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African American rites of passage interventions: A vehicle for utilizing African American male elders

Gregory Washington[a], Leon D. Caldwell[b], Jerry Watson[c], and Leslie Lindsey[d]

[a]Department of Social Work, University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee, USA; [b]Community Transformation Partners, Laurel, Maryland, USA; [c]Department of Social Work, Rust College, Holly Springs, Mississippi, USA; [d]Serenity Inc. Recovery Center, Memphis, Tennessee, USA

ABSTRACT

There is a dearth of information regarding African American males and their service to boys as unrelated, concerned adults. While rites of passage programs provide a strong space for the growth of young Black males to develop, there is a need for more literature on what motivates and how to recruit and retain African American men to mentor. This article discusses central components of traditional mentoring and rites of passage programs and the experiences of a group of African American men in Memphis, Tennessee, who have mentored for an after-school rites of passage project. The authors provide recommendations for recruiting and training African American men to utilize rites of passage activities to promote the healthy development of African American male youth.

Mentoring is an important opportunity to support the growth and development of youth. It creates a system of support and a space for young people to connect with a caring adult that is committed to them and the mentoring relationship (Butler, Evans, Brooks, Williams, & Bailey, 2013; Hall, 2015). Portions of traditional mentoring programs are defined through Greek influence. The word "mentor" derives from the Greek root meaning "steadfast" and "enduring." In common terms, a mentor is described as a teacher, philosopher, role model, friend, or coach (Blechman, 1992; Waller, Brown, & White, 1999; Zippay, 1995). Mentoring is broadly defined in the literature as a process in which an experienced individual conveys knowledge, skills, or emotional support to a mentee or protégé (Clark, Harden, & Johnson, 2000; Johnson, Koch, Fallow, & Huwe, 2000; Zippay, 1995). Dubois and Karcher (2005) identified three recurring themes from the literature review and work of Freedman (1992): (1) the mentor has more experience and wisdom than the mentee, (2) the mentor offers guidance intended to facilitate the development of the mentee, and (3) there is an emotional bond between mentor and mentee that includes a sense of trust. Having mentoring programs that are culturally specific are also very important. They provide an ability to better connect with youth, support critical life skills, and enhance safe spaces where the young person feels connected to the mentor and the broader community (Watson, Washington, & Stepteau-Watson, 2015). Rites of passage programs serve as models of culturally specific mentorship (Harvey & Coleman, 1997; Harvey & Rauch, 1997). Rites of passage efforts that promote the healthy development of African American youth need to recruit with an understanding of these foundational mentoring concepts, but they must also embrace the ethnicity, race, culture, and strengths and needs of African American families. This article will examine key ideas on how to best recruit and retain African American men to serve as mentors in rites of passage programs.

CONTACT Gregory Washington ✉ Gwshngt1@memphis.edu 🖃 Department of Social Work, University of Memphis, 105 Browning Hall, Memphis, TN 38152, USA.

Literature review

Mentoring has received a considerable amount of attention in the national press and social science literature in recent years as a resource to meet the needs of some African American families. One of the most cited pieces of mentoring literature is the 1995 Public/Private Ventures longitudinal study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs (Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 2000). In this study, youth of color were found to be 70% less likely to initiate drug use. There were also some noted improvements in mentee/peer relationships, especially among male youth of color.

There is relevancy for communities, families, and parents that are searching for ways to nurture the healthy development of youth in "fragile families." In the Fragile Families study, families are described as primarily single, female-headed households in poor African American communities. In these families, by the time the child is five, most couples have broken up and paternal involvement has steadily declined (McLanahan, Garfinkel, Reichman, & Teitler, 2001). In fact, 40% of the fathers in the study had little or no contact with their children. This study describes the reality for many children in America. For many youths in poor, marginalized communities, the lack of positive male role models, poor living conditions, and high levels of community violence are persistent realities that contribute to their vulnerability to behavioral, emotional, and mental health problems (Aneschensel, & Sucoff, 1996; Chow, Jaffee, & Snowden, 2003; Herrenkohl, Sousa, Tajima, Herrenkohl, & Moylan, 2008). There is increasing evidence that these youths could benefit from interventions that incorporate gender and ethnic matching.

