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# A Young African-American Woman's Story: Risk and Protective Factors in Developing Identity

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A Young African-American Woman's Story: Risk and Protective Factors in  
Developing Identity

by

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
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St. Paul, Minnesota

in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Masters of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this research study is to explore the life experiences of an African American young woman specifically focusing on risk and protective factors and their impact on identity formation. The research asks the questions, "What are the risk and protective life experiences of an African American young woman? How do these possible life experiences impact the way the young woman participant views herself and her world?" The methodology chosen for this research is a qualitative case study allowing for an in-depth and holistic look at an individual's life. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with a young African American woman and her uncle, who the young woman identified as a "special adult" within her life. Interview questions called upon participants to reflect upon the life of the young woman. The young woman was instructed to take photographs of the places and things that are most important to her allowing an active role within data collection. A visual analysis of photographs taken provides a meaningful interpretation of the young woman's life including her dreams, values, ambition, and sense of safety. Furthermore, findings suggest risks within the forming identity of a young African American woman are relationships and social perception. Protective factors consist of a vision for her future, a sense of purpose, and resilience. These findings propose a need for future research, funding, and social work practice that is informed of risk and protective factor's impact on identity development within the lives of young African American women. An informed practice has the potential to create a more inclusive world.

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**Table of Contents**

Abstract.....page 2

Acknowledgements.....page 3

Introduction.....page 5

Literature Review.....page 6

Conceptual Framework.....page 13

Methodology.....page 14

Findings.....page 19

Discussion.....page 31

References.....page 40

Appendix A: Recruitment Email.....page 43

Appendix B: Interview Questions.....page 44

## **Introduction**

Social workers need to start a movement that addresses the emotional, spiritual, physical and psychological well-being of young African American girls. “African American girls are suspended at a higher rate than all other girls and white and Latino boys. Sixty-seven percent of African American girls reported feelings of sadness or hopelessness for more than two weeks straight compared to 31 percent of white girls and 40 percent of Latinas ” (Morris, 2012, p. 3). Despite documented need, little research or funding has been devoted to addressing the concerns of African American girls in comparison to the African American male counterparts. “While over 100 million philanthropic dollars have been spent in the last decade creating mentoring and educational initiatives for black and brown boys, less than a million dollars has been given to the study of black and brown girls” (Morris, 2012, p. 3). These dollars are aptly spent; by almost every social measure African American men, particularly boys, are falling behind at alarming rates. While critical action is occurring about the state of African-American men, the needs and concerns of African American girls remain largely ignored. Clearly, there is a need for additional research.

The proposed study is designed to investigate the life experiences of an African American young woman, specifically risk and protective factors and their effects on identity formation. To add to the needed research and knowledge of African American women, the research question, “what are the risk and protective life experiences of an African American young woman? How do these possible life experiences impact the way she views herself and her world” will be explored. A context will be formed through an examination of the previous literature and research on identity development during

adolescence and how risk and protective life experiences of young African American women impact identity development. As detailed in the methods section, this will be researched qualitatively using a case study design. Results and subsequent discussion will provide further insight into the purpose of this proposed study and implications for social work practice. The remainder of this proposal will outline key findings from the literature and methods of proposed study. The literature review is as follows:

### **Literature Review**

Although identity formation does not begin or end with adolescence, it is the first-time individuals have the cognitive capacity to sort through who they are and what makes them unique. Identity includes two concepts: self-concept and self-esteem (American Psychological Association, p. 15, 2002). "Self-concept is the set of beliefs one has about oneself. This includes beliefs about one's attributes (e.g., tall, intelligent), roles and goals (e.g., occupation one wants to have when grown), and interests, values, and beliefs (e.g., religious, political)" (APA, p. 15, 2002). "Self-esteem involves evaluating how one feels about one's self-concept. Self-concept and self-esteem develop uniquely for each adolescent with many factors impacting their developing identity" (APA, p. 15, 2002). Factors such as peer and parent relationships, gender, cognitive abilities, body image, emotional skill level, and ethnic and racial identity impact adolescent's self-concept and self-esteem, which affects their developing identity. For young African American women, there are experiences that create risk to their developing identity, one of which is unobtainable beauty standards and messages.

African American women, like other women, are often judged on their appearance including hair texture, body shape and size, and skin color. These kinds of judgments, for African Americans, are imbued with racial overtones and prejudice, which in young women, may contribute to self-esteem issues in adolescence. Given the racist past and present of the United States, there are several identity and beauty issues that African American women face. "Since 1619, African American women and their beauty have been juxtaposed against White beauty standards, particularly pertained to their skin color and hair" (Patton, 2006, p. 26). "African American women are constantly exposed to Eurocentric messages and images that question beauty standards outside the dominant realm" (Patton, 2006, p. 35). During adolescence, a time when identity is forming, these message and images can be especially harmful. "Outside the African American community there is little appreciation and positive reification for African American beauty" (Patton, 2006, p. 38). Also adding to dissatisfaction with appearance in African American young women is the media.

In a survey researching African American adolescent girls' Black media use, it was found that, "girls who identified more strongly with their favorite television characters were more likely to attribute greater importance to being attractive in their self-worth judgments" (Gordon, 2008, p. 253). It was also found, "there was significantly higher identification with female music artists who were more objectifying than with the less objectifying artists" (Gordon, 2008, p. 250). This information highlights the importance of African American role models in media for children and adolescents. Female African American role models in the media who portray healthy self-esteem and self-concept encourage healthy identity development young African



American women. Another life experience impacting identity development in young African American women is stress.

