There was consensus among these women that over the past 70-80 years, perceptions/stereotypes about African American women have changed, at least somewhat, to position African American women more positively in some areas. The positive changes mentioned by these women in perceptions/stereotypes of African American women seem to reflect a deviation from patriarchal models. For instance, these women tended to believe that African American women are now seen as more capable in careers outside the home than they were previously thought. Some of the women mentioned that although some perceptions/stereotypes of African American women have changed to position them more positively, there have also been changes in perceptions/stereotypes that would position African American women more negatively. For instance, some women stated that compared to earlier generations, African American women are now thought to be selfish and "high maintenance," concerned with meeting their own personal needs, even to the detriment and neglect of others around them. Such negative changes in perceptions/stereotypes of African American women seem to be

influenced by racist and sexist assumptions. Specifically, these criticisms seem to be focused on African American women not conforming to traditional patriarchal models that would expect them to be more concerned with caretaking, placing the needs of others – racially similar and dissimilar – before their own.

The participants' understanding of contemporary perceptions/stereotypes of African American women often came from the opinions of others well known and unknown to them. Through listening to others express their opinions and expectations of other African American women they came to understand how the world likely views them. Some women reported that their ideas of African American women were informed by their personal observations of other African American women. Many of the participants expressed the idea that as in the past, contemporary positive perceptions/stereotypes also tend to emanate from within the African American community. This could be the case because younger African Americans may be continuing the tradition of defining themselves separately from Euro Americans' opinions of them. Several participants also expressed a belief that race has more impact on their daily lives than does gender. This could be because these women have received or recognized more messages regarding the inferiority of their race than messages about the inferiority of their gender. They may have received or noticed more racial messages than gendered ones because, as discussed earlier, they live amidst southern culture, a culture that is more overtly racially charged than others in the U.S.

The media also largely informed the participants' understanding of contemporary perceptions/stereotypes of African American women. Many participants reported that most of the media depictions of African American women they see are negative. Milkie

(1999) contended that because they have less control over the media images that are propagated about them, African American women may strive to present more positive self-images in social contexts. Similarly, in reaction to the perceptions/stereotypes that abound regarding African American women, the majority of the participants in the current study reported their desire to not only present themselves in ways contrary to negative perceptions/stereotypes, but to actively work to counteract stereotypes. The women in this study described efforts to counteract negative perceptions/stereotypes as being either proactive or reactive. Although most of the participants reported some desire to counteract negative perceptions/stereotypes, only a couple indicated that their desire to do so was strong. The couple of women who expressed strong desires to counteract negative perceptions/stereotypes also expressed thoughtfulness about their children's futures. Perhaps the women who felt strongly about counteracting perception/stereotypes were motivated, at least partially, by a desire to create a more just world for their children.

The media is a common source from which individuals gain information about others. Individuals often use information gleaned from the media to make social comparisons, which may result in changes in how they evaluate themselves (Baker, 2005; Blanton & Stapel, 2008). Milkie (1999) noted that individuals derive meaning from their perception of media messages as opposed to the messages themselves. She found that African American female adolescents were able to resist unfavorable and/or unattainable media depictions of African American women. Milkie (1999) deduced that the adolescents in her study resisted media images of African American women because they believed the majority of their female African American friends, and at least some of

their male African American counterparts also rejected such depictions. Many women in the current study, despite having received a great deal of knowledge regarding perceptions/stereotypes of African American women from the media, also rejected negative media images. Although no formal measure of self-esteem was administered to this sample of women, the overwhelmingly positive ways in which these women defined themselves suggests that they had high, positive self-esteems. These women were thus likely very motivated to maintain high self-esteems by readily rejecting those opinions of African American women that would threaten to undermine their positive feelings for themselves. Several women in this study explained that they rejected offensive media images by referencing models of African American womanhood that countered the unfavorable depictions. By repudiating undesirable characterizations of African American women, the participants prevented negative media images from influencing their understanding of African American women as a group as well as their personal self-concepts.