Gender and ethnicity matching

Several same-race and -gender mentor-mentee matches have revealed greater benefits related to scholastic competence and feelings of self-worth than cross-race matches (Gaddis, 2012; Mitchell & Stewart, 2012; Rhodes & DuBois, 2008; Rhodes, Reddy, Grossman, & Maxine, 2002). Reviews of literature discussing theory and research on identity development, relational development, friendship development, and help-seeking suggest girls and boys may need different types of mentors (Bogat & Liang, 2005; Karcher, 2008). This literature suggests that male and female youth who form different types of relationships with their mentors have different trajectories in developing relationships with their mentors. Particularly for male adolescents, instrumental (problem solving) versus psychosocial (processing) mentoring that focuses on creating feelings of autonomy is more common and could be better received by male youth from male mentors (Novotney & Mertinko, 2000; Rhodes & DuBois, 2008; Spencer, Collins, Ward, & Smashnaya, 2010). Instrumental mentoring may have greater potential for being beneficial for male mentees, and research has explored and proven a benefit associated with gender matching for male mentees.

Integrating ethnicity and gender matching into youth interventions may appear intuitively and theoretically prudent, but the research findings have been mixed. However, integration continues and influences a growing body of literature (Gordon, Iwamoto, Ward, Potts, & Boyd, 2009). Other research has shown that over the course of a year, male mentees of color in a mentoring program with mentors who were the same gender and same race matches had less deterioration in self-worth and scholastic indicators than those in cross-race matches (Rhodes, Reddy, Grossman, & Lee, 2002). It is relevant to note that in child welfare programs where caregivers and therapists were ethnically matched, youth experienced greater symptom reduction and reduced dropout and had better discharge outcomes as compared to youth whose caregivers and therapists were not matched (Halliday-Boykins, Schoenwald, & Letourneau, 2005). These findings foster increased interest in same-sex and gender youth development interventions.

African-centered rites of passage interventions

Culture incorporates the combination of racial and ethnic values and ideas learned, shared, and transmitted from generation to generation, and it helps interpret existence and organizes life (Gusfield, 2006; Laitin & Weingast, 2006; Song, 2009). While celebrating cultural history has influenced the growth of interest in African-centered rites of passage interventions, some persistent challenges also influence interest.

Historical trauma, racial bias, and cultural suppression in African and African American history has influenced interest in culturally centered youth development interventions such as rites of passage programs (Harvey & Coleman, 1997; Harvey & Rauch, 1997). The contributions of African societies and people of African descent could be inaccessible to the young African American male if there is not an intentional focus on his legacies and cultural strengths. Many of the most recognized formal mentoring programs have been influenced by a Eurocentric worldview of youth development assumed appropriate for all youth (Carroll & Jamison, 2011). Scholars argue that all knowledge about Africa received by African American male youth has been filtered by Europeans and consequently is Eurocentric (Asante, 1992; Gilbert, Harvey, & Belgrave, 2009). In other words, Europeans or European Americans have modified these programs for the purpose of fitting the African into the European world. In 1903 DuBois recognized the oppression and marginalization of African American culture as a continual process in the United States from the time Africans were introduced to the North American continent. Other scholars have argued that socialization that is void of the cultural strengths of the people of African descent could be a factor that leads to emotional conflict and stress for African Americans (Akbar, 1981; Nasir, McLaughlin, & Amina, 2009; Stevenson, 1994).

Youth attitudes and behaviors define the significance and meaning of race and ethnicity in their lives; these are becoming increasingly recognized as important "promotive" factors in the context of their normative development and "protective" factors (Neblett, Revis-Drake, & Umana-Taylor, 2012). Connecting intervention activities to cultural assets supports positive racial and ethnic identities among youth. There is growing evidence that suggests that African American children benefit from interventions that intentionally emphasize African cultural themes (Chipungu et al., 2000; Stevenson & Renard, 1993; Washington, 2007; Wyatt, 2009). Culturally centered approaches that may be referred to as African-centered, Africentric, or Afrocentric models include a focus on an African worldview. This worldview is influenced by values from ancient Egypt (Kemet) and Ethiopia that include collectivity and spirituality in much the same way that Greece, Rome, and individualism serve as reference points for the Eurocentric worldview (Asante, 1992; Boykin, Jagers, Ellison, & Albury, 1997; Nobles & Goddard, 1992).