Stress was explored in a study called The Shifting The Lens study, which addressed perceptions of stress, sources of social support, and use of coping strategies among urban African American teens (Chandra & Batada, 2006, p. 1). Participants included twenty-six African American teens nineteen of which were female (Chandra & Batada, 2006, p. 3). In audio journals, teens described what stress meant for them (Chandra & Batada, 2006, p. 3). The different sources of stress included: family, peer, romantic relationship, school, and neighborhood (Chandra & Batada, 2006, p. 5). “While teens reported avoidant and active coping styles for dealing with stress in their lives, the majority of teens avoided conflicts by trying to stay away from the problem, distracting themselves, or not thinking about the issue” (Chandra & Batada, 2006, p. 7). By avoiding problems, teens create risk in identity formation because stress is increased affecting their self-concept and self-esteem. Risk is further amplified by not confiding in those that can relieve stress. While this study revealed multiple sources of stress for urban African American teens, it did not explore gender-specific stress.

One source of stress for young women is gendered violence. Violence against women is a social and systemic political problem grounded in and perpetuated by institutional gender inequalities in our society (Miller, 2008, p. 148). In a qualitative study of violence against urban African American girls with a focus on the social context in which violence emerged, overlapping sources of gendered violence was found in neighborhoods, communities, and schools (Miller, 2008, p. 153). “With regard to neighborhood risks, public spaces in disadvantaged communities were male dominated,

and consequently, many facets of neighborhood risks were structured by gender” (Miller, 2008, p. 153). Also, “public acts of violence against women were widespread, with many youths recounting incidents they had witnessed” (Miller, 2008, p. 153). “Sexual violence was a continuation of the more routinized sexualization young women faced” (Miller, 2008, p. 154). “In addition, nearly one in three young women had experienced multiple sexual victimizations” (Miller, 2008, p. 154). “Research has consistently shown that women’s risk for sexual victimization is at its highest in adolescence and young adulthood” (Miller, 2008, p. 154). “This risk was heightened further for the young women living in distressed urban communities” (Miller, 2008, p. 154). Explanations for the heightened risk of sexual victimization are lack of supervision, which led to alcohol and drug use (Miller, 2008, p. 154). Another risk factor impacting identity formation in young African American women are the prevalence of the Emotional Behavioral Disorder (EBD) diagnosis in schools.

EBD is an educational diagnosis that encompasses a broad category of observed behavior in adolescents and children including: difficulty learning and maintaining interpersonal relationships, inappropriate types of behavior, a general mood of unhappiness or depression, and physical symptoms associated with personal or school problems (Bullock & Gable, 2006, p. 2). Notably, literature discussing EBD takes a deficit-based approach. EBD is addressed as a failure and something to be solved by schools and classroom environments sending negative messages to those labeled. These negative messages influence self-esteem and self-concept. Within much of the literature, students are identified as “problems” and given low expectations. Alarming, based on data collected in 2005 from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA),

“black students between ages of 6 and 21 were 2.86 times more likely to receive special education services under IDEA for mental disabilities, and 2.28 times more likely to receive services for emotional disturbance than same-age students of all other racial and ethnic groups combined” (Codrington & Fairchild, 2012, p. 3). Based on this statistic, it can be argued that EBD is over diagnosed and has racist overtones adding to the stigma of being African American.

Although disheartening, this information provides insight into the possible hardships of being an African American young woman. Despite misrepresentations within the media, stress, gendered violence, and the over diagnosis of EBD; African American adolescent girls possess higher self-esteem than any other racial or ethnic adolescent female group protecting them from issues in identity formation (Adams, 2003, p. 255).

It was found through a sample of 453 Black and 1902 White adolescent girls, “Black females tend to have higher self-esteem than White females” (Adams, 2003, p. 265). Not only was it found that African American adolescent females have higher self-esteem, they were also found to have higher self-worth and lower self-deprecation (Adams, 2003, p. 268). “Social support was found to be the strongest predictors of self-esteem, self-worth, and self-deprecation” (Adams, 2003, p. 268). As discussed above there are challenges in the lives of African American young women, but social support empowers to overcome those challenges. Higher self-esteem and self-worth also helps African American young women to overcome challenges by helping them to rebound after hardships. As a result, resiliency is cultivated protecting against any further life

challenges. Available social support for those diagnosed with EBD creates more likelihood of high self-esteem and self-worth.

In 1995, the RENEW (Rehabilitation, Empowerment, Natural Supports, Education, and Work) program “was designed to improve transition outcomes for youth and young adults with EBD” (Rutherford, Quinn, Mathur, 2004, p. 378). In results from the first cohort of 18 young adults, it was found that 17 of the 18 completed high school or its equivalent and half entered postsecondary education (Rutherford et al., 2004, p. 378). Also, “they reported after 2 years in the project that they were much more satisfied with their work, schooling, progress towards goals, and handling of life problems” (Rutherford et al., 2004, p. 378). Another approach that has shown to benefit those with EBD is yoga.

In a study over two years of 37 students identified with emotional and behavioral disorders, yoga was found to significantly decrease anxiety symptoms within participants (Steiner, Sidhu, Pop, Frenette, Perrin, 2012, p. 823). Teachers who completed pre and posttests for each participant reported significant improvement in the areas of school, externalizing and internalizing problems, behavior, and classroom attention (Steiner et al., 2012, p. 821). Clearly yoga's use of calm breathing techniques, meditation, and attention on emotional states showed to be beneficial for students with Emotional Behavioral Disorder. Family support, particularly a mother's support, is another protective factor for an African American young woman's identity development.

“For African American girls who face poverty in their daily lives, an important factor in their resilience is how they see themselves in the future and how they perceive their mothers' care and involvement in their lives” (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011, p. 5).