The participants discussed qualities of the perceptions/stereotypes of African American women of which they were aware. The majority of the women reported mostly negative perceptions/stereotypes of African Americans and African American women. While most of the participants also described some positive perceptions/stereotypes regarding African American women (e.g., strong, independent), there was a feeling among some of the women that the negative opinions tend to have more impact and salience than the more positive ones. This could be because the negative ones may have caused stronger affective responses for these women, making them more readily accessible in their memories. The participants also may have proffered numerous



negative perceptions/stereotypes due to the sheer abundance of negative messages regarding African American women. As bell hooks (2001) notes, everyone in U.S. society is frequently confronted with animosity towards African Americans regardless of whether they are consciously aware of it. Additionally, the combined effect of racism and sexism is that individuals are encouraged to believe that the negative images of African American women are truer than are positive ones (Collins, 1991; hooks, 2001; Lawrence-Webb, Littlefield, & Okundaye, 2004). Alternatively, some participants may have provided more negative perceptions/stereotypes than positive because they were referencing African American women of their experience who they felt exemplified negative, dominant opinions of African American women.

The participants discussed how perceptions/stereotypes of African American women have personally impacted them. Participants noted that perceptions/stereotypes have been impactful to the extent that they have conveyed social significance of their racial and gendered identities, and as they are referenced in interactions with others. Previous researchers have contended that self-concept develops through interactions with close and distant others (e.g., Allen & Bagozzi, 2001; Cross & Madson, 1997; Demo, 1992; Hitlin, 2003). The women in the present study discussed some meaningful interactions with others that helped inform their self-concepts. Specifically, the participants recounted instances of others' reactions to them and their understanding of how others have perceived them. Regarding others' reactions to them, the majority of participants reported that they had been confronted with others' expectations that they would conform to common stereotypical roles. Others' expectations that they would personify stereotypes seemed to prompt these women to affirm their own personal self-

definitions devoid of negative perceptions/stereotypes. This provides further evidence for past researchers' contentions that African American women are not merely passive recipients of dominant ideology, but that they actively work to challenge messages of inferiority (e.g., Collins, 1986; Patterson, 2004). Generally, as the participants relayed their experiences, their tones conveyed frustration with others' tendencies to label and make unfavorable assumptions about them. Frustration may have resulted because such occurrences may have been experienced as assaults to their identities, and were thus painful experiences. Moreover, these women may have detected cues from social and/or work situations that informed them of the relatively low value society places on their race and gender, such as unequal pay because they are women, or being ignored in groups of racially dissimilar others because they are African American. Half of the women reported that they are frequently met with expressions of surprise once others learn that they do not fit negative stereotyped roles of African American women. Others' reactions of surprise may be meaningful to these women in that others persist in viewing them as members of a homogeneous group. Additionally, others' surprise reactions may be meaningful because these women are familiar with varied representations of African American womanhood and they are thus disappointed when others evince a lack of similar knowledge.

The women in this study described a number of incidents from which they surmised others' perceptions of them. All but one participant reported believing that acquaintances and strangers probably tended to perceive them in terms of negative stereotypes. Participants may believe that others make negative assumptions about them because they are aware of the abundance of negative perceptions/stereotypes that exist

regarding African American women. Perhaps that knowledge combined with experiences in which others have made stereotypical assumptions about them fuels the participants' expectations that others perceive them negatively. It may also be the case that assuming others are thinking negatively of them helps these women prepare for scenarios in which others actually react to them as stereotypical. Stated differently, assuming that others perceive them negatively may help these women guard against potential assaults on their affective states. Most of the participants also reported believing that others, including those well known and unknown to them, perceived them in positive ways at times. This may be the result of a combination of others having expressed their beliefs that these women personify more positive stereotypes as well as implications of their educational and career attainments. Specifically, the participants' academic and career successes may prompt others to assume that they possess certain socially desirable characteristics or competencies.

For a number of the participants, stereotyped labels and images were a part of how they understood themselves. The common perceptions/stereotypes with which most of these women identified tended to be those that are generally considered socially desirable, such as strong and independent. The participants appear to have actively prevented the perceptions/stereotypes they found offensive from becoming part of their self-definitions. This finding is similar to results from previous studies as researchers have found that African American women often consciously reject messages from the dominant culture that would be damaging to their self-concepts (e.g., Duke, 2002; Patterson, 2004; Petersen, 2000).