African-centered rites of passage interventions are in part inspired by beliefs that people of African descent continue to have the wisdom of elders and other African assets to overcome the influences of historical trauma. It is argued that the transatlantic slave trade, the Jim Crow era, and institutionalized oppression has contributed to self-concepts of inferiority, cultural incompetence, and maladaptive behavior that influence African Americans (Serpell, Hayling, Stevenson, & Kern, 2009; Whaley & Noel, 2012). It is suggested that interventions for African American male youth should intentionally utilize cultural assets of the African American community (Caldwell & White, 2001; Carswell, Hanlon, O'Grady, Watts, & Pothong, 2009; Washington, 2005; Washington, Johnson, Jones, & Langs, 2007). Cultural assets include positive racial socialization strategies and the language and values that are central to an African worldview. African-centered rites of passage interventions frequently emphasize African history, family history, and genealogy. Manhood development traditions, rituals, roles, and responsibilities are emphasized in the interventions that target African American male youth (Harvey & Coleman, 1997; Harvey & Rauch, 1997; Watson, Harden, & Washington, 2013; West-Olatunji, Shure, Garrett, Conwill, & Torres-Rivera, 2008). Many of these interventions discuss racism and oppression while emphasizing the values and importance of success as a collective group instead of the more Eurocentric focus on individual success. These

interventions may provide an appropriate and comfortable perspective for recruiting African American men to mentor youth.

Multiple youth development programs utilizing rites of passage for African Americans have been examined as mechanisms to facilitate the successful, positive, and healthy transition from one stage of human development to the next. These studies reaffirm the importance of maintaining a group of people's culture of heritage (Alford, McKenry, & Gavazzi, 2001; Christopher, 1996; Harvey & Hill, 2004; Karcher, 2009). Conversely, these examinations confirm that when youth lack a positive rites of passage experience, there are extraordinary and often negative social consequences related to problem and self-destructive behaviors including, but not limited to violence, substance use, delinquency, and crime in general (Lee, 2008; Nebbitt, Lombe, LaPoint, & Bryant, 2009).

In Benjamin's (1993) work *Boys to Men, A Handbook to Survival*, he posed some very philosophical questions: How does a boy become a real man? How do psychological, spiritual, and mental growth and development take place? How do young boys become the men God intends for them to be? How do boys develop their natural potential that resides deep within their spirit? Benjamin sets the stage for the development of and the need for rites of passage programs. Watson et al. (2013) make note of the importance of cultural processes to facilitate the transition across life stages, phases, or passages to facilitate growth and development and the importance of history.

Emphasizing the engagement of the adult male community to conduct group mentoring is consistent with an African-centered worldview and may have utility for nurturing the healthy development of African American male youth. There are collective and communal models of youth development that include volunteer mentors and racial socialization messages to African American youth that have been found to be associated with psychological well-being and academic achievement (Bowen & Howard, 1985; Brega & Coleman, 1999; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Marshall, 1995; Stevenson, 2003; Washington, Johnson, Jones, & Lang, 2007).