Being able to envision a positive future impacts the choices African American girls will make in the present (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011, p. 5). African American girls who perceive that their mothers care about them and who also have positive outlooks of them cultivate resiliency protecting against risks in identity development. Furthermore, “A positive relationship with parents and positive family functioning (strong emotional bonds among family members, monitoring of children’s environments, etc.) are more critical to an African American girl’s development of self-esteem than whether her home is a single-parent or two-parent home” (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011, p. 6). In addition, to parental involvement at home creating resiliency, many low-income, inner-city girls like the idea of a club as a “home-place,” a spot where they feel listened to and where their opinions are valued (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011, p. 5).

“The creation of a home-place for youth enables the development of self via organizational responsiveness to girls’ voices, strong bonds between girls and staff (as well as other adults working with girls such as volunteers), and the development of programs that fuse the interests of girls and adults” (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011, p. 6). Just as extended families provide support for African Americans, particularly those from impoverished backgrounds, home places have the potential of providing valuable sources of support and linkage for girls (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011, p. 5). Home places such as girl groups, sports teams, and recreation centers assist in identity development of African American young women. Another important support that could be considered a home place is the church.

Church is the third major place, outside of school and home, where African American girls and young women find opportunities for engagement and advocacy and

where, for a majority of girls, leadership experiences have been positive (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011, p. 7). Positive leadership experiences encourage higher self-esteem and self-worth protecting against risk in identity development.

### **Conceptual Framework**

When thinking about the life of my participant, I believe she has been disadvantaged in many ways. Overcoming the stigma of being black and a young woman, trauma, and stress is challenging. Unfortunately, living in a world where racism and misogyny exist leads to oppression. Womanism, a feminism term Alice Walker coined as a reaction to the realization that feminism does not encompass the perspectives of Black women, fights the oppression experienced by my participant (Napikoski, 2014). “Many women of color in the 1970s had sought to expand the feminism of the Women’s Liberation Movement beyond its concern for the problems of white middle-class women. The adoption of womanism signified an inclusion of race and class issues in feminism” (Napikoski, 2014). “Walker [defined] a womanist as a “black feminist or feminist of color” who loves other women and/or men sexually and/or nonsexually, appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility and women’s strength and is committed to “survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker, 1983, p. xi). “Womanism provided a political framework for women of color and gave them tools in their struggle with patriarchy that imposed restrictive norms and negative stereotypes on them” (Izgarjan & Markov, 2012, p. 304). By the late 1990’s, Walker changed her original position on womanism to include all women, white and of color, and men who respect women and their rights (Izgarjar & Markov, 2012, p. 312). My understanding of womanism informs the proposed research.

I interpret womanism similar to Walker's current position that was created in the late 1990's. Womanism is dedicated to the struggle against oppression and behavior that belittles a community or individual based on the difference in race, culture or class. The proposed research adds to Walker's, "call for all women to create a platform based on the communality of female experience which would allow them to communicate better with one other" (Izgarjar & Markov, 2012, p. 314). Witnessing the story of my participant through research allows for a sharing of the female experience not only with each other, but also with other women. Application of womanism within the proposed research continues a call for action.

Womanism accounts for the research participant's experience of race, culture, and class. The proposed research invites other women to be informed of other women's experiences of race, culture, and class. The research collected focusing on risk and protective factors and their affects on identity development within a young African-American woman's is informed by the possible negative messages of race, culture, and class.

### **Methodology**

In order to take an in-depth look at the life of an African-American young woman, the qualitative research technique of a case study was taken. Qualitative research, "[offers] access to a valuable type of data-namely, a deeper and richer understanding of people's lives and behavior, including some knowledge of their subjective experiences" (Monette, Sullivan, Dejong, & Hilton, 2014, p. 220). Case studies, "involve a detailed descriptive account of part or all of a particular individual's life" (Monette et al., 2014, p. 240). "The goal is to gain understanding through depth and

richness of detail” (Monette et al., 2014, p. 241). The case study was formed through visual analysis of photographs and a total of three interviews with the participant and two identified special adults that the participant selects.

### **Sample and Recruitment**

This research uses a convenience sample. The researcher elicited the help of a caseworker from Face to Face- SafeZone, a drop in center for youth in St. Paul, Minnesota. The researcher contacted Face to Face -SafeZone through email (Appendix A). The caseworker, as instructed in the email, approached five participants that fit the sample criteria and asked if they are interested in participating in a research study regarding their life experiences. The five participants were given the contact information of the research and instructed to contact the researcher if interested. The interested participant was informed that involvement in this study is strictly voluntary and they may be identified if they choose to participate. Once the researcher had an interested participant, a meeting was set up with the participant where informed consent forms were given and explained. The criteria for the sample were one adolescent girl, ages fourteen to twenty-three, who is African American and possessed the maturity to handle a study of this nature.

### **Measures To Assure Confidentiality/Anonymity**

Photographs taken for a visual analysis are used for presentation purposes only and not included within the paper or publication. The participant was informed that photographs taken may include identifying information, but are distorted using computer programming to protect her identity as best as possible. Photographs involving other individuals outside of the participant are not allowed. Photographs of the participant



were not allowed. Photographs were taken using a digital camera and were kept within a lockbox. Interviews will be recorded on a locked portable recording device owned by the researcher. The content from the interviews were transcribed by the researcher and deleted from the recording device. Transcribed material was also kept within a lockbox. Photographs and transcribed information are held no longer than May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015 at which all material will be destroyed. All consent forms will be kept for at least three years following completion of the project.

### **Protocol for Ensuring Informed Consent**

Before participants took part in the proposed study, they were asked to read the consent forms that outline the purpose of the study, why the participants have been selected, how their responses will be kept anonymous and confidential, and where they can turn if psychological issues arise. The researcher asked participants whether they have questions after going through the consent forms. Participants were given the option to not answer questions that make them feel uncomfortable. Participants signed their names stating they understand the purpose of the study, that their information was kept anonymous and confidential and that they were not coerced to partake in the present study.

