Introducing African American Male Theory (AAMT)

Lawson Bush V.
California State University, Los Angeles

Edward C. Bush
Riverside Community College

After more than 40 years of study, no comprehensive theory has been developed to analyze the lives of African American boys and men. In response, the authors developed African American Male Theory (AAMT), which is a theoretical framework that can be used to articulate the position and trajectory of African American boys and men in society by drawing on and accounting for pre- and post-enslavement experiences, while capturing their spiritual, psychological, social, and educational development and station. It is our goal in this article to introduce AAMT to our colleagues who are scholars and practitioners studying and working with African American boys and men. We hope thereby to provide an opportunity for AAMT to take root in the academy and in communities where institutions, policies, and programs intersect with the lives of Black males.

African American Male Theory (AAMT) is a theoretical framework that can be used to articulate the position and trajectory of African American boys and men in society by drawing on and accounting for pre- and post-enslavement experiences while capturing their spiritual, psychological, social, and educational development and station. Though AAMT is a multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary approach to theorizing about the experiences of African American boys and men, it also has the capacity to serve as the framework and guide for practice. It is our goal in this paper to utilize the *Journal of African American Males in Education* to *introduce* AAMT to our colleagues who study and work with African American boys and men. We hope thereby to provide a unique opportunity for AAMT to take root in the academy and in communities where institutions, policies, and programs intersect with the lives of Black males.

In other work (Bush & Bush, in pres) the authors situate AAMT in the historical development of men's studies in general, in African American men's studies in particular, and in the context of other historically excluded populations that have theories and frameworks around the narratives specific to their group, which includes Black feminist and womanist theory (Cannon, 1988; Collins, 1990), Feminist theory (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2005), Latino and Latina critical theory (LatCrit) (Bernal, 2001; Fernández, 2002; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001), Tribal critical race theory (TribalCrit) (Brayboy, 2005), African-centered theory (Asante, 1980, 1990; Asante & Mazama, 2005; Mazama, 2001), and Kawaida theory (Karenga, 1980). Moreover, we briefly overview the body of literature that has characterized the study of African American boys and men for over the last 40 years.

It is important to note that after more than 40 years of research, no unified theory has emerged as a foundation and frame that explains the lives of African American boys and men. In fact, a significant number of studies and other scholarly writings over the aforementioned period concerning African American boys and men had no explicitly stated theoretical framework. In recent years, the preponderance of social science literature, particularly in the educational body of research, has drawn upon critical race theory (CRT) to demystify and encapsulate the lives of African American boys and men (Donnor, 2005; Duncan, 2002; Howard, 2008; Lynn, 2006; Singer, 2005; Stinson, 2008). While we categorically affirm the necessity of considering racism, power, and cultural hegemony as a framework to analyze and situate this population, drawing on CRT as the sole theory offers a myopic viewpoint and provides a limited foundation on which to build (Bush & Bush, in press) We aspire for a more dynamical lens and have, as others (Williams, 2009; Woods, Montgomery, Herring, Gardner, & Stokols, 2006) suggested, borrowed liberally from ecological systems theory, which allows for more fluid interaction and juxtaposition of abstract and concrete concepts, environments, time periods, and other phenomena.

According to many indigenous peoples around the world (Cajete, 1994; Ming-Dao, 1986; Somé, 1993) the universe is made up of a series of interconnected organisms and systems. Likewise, human beings exist in a symbiotic and bidirectional relationship with one another, their environment, and other phenomena. These ancient concepts constitute the foundation of systems and ecological thinking. The current authors view, incorporate, and employ ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1986, 1989, 2005) from the perspective that it is a modern coining and rendition of an African philosophy and ontology (Asante, 1980, 1990; Asante & Mazama, 2005; Mazama, 2001; Jackson & Sears, 1992). In this light, ecological systems thinking is a natural extension of African thought and practice; thus, we find it, among other salient reasons, to be a natural and suitable framework to be the major underpinning of a comprehensive theory for African American boys and men.

African American Male Theory

The six tenets of AAMT are that:

1. **The individual and collective experiences, behaviors, outcomes, events, phenomena, and trajectory of African American boys and men's lives are best analyzed using an ecological systems approach.**

Building upon the ancient and current African worldview as well as Bronfenbrenner's work, AAMT suggests that African American boys and men exist in a symbiotic and bidirectional relationship with other beings, matter, concepts, and phenomena. Thus, AAMT provides the conceptual framework to describe and analyze the interrelated structures, systems, and processes that occur in these dynamic and multidimensional environments that influence and shape the development, experiences, outcomes, and trajectory of African American boys and men (Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003). Given that the environmental factors affecting African American boys and men are numerous and vastly differentiated, a multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary approach becomes necessary to AAMT.