The women in this study were reared in the 1980s and 1990s, and entered adulthood in the late 1990s and at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Adult African American women who were reared during the decades of the Civil Rights and Women's Rights Movements have been able to define themselves in ways contrary to the dominant culture's often disparaging views of them (Patterson, 2004; Petersen, 2000). It is significant that here, even a sample of younger African American women who were not privy to wide scale empowering social movements were also able to define themselves in overwhelmingly positive terms despite abundant unfavorable perceptions/stereotypes about them. As discussed earlier, historically, negative perceptions/stereotypes of African American women came from non African Americans while more positive perceptions/stereotypes came from other African Americans. This reflects the more close-knit, collectivistic orientations of older generations of African Americans. Although segregation meant unequal living conditions and career and educational opportunities, there was neighborhood communalism as African Americans of varied social classes and incomes lived together in neighborhoods, and attended the same schools and churches (hooks, 2001; Reid, 2004). In this context, African American women compared themselves to other African American women not to Euro American women, and were well equipped to resist Eurocentric images, propaganda, and norms. Moreover, African Americans bolstered one another's self-esteem because no one from outside of their racial communities would have done so. Within segregation, African American women were socially insulated in ethnically similar communities that protected them from racist assumptions, yet subjected them to oppression from African American men who had adopted dominant cultural models of male supremacy (hooks, 2001; Jones,

1998; Lawrence-Webb et al., 2004). With the increased economic and educational opportunities of integration came more interactions with Euro Americans. More interaction with Euro Americans meant more exposure to negative perceptions/stereotypes, and thus presented more challenges to African American women's abilities to think highly of themselves. As bell hooks (2001) notes, it was more common for African American women to maintain positive self-concepts during periods of de jure segregation than since legalized social integration.

Although all of the women in this study reported frequent social interactions with Euro Americans, similar to earlier generations of African American women, many of the participants may have maintained collectivistic worldviews. Collectivism may be represented in the majority of these women's tendencies to reference other African American women of their experience as examples of more socially desirable perceptions/stereotypes (e.g., strong, independent). The attributes that they admired in other African American women, such as strong and independent, often became ways in which they also saw themselves. Moreover, the majority of these women may have modeled their methods of refuting unfavorable perceptions/stereotypes after older African American women of their experience. Specifically, these women may have observed ways in which older African American women maintained positive self-concepts, such as setting and adhering to a set of values and expectations not defined by dominant culture.

As discussed in chapter 4, unlike the majority of participants, only two women from the current study tended to reject stereotyped labels altogether in their self-definitions. While these two women also defined themselves in mostly positive terms,

they did so by contrasting themselves with other African American women of their experience. They recounted experiences with African American women who, at least in their opinions personified stereotypical roles. After comparing themselves to other African American women of their experience, these women came to view themselves as exceptions to stereotypical rules in their career and educational successes, personalities, and personal choices. They may see themselves as responding to racist and sexist expectations differently compared to other African American women of their experience. Perhaps these two women believed that the only way to see themselves positively was to distinguish themselves from racially similar women. In essence, they may have adopted a survival strategy of aligning themselves with dominant culture and dominant cultural perspectives in order to make living around and working with Euro Americans easier. Another possible explanation for the two women's complete eschewal of stereotyped labels is that compared to the majority of participants, they may espouse more individualistic worldviews which may prevent them from focusing on similarities between themselves and other African American women. These two women may have overlooked the historical and contemporary situations which gave rise to the characteristics that are considered negative perceptions/stereotypes. Inattention to sociohistorical realities may have left these women, at least on some level accepting, without critically analyzing dominant characterizations of African American women. It is not uncommon for African Americans to know little about their history. Lacking knowledge of their history, African Americans may look unnecessarily unfavorably on their racial communities, believing that they represent significant aberrations from dominant cultural standards (Lawrence-Webb et al., 2004).