### **Data Collection Instrument and Process**

Data was collected through photographs taken by the young woman participant, and three interviews including the participant, and two identified special adults in selected by the young woman participant.

Photographs taken by the young woman participant were taken with a digital camera. She was instructed by the researcher to take photographs of the places and

things that are most important to her. The participant was told that she may not be in the photographs. Pictures taken enabled the participant to tell her story herself enhancing empowerment. Photographs taken are for presentation purposes only and are not to be included within this research paper or publications. Photographs including identifying information are not included in the presentation. A visual analysis of the photographs observing themes within the participant's life was completed.

The researcher also developed interview questions (Appendix B) used with the young woman participant and two identified special adults in the young woman's life. The interview questions were open-ended to enhance conversation regarding the identity formation of a young African American woman with particular emphasis on risk and protective factors. The research's chair and committee members approved interview questions. Each interview was recorded on a locked portable recording device. Data recorded from the interview was transcribed for analysis.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The data within this study took a case study analysis approach. Case study analysis embraces multiple forms of data and analytic techniques (Padgett, 2008, p. 143). "The key distinguishing feature of a case study analyses is that they maintain holistic integrity of the case" (Padgett, 2008, p. 144). The use of multiple sources including photographs and three interviews created a comprehensive description of the participant. A content analysis was used with all data collected.

Content analysis refers to a method of transforming the symbolic content of a document, such as words or other images, from a qualitative, unsystematic form into a quantitative, systematic form (Monette et al., 2014, p. 204). While all data analyzed used

a grounded theory method that looks for codes and themes, the participant observation, and three interviews were understood through a content analysis and photographs were understood using a visual analysis. Visual analyses, similar to a content analysis, also look for codes and themes, but are seen through images. The process of coding used with observation notes and interviews, “involves close and repeated readings of transcripts in search of meaning units that are descriptively labeled so that they may serve as building blocks for broader conceptualization” (Padgett, 2008, p. 152). This broader conceptualization creates themes within the data. Open coding was used with the three interviews, which involved reading each line of the interviews and noting emerging patterns reflecting the experiences of respondents. Themes developed within the content and visual analyses created a meaningful interpretation of identity formation within the life experience of an African American young woman.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The qualitative nature of the present research study allowed for real-life stories from an African-American young woman. Experience was formed through interviews and photographs. The researcher was able to use the participant's words to understand how they have been affected by risk and protective factors and their impact on identity formation. The information obtained is beneficial for social workers, family, friends, and peers to develop a deeper understanding of the needs of African-American young women. A deeper understanding can create advocacy for programs and policies supporting African-American young women.

There are limitations to the present study. The participant is not representative of the entire population of African American young women. The present research only

focused on one participant living within St. Paul, which further excludes experiences of African American young women. Another limitation is only two supporting participants outside of the African American young woman's life, two identified special adults, were interviewed. Further interviews with peers would have added to the present research.

### **Findings**

The young woman who participated in my research is eighteen years old. She currently lives with her uncle and younger sister in a metropolitan area of St. Paul, Minnesota. At age fourteen, guardianship was granted to her uncle after her mother could not care for her. She is currently attending school in St. Paul, Minnesota and is expected to graduate in the spring of 2015. Through out our time spent together, it was obvious that hardships have developed resilience within her. Her resilience is noticeable within youthful stories of having her first job, struggles with family and boyfriends, and her hopes and dreams. After our interview, she took photographs of her life. The photographs taken by her are a glimpse into daily life as a young African American woman. She also allowed me to interview her uncle as an identified important adult in her life.

Her uncle shared more about his niece's life as a young African American woman. Her uncle spoke of challenges faced by his niece, particularly with peers. Through out her challenges, he spoke of supporting and guiding her. Hearing his reflections on the life of his niece created a more holistic view of the young woman's life. The following are themes were developed using content analyses of the two interviews with the young woman and her uncle that created a meaningful interpretation of risk and

protective factors impact on identity formation within the life of a young African American woman.

### **Protective Factor - Her Future**

Both the young woman participant and her uncle were asked what is important to the young woman participant. They shared the young woman's hopes for her future and dreams. Her hopes and dreams for the future gave her strength during difficult times protecting against risks in her developing identity. The young woman shared her dream of becoming a police officer and going to college.

I want to be in law enforcement, become a police guard and go to college...that's the start of my future. Cause you know...I got my future so well planned out that sometimes I go to bed prayin' to Jesus that I go to sleep and wake up and I'm in my future. And I wake up still doin' the same thing.

Her uncle also spoke of her dream of becoming a police officer with positivity.

She wants to be a police officer. If she can't be a police officer...she said after she graduates she's going to start applying to be a security guard. So...I think she feels that's her way of working towards her goals...hey, I'm all for it. I don't want the negative, I want the positive and with all the drugs and things that are going on out there and she's not involved in that so that's really good. If she wants to be a police officer or whatever then there's nothing wrong with that. More power to her.

The young woman participant also spoke of other hopes and dreams.

I want to be set in my future...like go to college, have a job, have a car, and have a husband.

### **Protective Factor - Purpose**

The young woman participant's first job at a fast-food restaurant gave her purpose. Having her first job motivated her to graduate high school so she could continue working towards becoming a police officer. Her job also helped her focus on what's important when dealing with peers. After the young woman shared a story of her best friend choosing to spend time with her boyfriend instead of the young woman participant, the participant stated,

I deal with it by workin', just keep workin', I keep doin' what I have to do. I have a job, friends, and I'm graduating.

Her uncle also shared that work helps her stay focused on her future.

When she got her job, she started to realize that there is a better life out there.