Bronfenbrenner's (1986, 1989, 2005) model of interconnected environmental systems includes the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and the chronosystem. The microsystem captures the individuals own biology, personality, beliefs and perceptions, and intellectual gifts and the interactions with familial, home, peer groups, neighborhood, and school environments. The mesosystem makes the links between the environments of the microsystem. It is the space where microsystems engage one another; for example, it is the connection between home and school, family and peer groups, and the like. Exosystems are external environmental settings and community factors, such as a parent's place of employment, that affect an individual even if that person is not a direct participant. The macrosystem looks at larger cultures or systems, which can be physical, emotional, and ideological that may affect individual development. These may include regional and national culture and economic and political culture. The chronosystem considers the pattern and arrangement of the environmental events and transitions and the sociohistorical context in which they occur over time such as the change in career opportunities for women over the last few decades (Santrock, 2008).

African American Male Theory incorporates all five of Bronfenbrenner's (1986, 1989, 2005) interconnected environmental systems. However, AAMT divides the microsystem into two categories: inner microsystem to capture components such as a person's biology, personality, and perceptions and beliefs while the outer microsystem provides the space to analyze the impact of such aspects as the family, peers, neighborhood, and school environments. In addition, AAMT expands the mesosystem to show the links between the environments of the inner microsystem, outer microsystem, and a sixth division and system added by AAMT called the *subsystem* (see Figure 1).

The subsystem provides the space to consider the influence and involvement of such matters as the supernatural and spirit (Cajete, 1994; Somé, 1993), the collective will, collective unconscious, and archetypes (Jung, 1968; Taub-Bynum, 1984). In addition, it provides the opportunity to consider what renowned and highly regarded physicists describe as multidimensional levels of reality existing in parallel spaces (Kaku, 2005) on the individual male level in the microsystem and as an undercurrent of the other systems in the model.

e.g. unknown
non-matter

e.g. cultural
hegemony & racism
hip hop/youth culture
Patriotism
Black Nationalism
laws/policies

Interactions between the:
Subsystem
Inner Microsystem
Outer Microsystem

e.g. supernatural &
spirit
collective will &
unconscious
archetypes

Subsystem

Chronosystem

Macrosystem

Exosystems

Mesosystem

Subsystem

Microsystem

e.g. desegregation/segregation
change in family structure

e.g.
unemployment
rate
smog
urban/rural
access to
healthcare

Inner Microsystem
e.g. biology
African male
personality
sexual orientation
beliefs and perceptions
intellect