### **Implications for Counseling Psychologists**

African American women's early termination or complete avoidance of psychotherapy has been attributed (at least partially) to their trouble finding clinicians with whom they feel they can relate (Curphey, 2003). Findings from the current study remind clinicians to consider how African American women's sociopolitical realities (e.g., living in an environment rife with stereotypes about them) may affect their presentations. With improved understanding of African American women's self-definitions, and the impact of stereotypes on those definitions, clinicians may be better able to understand these women's worldviews. Specifically, clinicians may be more empathic with their African American female clients once they recognize the pressure that some African American women feel to conform to or to live contrary to perceptions/stereotypes about them. Clinicians' genuine empathy regarding African American women's often difficult task of asserting their individuality in a society that would ignore their self-definitions may help these clients to feel understood and comfortable. Consequently, clinicians may be better equipped to increase and maintain therapeutic relationships with African American women. For instance, one of the most frequently mentioned perceptions/stereotypes of African American women from this study was that African American women are strong. While most of the women who mentioned the perception/stereotype of strength had come to adopt that label as part of their self-definitions, one participant expressly rejected the label. Although strength generally carries positive connotations in American society, the different reactions to the label of strength among this study's participants underscores the importance of not assuming how our African American, female clients will feel about such

characterizations. Whether they identify with the perceptions/stereotypes that are propagated about them, African American female clients are likely to have strong opinions about such characterizations that may affect their presentations and roles in therapy relationships.

African American women's acute awareness of stereotypes about them could also affect their relationships with others, including their therapy relationships. Knowledge of stereotypes about them, at least initially, could cause African American women to present in an emotionally guarded manner in therapy relationships. Creating a space in which African American women are encouraged to experience a full range of emotions and explore the various parts of themselves may ease guardedness. To this end, outside of the therapy relationship, it is important for psychologists to honestly acknowledge the stereotypes of which they are aware, examine what sociocultural conditions may have given rise to the stereotypes, and intentionally act to avoid imposing stereotypical frameworks on clients. Within the therapy relationship, clinicians should communicate to their African American female clients a willingness to discuss issues of race and gender that may be salient for them, particularly any identity related assumptions that could potentially hinder the development of the therapy relationship. This is consistent with previous research, which demonstrated that therapy relationships with African Americans may reach impasses when African American clients feel that their clinicians are uncomfortable or reluctant to discuss issues of race (e.g., Neville, Spanierman, & Doan, 2006; Thompson & Jenal, 1994).

When learning about groups of traditionally oppressed people (e.g., African Americans, women) psychologists in training should be encouraged to remember that the



more traditionally oppressed groups to which one belongs, the more stereotypes one generally encounters. Psychologists in training should be instructed to recognize that the intersection(s) of traditionally marginalized group identities may profoundly impact how individuals see themselves and their world, as well as their understanding of how the world sees them. Therefore, the focus of training should be less on characteristics of groups of people and more on the power and privilege dynamics which operate in U.S. society. The idea that training programs should address in more depth the sociopolitical factors underlying the realities of members of marginalized groups is an extension of a call by Rigazio-Digilio & Ivey (1997) for mental health professionals to devote more consideration to multicultural issues. Additionally, trainees should be directed to consider whom racist and patriarchal systems benefit as well as their impacts on those who are oppressed. Because the critical examination of racist and patriarchal practices may lead to feelings of discomfort which individuals may want to avoid, trainees may be encouraged to utilize tools to help them become more comfortable discussing issues related to race and gender such as practicing freewrites and engaging in dialogue with fellow trainees. Ochoa & Pineda (2008) note that freewriting can serve as a useful tool in helping students become more aware of the impact of their social identities, and encourage dialogue about thoughts and feelings on the inequalities associated with various identities. The current study, with focus on the impact of stereotypes on African American women's self-concepts reveals one way one group of traditionally oppressed people is affected by living in a society with biases toward Euro Americans and men. The participants' self-definitions, conspicuous for their lack of common negative stereotypes, may reflect a rejection of traditionally oppressive systems that have