And now all of a sudden...she's a workaholic. She wants to work, work, work, and work.

Not only did she find purpose in working, she also saw herself as a savoir for others in her life.

Maybe it's because I like to save people. Yeah because like...when me and my best friend first met, her other group of friends be gettin' locked up and gettin' into fights. When I came into her life she stopped doing that. She started hanging out with me.

She also spoke of helping other students at her school.

Like at school...if somebody is makin' fun of somebody else I jump in and stop it. Like have them make fun of me instead.

### **Protective Factor - Resilience**

The resilience of the young woman was clear through out interviews with the young woman and her uncle. Her resilience protected her from others that did not believe in her. Her resilience is seen in the following story:

I think it was Thanksgiving. My people came over like my brothers. Well, we were all over the house or whatever and my people, my brother and his girlfriend, and my mom came over...the usual people came over and they were all like...down talkin' me. Talkin' about how...well, my brother made a comment like, "at least there's hope for one sister". That made me offensive and I started snapping off. And my uncle took me in the bathroom to calm me down. So I just headed into the bathroom and they wanna come into the bathroom bein' like...is she really mad? Yeah, I was really mad. I sat in my room and I went out there to get some food and I went to sit in my room. And at the same time I was sayin' to myself...sayin' to them...ya'll sayin' this now, but wait till' I make it. Ya'll gonnna be calling me for a place to stay or something. That's all I said to them.

When asked what helps her be strong, she responded:

When people say I'm not gonna make it and I push myself harder. That always makes me strong.

At the end of our interview, I asked her what is something she'd like others to know about being a young African American woman. Her response continues to show her resilience.

I'm strong, independent, I make my own money, I don't depend on nobody for nothing. I always tell people I have a job. I let everybody know that. I'm a queen.

Her uncle also spoke of her resilience:

She's a very strong young lady. And when she puts her mind to something she'll do it.

The young woman's resilience assisted in navigating relationships that could potentially be harmful in her developing identity.

### **Risk Factor - Relationships**

Her uncle was particularly concerned about the young woman's relationships with peers.

I have to remind her she has to choose her friends wisely. See that's a problem. They're associates, not friends, she's gotta learn the difference.

When asked about what makes life difficult for the young woman her uncle responded:

Her friends. Her friends. Her associates. Them are the ones that make it harder for her.

When the same question of what makes life difficult was asked to the young woman, she shared stories of her relationships with her best friend and ex-boyfriend.



Cause you know...this thing happened between me and my ex-boyfriend. He lives with this girl now. He got an apartment with her and I was over there and I guess she was at work and he wanted me to come over there and he told me it was his mom's house. So I'm looking around like...your mom don't have kids. You know? So I went in the back and there was a little girl's room and the girl he be talkin' to has a little girl. So I'm like...this is the girl's house. This isn't your mama's house. And I got mad like...it's crazy.

She also spoke of her best friend whom she had recently got into an argument with. It was clear through out the interview that she was contemplating their relationship.

Or like...cause like on pay days I like to take people to go with me to get my hair done cause I don't like to go by myself and I end up paying for my best friend all the time to get her nails done and buy her some food and stuff. But like the whole week she be at her boyfriend's house and she shows up like a day before pay day. Ain't that messed up? Like a day or two days before pay day. Ain't that messed up? Like show up on pay day while I'm at work being like, "I'm at your house. Where you at?"

When asked further about her relationship with her best friend she responded:

I used to think she's using me, but her boyfriend got money. But I know he's going to get tired of having to pay for her all the freakin' time. She doesn't have no income.

Another risk factor in the young woman's developing identity is social perception.

### **Risk Factor - Social Perception**

In conversation with the young woman about what it's like being an eighteen-year-old African American in comparison to a young man, she spoke of why it's more difficult to be a woman than it is to be man in her world. Her discussions have undertones of misogyny and racism within social perception.

It's hard. Yeah cause there's so much negative stuff. Like dude's calling you bitches and thots and stuff. That be annoying. They always be doin' that. Just...walkin' down the street and wear what you want without guys trying to talk to you or yeah...if you don't want to talk to them then you're a bitch or thot anyways. Yeah, that be annoying and rude. Like...how would they like it I mis somebody call their mama a thot or something.

She continued to explain what makes life more difficult for young women,

I mean...it's harder. Guys can do some stuff that girls can't do. Like they can talk to a whole bunch of girls if you talk to a whole bunch of dudes you get called a thot.

While the young woman spoke of life being more difficult for her than for a young man, her uncle's perception is that life is easier now for young women than it used to be.

In society today, I think it's a little easier. Cause you know back then women didn't have the right to say nothing or do nothing. So she has more of a freedom to make her own choices and hopefully makes the right choices. You know? Like I told her, you make the right choices you can go a long way. And gender has nothing to do with it. It's you, yourself, and how you carry yourself.

Her uncle's emphasis on individuality differs from the young woman's perception. The young woman also spoke of what it's like being African American,

We can't go through a crowd of white people like try to be friends they look at me like who is she? But they look at me like I'm crazy or something. You have them thinking like "Oh she's being too loud".

Her uncle continues to emphasize individuality and overcoming challenges which differs from his niece's view point when asked race:

I think she's meeting her challenges. Cause she's meeting them head on. When she has a problem she doesn't run from them. She'll come and talk to me and tell me. And then I guide her and tell her what to do.

After completion of the interview with the young woman, she was instructed to take pictures of the things in life that are most important to her. The following is a visual analysis of the pictures taken by her further discovering the risk and protective factors in her developing identity.