Outer Microsystem
e.g. family & extended family
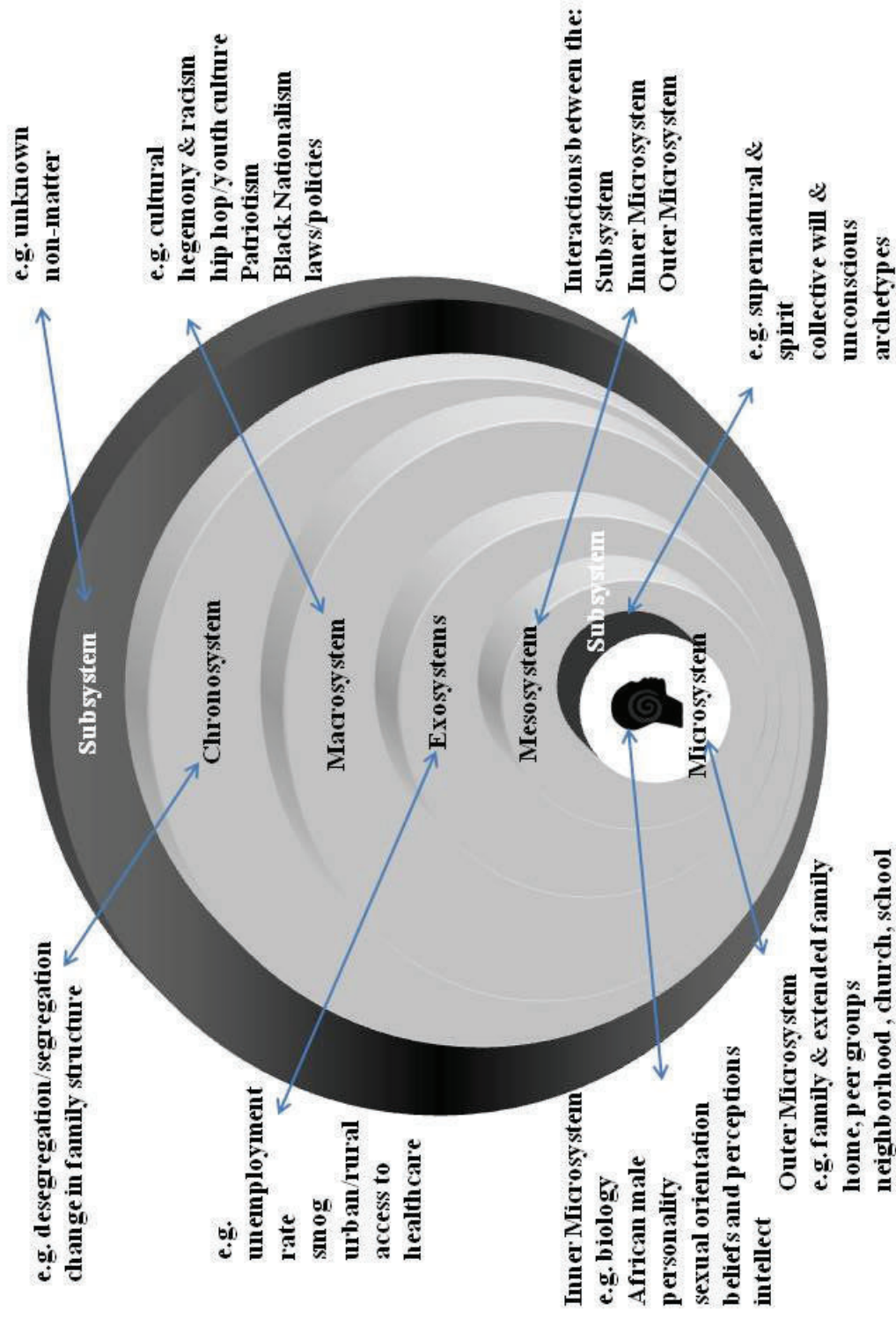home, peer groups
neighborhood , church, school

Figure 1. Ecological Systems Model for African American Male Theory

With this in mind, we are not out to prove that the aforementioned phenomena exist and that they the affect the experiences of African American boys and men; rather, our aim is to ensure that AAMT is elastic and robust enough to grow and to accommodate the physical and social scientists who currently research such phenomena. Additionally, spirituality and the related are important to a significant number of African American boys and men (Baker-Fletcher, 1996; Watts, 1993). The endosystem allows us to examine and account for spiritual phenomena via the perspective and narrative of this population.

2. **There is something unique about being male and of African descent.**

Whether it stems from nature, nurture, or other, there is something unique about being male and of African descent. While AAMT affirms the uniqueness of other populations and groups and is unquestionably interested in what makes African American males similar to or like other populations, AAMT is specifically concerned with examining and discovering what is distinctive about this population as a group with understanding individual distinctions within the group. Distinctions are necessary across areas and disciplines, for example, to create specialized programs, pedagogies, and curricula in education, to focus on specific medical and psychological treatment in biological and psychological research, and to account for the contributions of African American men to forward progress of humanity in history.

3. **There is a continuity and continuation of African culture, consciousness, and biology that influence the experiences of African American boys and men.**

African American Male Theory asserts that the study of African American men and boys must be anchored in Africa (Franklin, 1994; Harris & Ferguson, 2010; White & Cones, 1999) because African culture and consciousness persistently impact African American boys and men (Fortes, 1967; Herskovits, 1959; Hill, 1997; Kenyatta, 1983; McAdoo, 1988; Nobles, 1980; Sudarkasa, 1980). The study of these links requires multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches as the implications of these connections permeate the social sciences and humanities. Research on African American boys and men that does not take into account for the impact of Africa in America runs a significant risk of producing incomplete and faulty results. Much work needs to be done in this area, inasmuch as most research on African American boys and men does not attempt to empirically examine or even theorize about the ramifications of such cultural, biological, and spiritual links and continuation.

4. **African American boys and men are resilient and resistant**

African American Male Theory posits that African American boys and men are born with an innate desire for self-determination and with an unlimited capacity for morality and intelligence. AAMT embraces resilience theory and vehemently opposes deficit paradigms, thinking, and practice. From this viewpoint, it is apparent that social and educational challenges facing this group stem from socially constructed systems rather than any innate biological or cultural deficiencies.