Young African American males have been the focus of many African-centered rites of passage interventions due to the unique needs of many of these youth. African American males disproportionately live in poverty and consistently have the highest rates of unemployment, dropping out of high school, and incarceration (Wheelock, Uggen, & Hlavka, 2011). Many young African American males live in communities with some of the highest rates of violence, and homicide has been the leading cause of death for African American males between the age of 15 and 24 for decades (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).
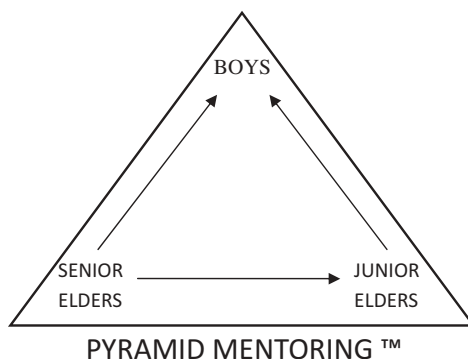
Racial socialization has been identified as the process that contributes to the development of a cultural identity (Miller, 1999; Stevenson, 1995; Stevenson & Renard, 1993; Wright, 2009). Racial socialization that is facilitated through the mentoring relationship is considered a part of the manhood development process. Stevenson's (1997) research with African American male youth indicates those with an adaptive or proactive racial identity tend to demonstrate healthier adaptations to the risks related to living in an urban environment.

Rites of passage interventions emphasize the importance of African and African American history and culture as a means of raising the critical consciousness and critical thinking of African American male youth related to a legacy of success. The emphasis on critical thinking can be a means to counteract the impact of oppression and racism and enhance empowerment of these youth (Watts, Griffith & Abdul-Adil, 1999). Rites of passages activities foster and promote positive relationships between boys that nurture critical thinking abilities among youth by integrating culture such as hip-hop music and videos and film into group discussions and activities (Lee, 2012).

The EASI intervention overview

The EASI design was influenced by a culturally centered group mentoring approach called Pyramid Mentoring (Washington, 2014). This approach is congruent with an Afrocentric worldview that values spirituality, communal interaction, and community elders coming together to help nurture the growth of its youth.

EASI utilizes adult African American males trained as mentors; veteran mentors are called Senior Elders, and mentors in training are called Junior Elders, in a triangle or "pyramid" of social interaction. This approach has shown promise in helping youth to develop various perspectives on the path to healthy manhood (Washington et al., 2007). Inside the pyramid the constant presence, support, and interaction of Senior and Junior Elders provides positive examples of African American manhood for the boys at the top of the structure.

PYRAMID MENTORING ™

EASI employs a 12-week, theory-based curriculum guided by social cognitive theory, the ecological perspective, group theory, and the Afrocentric paradigm. The social cognitive theory emphasizes a focus on changing thoughts and beliefs that can modify interpretation of experiences and consequently behavior (Bandura, 1999). The intervention provides opportunities for interactions with elders that challenge the existing beliefs and thoughts among the EASI boys about masculinity, manhood, school, and relationships. Discussions and activities include integration about historical and current environmental factors that have contributed to the status and conditions of African American males. This environmental focus recognizes that societal values, policies, and stressors that individuals and groups of people experience can impact behavior (Abrams, Theberge, & Karan, 2005). The elders are trained to create a safe space that afforded the trust and need for risk taking in the explorations of new attitudes and behavior (Yalom, 2005). The core principles of the Afrocentric paradigm, as articulated by the *Nguzo Saba*, which is Swahili for "Seven Principles," are included in the discussions and interactions between mentors and mentees. The seven principles of *Nguzo Saba* are grounded in African-centered, Pan-Africanist, and socialist thought (Karenga, 1988) considered important to self-determination.

The *Nguzo Saba* (Seven Principles) are the following:

Umoja (Unity)
Kujicihagulia (Self-Determination)
Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility)
Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics)
Nia (Purpose)
Kuumba (Creativity)
Imani (Faith). (Azibo, 1996, p. 83)

These principles were evident in the description of activities included during the development of the curriculum and were grounding reference points for interactions. These principles and other themes incorporated into activities helped facilitate group and dyad interactions focused on cultural identity, self-exploration, value clarification, and nonviolent conflict resolution. Elders from the Memphis, Tennessee community, scholars, and a local community advisory board contributed to the curriculum, which was informed by standards for youth mentoring established by MENTOR, a

research-based national mentoring organization (Garringer, Kupersmidt, Rhodes, Stelter, & Tai, 2015). A local scholar contributed to the process as well, and her manual *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* was a valuable resource (Okwumabua, 1996) for selecting additional activities for each of the 12 weeks that affirm the importance of African values, knowledge, and ancestry (Azibo, 1996; Karenga, 1988).