privileged Euro Americans and men for centuries. Collins (1986) notes that when African American women create their own self-definitions separate from dominant cultural representations of them they challenge the racist and sexist status quo, and may protect themselves from internalized oppression. Thus, by creating and affirming their self-definitions, the women in this study reclaim some of the power that has been denied them on a systemic level.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are several limitations to this study. First, all of the women in this study had earned Bachelor's degrees and the majority had completed at least some professional schooling. Educational attainment has been shown to impact individuals' ideas of themselves, particularly as increases in education are associated with higher incomes and greater career opportunities (e.g., Jackson & Mustillo, 2001). Regarding amount of formal education, the sample from the current research is similar to many other studies that have also sampled African American women who were attending college or had already earned college degrees (e.g., Patterson, 2004; Petersen, 2000). The voices of African American women with less formal education are not represented in the current study. Moreover, all of the participants in the current study were reared in southern cultures. The participants' perspectives on race may have been strongly influenced by their experiences living in southern cultures where overt racial tension is often more pronounced than in other regions of the country. Comparatively, African American women who were reared in the west, north, and/or Midwest may be accustomed to more subtle forms of racism of which they may even be unaware. Thus, African American

women from U.S. regions other than the south may experience the effects of race differently from the women in the current study.

Second, as Polkinghorne (2005) noted, the richest data tends to result from multiple interviews with participants. Perhaps additional interviews with more pointed follow-up questions about these women's experiences would have provided greater insight into the complex make-up of African American women's self-concepts. Meeting with participants a second time would have allowed them additional time to reflect on their experiences and opportunities to elaborate on their stories. Although useful data was obtained and analyses were grounded in participants' experiences, additional interviews would have provided the opportunity to present emerging trends to participants for further accuracy checks, and would have revealed specific areas requiring further inquiry.

Third, as a qualitative study, the quality not quantity of participants' responses was important (Polkinghorne, 2005). Although saturation (signaling an end to data collection) was reached in the current study, some oversampling with more focused questions may have added a greater level of depth to the findings. Fassinger (2005) has utilized oversampling in order to compensate for potential limitations involving individual interviews. Oversampling here would have allowed for the deliberate inclusion of African American women with more diverse backgrounds (e.g., geographical diversity). The addition of women with more diverse backgrounds would have allowed for increased understanding of factors that mediate the effects of perceptions/stereotypes on self-concept.

Future research on African American women's self-concepts should investigate the impact of perceptions/stereotypes on women with varied levels of formal education. Moreover, future work should also focus on understanding the impact of perceptions/stereotypes on African American women's self concept when women are members of other traditionally marginalized groups such as lesbian or physically disabled. Although beyond the scope of the current research, some of the participants opined that their current and potential relationships with others, particularly African American men, are greatly affected by the perceptions/stereotypes that exist about them. Future research should more closely examine the impact of perceptions/stereotypes of African American women on the quality of their potential and existing relationships.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that the self-conceptualization process of African American women is complex. Thomas (2004) and Reid (2004) asserted that the self-conceptualization process of African American women is still not well understood today. The current study was an attempt to increase understanding within the field about the self-conceptualization processes of African American women with regard to the perceptions/stereotypes that exist about them. The African American women in this study tended to define themselves in positive terms, and often their self-definitions included perceptions/stereotypes that are typically thought to be socially desirable (e.g., strong and independent). Future research should extend the current question to consider the implications of perceptions/stereotypes for self-concepts of African American women when those women are also members of other traditionally oppressed groups. Future research should also investigate the meaningfulness and impact of

perceptions/stereotypes on African American women's relationships, as well as any subsequent impact on their opinions of themselves.

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APPENDIX A  
ADVERTISEMENT FOR THE STUDY

## Advertisement for the Study

**PARTICIPANTS INVITED FOR A RESEARCH STUDY**

I am seeking participants for a study that aims to learn about how African American women develop a sense of self-concept. This study is being conducted by a doctoral student (Leslie Leathers) in the University of Iowa's Counseling Psychology program. This study will involve participation in one interview that will last between one and three hours. Follow-up interviews may be necessary for the purposes of clarification.

Criteria for inclusion in the study include:

Women who:

1. Identify as African American
2. Have lived in the United States their entire lives
3. Are aged 24-34 years old

All of the information you provide will be kept completely confidential. In the event that this study is reported or published, your identity will not be disclosed. Results will be reported in a summarized manner so that you cannot be identified, and all participants will be assigned pseudonyms in order to further protect anonymity.