### **Saint Paul Police Western District**

The first location the young woman identified wanting a picture of was a Saint Paul, Minnesota police station. Across the middle of the photograph "Saint Paul Police Western District" is written in bold off-white lettering signifying the main entrance of the police station. Surrounding the entrance to the police station are large windows creating a sense of transparency and invitation. This photograph represents the young woman's

dream of becoming a police officer. Both the young woman and her uncle spoke of her wanting to become a police officer during interviews. It is important to note that this photograph was the first taken by the young woman participant emphasizing the importance of her dream and its role in her identity. It is also important that the young woman took multiple pictures of the police station. Becoming a police officer allows the young woman to dream past her current situation towards a more stable future. It represents the hopes she has for herself as a young woman and her future. After spending time at the police station, the young woman wanted to take photographs her hair and nail salon.

### **Hair and Nail Salon**

The young woman participant's hair and nails were important to her. She emphasized wanting to look her best. In the upper left corner of the photograph of her hair salon, "7-Mile Beauty Supplies" is written in white letters on a bright red awning. Underneath the name of the hair salon also written in white is "beauty supplies, hair extensions & wigs, clothing, & body piercing, jewelry". Within the windows of the hair salon is the number of the business and "open" illuminated in neon red lights. There are metal bars running horizontally across the full length of the door at the entrance of the hair salon. A surface level interpretation of the photograph points out that the young woman cares about her appearance. This interpretation is continued in another picture of the young woman's nail salon.

"TJ Nails" is written in orange cursive writing on a rectangle green sign above the main entrance of the nail salon. The "open" sign is lit up in neon red with prices of manicures written in white underneath in the windows. Both the young woman's hair

and nail salons are within walking distance of each other and are in strip malls. Both photographs present a larger interpretation of beauty standards for African American young women.

During adolescence, a time when identity is forming, young women are susceptible to negative messages about their looks. These negative messages may be enhanced within the life of a young African American woman. When African American beauty standards are consistently compared to the more dominant Eurocentric beauty standards, the self esteem of African American young woman are at stake. By taking photographs of her hair and nail salon, the young woman participant is emphasizing the importance beauty standards for her. Therefore, she is susceptible to these negative messages of African American beauty standards creating risk in identity formation. The next pictures taken by the young woman were of her jobs.

### **Jobs**

The young woman was proud to share with the researcher that she had two jobs at fast food restaurants. She expressed excitement to be earning her own money to use for clothing, hair, and nails. The photograph she took was the front of the counter of the restaurant where she works. Florescent lighting highlights the menu of the restaurant at the top of the photograph. Various sandwiches, soda, and fried foods are priced across the display. Below the menu is food waiting to be served underneath a heat lamp, a counter supporting a cash register, and four sizes of cups. In the right hand corner of the photo a soda fountain, lids, and straws are waiting to be consumed. The young woman spoke to the researcher about the duties of working at the restaurant with pride. Her jobs

and the photograph are important because it represents gaining independence and emerging adulthood.

At eighteen years old, the young woman is gaining independence with her two jobs. By earning her own money, she is figuring out how to support herself as an adult. She spoke of spending too much of her paycheck on her hair and nails with the researcher. While at the restaurant, the young woman joked around with other employees. It was clear to the researcher that the young woman's jobs had a positive impact on her identity. The final place the young woman identified as important was her home.

### **Home**

The young woman identified to the researcher that she grew up has two homes. She lived with her mother until age fourteen when guardianship was granted to her uncle. The young woman shared with the researcher that guardianship was given to her uncle because her mother could not take care of her because of drug use. The young woman took the researcher to her mother's former house and her uncle's house, where she currently lives, to take photographs.

On the left hand side of the photograph of her mother's former house is a rusted mailbox and a brown house with boarded up windows. It is clear that the house is located in an urban neighborhood of Saint Paul, Minnesota. The young woman identifies that her mother's house is abandoned. Beside her mother's former house is a sidewalk leading to the backyard and a chain link fence separating the house from the neighbors. The yard appears disheveled and uncared for. A surface level interpretation indicates that the young woman's mother's home is important to her. She shares with the researcher that

she grew up in the house until age fourteen with her mother and younger sister. This image also speaks to a larger understanding of the young woman and her identity.

Similar to her mother's former house within the photograph, the young woman may feel a sense of abandonment within her life. The boarded up windows and unkempt lawn may symbolize the young woman's past. While visiting the house, she spoke of feeling sad that it is abandoned and wished it were better taken care of. Clearly the loss of her mother within her life, as reflected in the photograph, was a difficult for the young woman changing the way she views herself and her world. Next, the young woman took a photograph of her current home at her uncles.

The photograph is also of a house within an urban neighborhood of Saint Paul, Minnesota. Two cats, which the young woman spoke of fondly, are wandering on the sidewalk towards the front stoop of the house. The house's stucco exterior is a warm brown with green and white trim on the windows. There are three steps leading to the front door and green trees in front of the house. In comparison to her mother's home, this house is obviously occupied as seen in the cats in the front lawn and recycling bins waiting to be picked up on their stoop. Rather than sadness associated with the house, there is a sense of warmth and comfort. This warmth and comfort is reflective of the young woman's life.

The young woman was lively while at her uncle's house. She clearly felt comfortable and at home. For the young woman, her uncle's home is a place of safety. Having a home that is safe and comfortable is essential as identity is forming in adolescence. It creates an environment where relationships with caregivers can be formed. These relationships support adolescence in their exploration of the self and their

world. In the following and final section, I will include a discussion that understands this study's findings in the larger scholarly conversation of risk and protective factors within the lives of young African American women.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this research is to explore risk and protective factors within the life of a young African American woman. Specifically, the proposed research examined a young African American woman's life experiences and its impact on risk and protective factors within her identity development. In this section, I will examine the ways the findings of this study align with and differ from previous published literature on this topic.