The elders were also provided training based on a working knowledge of social learning, cognitive theory, and group empowerment theories. Their interactions were influenced by these theoretical concepts and Afrocentric frameworks as evidenced in their behavior modeling and dyadic interactions. The orientation of elders also included grounding in some of the nuances of urban youth culture and ongoing support to understand the dynamic nature of this culture. This was important because group activities grounded in the culture of children and youth, via rap music, for example, has produced some successful prosocial skill outcomes (DeCarlo & Hockman, 2003; Freire, 1995). Several African American scholars, professionals, and students from the local colleges and universities around this predominately lower social economic community were trained to implement the intervention.

Barriers to recruitment and retention of Black men as mentors

There is a need for more research that clarifies the mechanisms that work to motivate African American men to participate in culturally centered groups like rites of passage interventions. Rites of passage interventions best work when you have mentors that are willing to contribute to the development of young people. Having an understanding of the barriers and the motivations of mentors is important to recruitment and retention efforts for this group. Below are key ideas to consider relating to understanding motivations and identifying barriers.

Key ideas to consider for recruitment and retention include the program focus and the qualities of the mentor. Some of these ideas are as follows: (1) It is important that rites of passage programs address education and communication. It is necessary that the program promote activities that encourage communication and the youth's ability to verbalize what he is feeling. (2) It is important that programs have added incentives for the mentors such as further ongoing training and technical support. (3) It is important that mentors possess the ability to listen and an honest desire to help youth build relationships with other youth, their families, and concerned adults. (4) It is important for mentors to reinforce strengths in youth, families, and communities that can enhance the participant's ability to create a positive future for themselves and others. (5) It is important that the program and the mentor emphasize African American history and the importance of spirituality in interactions with the boys. (6) It is also important that the program and the mentor respect and utilize youth culture as a valuable asset that may enhance the intergenerational interactions that are the cornerstone of rites of passage activities.

Marketing rites of passage programs

Rites of passage and manhood development programs may be powerful attractions to African American men, who are potential mentors particularly if the opportunity to help youth develop the skills needed to obtain an education and communicate effectively is emphasized. Advertising for men who have the ability to listen and an honest desire to help youth build authentic relationships is also suggested, because these are important characteristics to emphasize when recruiting men to mentor. It may also be effective for programs to advertise their investment in incentives as well as training and technical support. Men who mentor in rites of passage and manhood development programs may be attracted to the opportunity of highlighting the strengths in Black youth, families, and communities.

Recruiting approaches

Nontraditional methods for recruiting, training and supporting African American males to serve as mentors (Miller, 2007) is necessary. One could use the term "elder" instead of "mentor," thus utilizing a culturally centered group mentoring approach as symbols and naming are important. Being referred to as an elder could make the male mentor feel more connected to the African concepts, and it could remind the youth about the concept of respect. An important example is how the Big Brothers/Big Sisters mentoring program avoids the term "mentor" in preference for "big brother" or "big sister."

Mentor pairing

It may also be important to pair experienced mentors and novice mentors as an effective way to promote mentor development and provide support to inexperienced mentors. The Pyramid Mentoring approach, utilized by Washington (2014), could be further researched in this area to determine its effectiveness as a way to recruit, train, and support African American men in the manhood development work of rites of passage interventions. The Pyramid Mentoring approach allows rites of passage programs to utilize elders with various degrees of mentoring experience and build the capacity of trained supported men in African American communities.

Conclusion

African-centered rites of passage with traditional mentoring activities could provide a rewarding sense of support, identity clarification, and reinforcement to the men participating in the socialization of African American youth. Embracing African American men in something that feels comfortable and not too formal allows them to "give back" to their community and may increase their participation. African American men desire to guide, support, and mentor youth, and they want to be comfortable doing this in their community. Practitioners and scholars need to be committed to exploring African American men's reactions, reinforcements, and motivations that contribute to their interest and commitment to nurturing the healthy development of African American male youth.

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