If you are interested in participating, or have further questions please contact: Leslie Leathers at 919 475 3247 or 319 341 5725 or [leslie-leathers@uiowa.edu](mailto:leslie-leathers@uiowa.edu)

APPENDIX B  
SCREENING SCRIPT

## Script for Screening Participants

### **Explanation of the Study:**

Hello, I am Leslie Leathers, a student in the Counseling Psychology program at the University of Iowa. I am conducting a research study looking at how African American women develop a sense of self. Specifically, I am wondering: how would you, as an African American woman, define yourself, and what impact have stereotypes about Black women had on your idea of who you are?

If you choose to participate in this study you will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and I will interview you. The interview questions will all be related to the topic I am studying – how African American women develop a sense of self in the presence of stereotypes about them. This study may take between one and three hours of your time in addition to a potential one to two hours of time to clarify information from the first interview. Your participation will be confidential, and the interview will be audio taped for later transcription.

### **Screening Questions:**

1. Are you interested in participating in this study?
2. How do you identify racially; gender wise?
3. Have you thought much about what it means for you to be African American/Black in this society? (yes: a lot or somewhat; no)
4. Have you thought much about what it means to be a woman in this society? (yes: a lot or somewhat; no)
5. Are you aware of attitudes/opinions about African American/Black women? (yes: very aware or somewhat aware; no)
6. Have you lived in the U.S. all your life? Have you spent any significant period(s) of time living outside the U.S.?

Is it okay if I take your name and number so that I may contact you to schedule a time and date for the interview?

APPENDIX C  
DEMOGRAPHIC FORM



## Demographic Form

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

In what region of the country were you reared/have you lived for most of your life?

North \_\_\_\_\_ East \_\_\_\_\_ Midwest \_\_\_\_\_  
 South \_\_\_\_\_ West \_\_\_\_\_ Southwest \_\_\_\_\_

Relationship Status:

Single \_\_\_\_\_ Engaged \_\_\_\_\_ Dating \_\_\_\_\_  
 Married \_\_\_\_\_ Separated \_\_\_\_\_ Divorced \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Sexual Orientation:

Heterosexual \_\_\_\_\_ Lesbian \_\_\_\_\_ Bisexual \_\_\_\_\_  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_

Highest level of formal education completed:

Some High School \_\_\_\_\_ High School Degree \_\_\_\_\_  
 Some College \_\_\_\_\_ Associate's Degree \_\_\_\_\_  
 College Degree \_\_\_\_\_ Some Professional School \_\_\_\_\_  
 Professional School Degree \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Household Income:

\$0-\$20,000 \_\_\_\_\_ \$21,000-\$50,000 \_\_\_\_\_ \$51,000-\$80,000 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \$81,000-\$120,000 \_\_\_\_\_ \$121,000-\$160,000 \_\_\_\_\_ >160,000 \_\_\_\_\_

Who lives in your household? \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX D  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

## Interview Protocol

## African American Women's Sense of Self

1 – Tell me the story of how you came to believe that being AA was influencing how you were being perceived/what others were thinking of you? What did you think about that? How did you feel about that?

- What was your understanding then of why you were being perceived/thought of as such?

2 – Tell me the story of how you came to believe that being female was influencing how you were being perceived/what others were thinking of you?

- What was your understanding then of why you were being perceived/thought of as such?

3 – What is your understanding now of how being AA effects how you are perceived/what others think of you?

4 – What is your understanding now of how being female (an African American/Black female) effects how you are perceived/what others think of you?

5 – What is your understanding of how being an AA woman effects how you are being perceived/how others think of you? Please describe an example of when you thought you were being perceived/thought of this way. How did you feel? How did you deal with that?

6 – Can you think of a time when you heard an opinion (of AA women) being expressed/conveyed? What exactly happened? (May need to refer to answers given to #5) How did you feel (about yourself)? How did you deal with that?

7 – How do those perceptions you mentioned fit with how you see yourself? How many of those perceptions are part of how you see yourself?

8– How do you think your mother and other AA women from her generation were perceived/thought of at your age? How (if at all) do you think such perceptions vary from how you think you are perceived?

- Your grandmother and other AA women from her generation?