#### **Protective Factor - Her Future**

The young woman and her uncle described the young woman's hopes and dreams. They both emphasized her dream of becoming a police officer and going to college protecting the young woman's forming identity. These findings align with previous literature. There is an emphasis within previous literature that young African American women are likely to see themselves more positively when they see themselves positively within their future. "For African American girls who face poverty in their daily lives; an important factor in their resilience is how they see themselves in the future" (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011, p. 5). Furthermore, being able to envision a positive future impacts the choices African American girls will make in the present (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011, p. 5). The young woman and her uncle saw her succeeding and believed in her future which developed resilience, protected identity development, and positively impacted the young woman's current choices. Through the



lens of womanism, the young woman's hope for the future as a police officer is highlighted. Her dream for the future as a police officer creates a platform on which other woman can stand within a male dominated career.

### **Protective Factor - Purpose**

Both the young woman and her uncle spoke of her finding a purpose after starting her first jobs. This sense of purpose encouraged the young woman to ignore negativity within her life, such as a fight with her best friend and her brother not believing in her. She responded by focusing her efforts into work. Not only did the young woman speak of finding a purpose within her job, she also spoke of feeling like she is a savior for others. Previous literature shows that positive leadership experiences have been associated with high self-esteem and self-concept within adolescent girls (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011, p. 7). The young woman's job correlates with higher self-esteem and self-concept, as seen in her ability to move past negatives within her life, which protects her developing identity. Previous literature and the current study's findings stress the importance of leadership opportunities for young women in relation to their sense of purpose and self-esteem and self-concept.

Leadership opportunities are beneficial for young women. Providing leadership opportunities within young women's groups, jobs, school, and the community fosters high self-esteem and self-concept within adolescent girls. As seen in this study's findings, it also encourages a sense of purpose.

### **Protective Factor - Resilience**

Both the young woman and her uncle identified the young woman as being strong. The young woman shared stories with the researcher of facing barriers and

responding with strength, emphasizing her resilience. Previous research supports this finding. The previous research indicated that African American young women who are resilient have positive outlooks of themselves (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011, p. 7). The participants discussed the young woman as strong, which is a positive outlook of her, creating a positive identity development. Her resilience is encouraged within the positive outlooks of her uncle and herself. Although this study found factors protecting the developing identity of the young woman, there were also risks within her developing identity including her relationships.

### **Risk Factor - Relationships**

Within The Shifting Lens study, stress was explored within the lives of urban African American teens. The different sources of stress included: family, peer, romantic relationship, school, and neighborhood (Chandra & Batada, 2006, p. 5). “While teens reported avoidant and active coping styles for dealing with stress in their lives, the majority of teens avoided conflicts by trying to stay away from the problem, distracting themselves, or not thinking about the issue” (Chandra & Batada, 2006, p. 7). This study aligns with the current study’s findings. When the young woman and her uncle were asked what makes life difficult for the young woman, they both spoke of her friends being a problem within her life. The young woman shared she feels as if her best friend uses her and has been lied to by her ex-boyfriend. The teens that participated in The Shifting Lens study also cited peer and romantic relationships as stressful.

Navigating peer and romantic relationships is also a part of normal adolescent development. It is the first-time individuals have the cognitive capacity to sort through who they are and what makes them unique. The quality of those relationships determines

how they impact an adolescent's developing identity. For the young woman participant, her relationships were discussed as difficult and stressful creating risk within her developing identity. Another risk within the young woman's developing identity was social perception.

### **Risk Factor - Social Perception**

The young woman spoke of how it is more difficult being an African American young woman than a young man because of not being able to wear what she wants without getting called misogynistic names on the street. She also spoke of feeling like people who are Caucasian look at her like she's crazy and too loud while. While the young woman spoke of the difficulties of being a young African American woman, her uncle felt that life is easier for his niece than it was for others in the past. Through the lens of womanism, the young woman is facing feminist issues. Womanism accounts for race and class issues in feminism (Napikoski, 2014). The young woman's social perception of her world includes patriarchy and racism creating possible risk in her developing identity.

### **Saint Paul Police Western District**

The photograph the young woman took of the Saint Paul police department represents her dream of becoming a police officer. It also represents her hopes for the future. Again aligning with this finding, previous literature discusses the importance of young women seeing themselves positively within their future. Being able to envision a positive future impacts the choices African American girls will make in the present (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011, p. 5). Having two jobs encouraged the young woman to

stay out of drama with peers and gave her a purpose. This finding and previous literature emphasizes the need for career focused education within the education system.

Educational programs and curriculum that give students opportunities for internships and job and skills training encourages students to see themselves positively in their future. It also gives students necessary experience to compete in today's job market. Expanding career-focused education may affect others similarly to the young woman participant, who was encouraged in the present by her dreams of becoming a police officer.

### **Hair and Nail Salon**

The young woman took photographs of her hair and nail salon. She spoke of the importance of her looks. The photographs present a larger interpretation of beauty standards for African American young women. Previous literature emphasizes that African American beauty standards are consistently juxtaposed against European American beauty standards. "Outside the African American community there is little appreciation and positive reification for African American beauty" (Patton, 2006, p. 38). Not only are there comparison and little appreciation for African American beauty, but media also influences the way young African American women see themselves. In a survey researching African American adolescent girls' Black media use, it was found that, "girls who identified more strongly with their favorite television characters were more likely to attribute greater importance to being attractive in their self-worth judgments" (Gordon, 2008, p. 253). Previous literature and this study's findings highlight the need for positive African American women role models in young African American women's lives.

Positive African American role models can be encouraged in the media and through young women focused programming. Through these means, young African American women can be encouraged to see themselves positively. Also, positive self-esteem and self-concept may be promoted developing a healthy identity.

### **Jobs**

The young woman participant was clearly proud when taking the photograph of her place of employment. She was proud to have two jobs and be earning her own money for clothing, hair, and nails. This photograph represents her emerging into adulthood aligning with previous research. At eighteen years old, the young woman developmentally is figuring out who she is. Previous research discusses that adolescence is the first-time individuals have the cognitive capacity to sort through who they are and what makes them unique. Having two jobs allowed the young woman to further explore her world and gain independence, a developmental task of adolescence. Further aligning with previous research is the photographs the young woman took of her homes.

### **Home**

The young woman took two photographs of her homes. First, the young woman took a photograph of her former home that she shared with her mother and younger sister until age fourteen, which perhaps represents a sense of abandonment. The next photograph the young woman took was of her current home with her uncle and younger sister. This photograph represents a sense of safety for the young woman. Previous research discusses the importance of a home-place for youth through programs and groups that connects young women with adults. "The creation of a home-place for youth enables the development of self" (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011, p. 6). The young

woman's home-place was at her uncle's house. Her extended family provides was a source of support, providing valuable linkage for girls (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011).

### **Implications for Future Research**

The life experiences of young African American women are an area of research that is understudied. "While over 100 million philanthropic dollars have been spent in the last decade creating mentoring and educational initiatives for black and brown boys, less than a million dollars has been given to the study of black and brown girls" (Morris, 2012, p. 3). Further research can support funding leading to beneficial initiatives. Specifically, further research is needed exploring the lives of young African American women from the lens of womanism. Womanism accounts for feminist issues including race, culture, and class. Further research from this perspective can identify patriarchy and misogyny within the lives of young African American women producing results that could lessens oppression. It also allows for research that is female focused encouraging women to share their experience. Research is also needed using a case study methodology.

Case studies take a holistic approach to research. This holistic approach accounts for real life experiences that other research may not capture. The holistic nature of this study allowed the young woman participant to take photographs of the places and things that are important to her. This experience provided an opportunity for the young woman to tell her story creativity encouraging empowerment within the research. Further research taking a case study methodology could provide similar empowering experiences.

Finally, further research is needed in the areas of young African American women's peer and romantic relationships. This study's findings suggested that the young

woman participant's peer and romantic relationships created risk in her identity development. Further research addressing how certain relationships impact the way young African American women see themselves and their world is needed.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

This study's findings stress the importance of practice that is developmentally appropriate for youth. It also encourages practitioners to take into account the life experiences of young African American women outside of one's observations. Understanding the first hand experiences of young African American women guides the social worker towards more informed practice. Also, taking into consideration the impact of risk and protective factors on the developing identity of young women is encouraged. There are implications to start or continue a young women's group that provides leadership opportunities, positive role models, job skills, and discussion of healthy relationships within social work practice. A young women's group has the potential to foster protective factors within identity development. The National Association of Social Workers' code of ethics calls on the professional social worker to understand and act to prevent oppression with respect to race, age, and gender (NASW Code of Ethics). This research project provides insight into these possible areas of oppression in order to address and prevent it.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored the risk and protective factors within the life experiences of an African American young woman. Findings suggest that possible risk factors within the forming identity of a young African American woman are relationships and social perceptions. Protective factors include the young woman's future, a sense of purpose,

and resilience. Photographs taken by the young woman participant gave a glimpse into her daily life. They also provided a meaningful interpretation of her life story. Taking these findings into consideration, it is essential social workers address the needs of African American young women through future research and informed practice. With these critical actions, a more inclusive world may be formed.



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## Appendix A

Recruitment Email to Face to Face -SafeZone

My name is Jennifer Davis and am currently a masters of social work student at the University of St Thomas. A requirement of our program is to conduct research adding to the social work community. My proposed research is a case study of the life experiences of an African American young woman, ages 14-23, with particular emphasis on factors related to identity formation.

I am searching for a case manager to assist in the recruitment of one African American young woman, ages 14-23, with the maturity to participate in my research. As the recruiter, you will be given a script asking the possible participant if they are willing to do the following:

- 1) Complete an hour-long interview. Interviews will be audio taped.
- 2) Take photographs of the places and things that are most important to them.
- 3) Choose two adults that are special to them that the researcher may interview about her life experiences as an African American young woman. The special adults cannot be current treating case manager or social worker.

By signing the consent form for this research, they will receive a fifty-dollar target gift card.

If you are interested in helping me with my research please contact me at: 608-698-3434 or reply to this email

Thank you,

Jennifer Davis

## Appendix B

### Survey Instrument – Interview Questions for Participant and Adults

- 1) How would you describe your personality?
  - What are the things most important to you?
  - What do you do for fun?
  - What things in life are difficult for you?
  - What is it like being a student at your school?
- 2) Who are the people that help you the most?
- 3) Who are the people that make your life the most difficult?
  - Do you get help for your problems at school?
- 4) If you have a day to yourself, what do you do?
- 5) Can you tell me a story about a bad day you've had?
  - How do you deal with your bad days?
- 6) How do you fit in this world?
  - How do you fit in at home?
  - How do you fit in with family and friends?
- 7) What do you want to do after graduation?
  - What are your dreams?
- 8) What is it like being a young woman?
  - How is being a young woman different than being a young man?
  - What is more difficult about being a young woman than a young man?
- 9) What is it like being African American?
- 10) Are there unique challenges to being an African American young woman?
- 11) What gives you strength?
  - What are positives to your strength?

- What are negatives to your strength?
- How do you remain strong amongst difficult times?

12) Can you be strong and vulnerable?

- Are there times you've felt strong?
- Are there times you've felt vulnerable?
- Are there times where you've felt strong and vulnerable?

13) What is something you'd like people to know about being a young African American woman?