Resilience theory meshes well with AAMT as it was first introduced by ecologist C.S. Holling (1973) who, like the current authors, incorporated aspects of systems theory and ecological theory in his work. In short, resilience theory is concerned with and addresses the

ability, capacity, and powers that people or systems exhibit that allow them to rise above adversity (Holling, 1973; McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson, & Futrell, 1998; Montenegro, 2010). AAMT is particularly interested in discovering and illuminating the resiliency present in the inner microsystem (e.g., biology, personality, sexual orientation, beliefs and perceptions, and intellect), outer microsystem (e.g., family, extended family, home, peer groups, neighborhood, and church), subsystem (e.g., supernatural, spirit, collective will, unconscious, and archetypes), and mesosystem (e.g., interactions between the subsystem inner microsystem outer microsystem) (Nettles, Mucherah, & Jones, 2000; Nettles & Pleck, 1996; Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999).

Additionally, AAMT connects resistance with resiliency and focuses on ways in which African American boys, men, and systems reject White mainstream cultural hegemony and oppression. AAMT does not completely align with leading resistance or cultural oppositional theorists such John Ogbu and Signithia Fordham (Fordham, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1991). We are more interested in how the theory has been nuanced by others. For example, Ogbu suggested that some African Americans reject education because it is perceived as supporting their oppression. Bush (1997) challenged Ogbu (1991) by arguing that he has confounded the terms education and schooling. Bush saw schooling as the process used to maintain and continue asymmetrical power relations while he defined education as "the process that should make people more capable of manifesting who they are as defined by their cultural and community norms" (Bush, 1997, p. 99). Thus, he contended that what Ogbu (1991) found in his study was a rejection of schooling by African Americans rather than education as African Americans have always thirsted and fought for education even in the face of tremendous adversity and minimal resources (Anderson, 1988; Bush, 1997; Bush, Bush, & Causey-Bush, 2006). Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal (2001) have also re-conceptualized Ogbu's theory in a manner that is of interest to AAMT. They asserted that Ogbu focuses on self-defeating resistance while they view some opposition as having transformative qualities, effects, and outcomes as some individuals view society as being unjust and engage in resistant actions as a means of fostering social and political change.

AAMT considers all forms of resistance and opposition demonstrated by African American boys and men as a strength, though some manifestations may be counterproductive to what is viewed as 'success' or 'productivity' White mainstream society. Moreover, in accordance with tenets of AAMT, we aim to explore how resistant behaviors may arise from attempts to maintain a continuity and continuation of African culture, consciousness, and biology.

5. **Race and racism coupled with classism and sexism have a profound impact on every aspect of the lives of African American boys and men.**

Like CRT, AAMT sees racism as an omnipresent force and factor in society. AAMT is particularly interested in how racism impacts the lives of African American boys and men. Moreover, AAMT is also interested in understanding how being male and of a certain class may gain some African American boys and men privilege in some spaces and thereby seeks to be in dialogue with such perspectives (Abdulla, 2012; Cannon, 1988; Collins, 1990; hooks, 2000; Pellerin, 2012).

6. **The focus and purpose of study and programs concerning African American boys and men should be the pursuit of social justice**

The intent of AAMT is to undermine oppression by explicitly investigating, exposing, and correcting those practices, policies, programs, systems, concepts, and institutions that promote its continuation (Young, 1990). Yet, AAMT is not a reactionary theory. The aim is not necessarily to respond to cultural hegemony and racism but rather to explicitly account for it as AAMT works to draw upon the historical and current culture, consciousness, and community to determine what is, and strive to achieve, social justice for African American boys and men.

Conclusion

While the stories of oppressed people should never be forgotten and are necessary for scholars to thoroughly investigate, we encourage scholars to move away from damage-centered (Tuck, 2009) and reactive approaches (Bush, Bush, & Causey-Bush, 2006) that tell the stories of native peoples only in relationship to those who have oppressed them, and which tacitly conveys that the existence and importance of oppressed people are bestowed upon them by their oppressors. While AAMT is robustly equipped to analyze phenomena, experiences, and outcomes that are pathological, deleterious, oppressive, and arresting in the lives of African American boys and men, it also equally has the capacity to examine why African boys and men are resilient, healthy, and thriving. Moreover, and beyond theories that just offer a means for critical analyses, AAMT provides an authentic, native, and emic foundation and framework on which to approach future research in both the social and physical sciences and practice and policy in all fields as well.

The task of developing a comprehensive theory that can articulate the position and trajectory of African American boys and men in society by drawing on and accounting for pre- and post-enslavement experiences while capturing their spiritual, psychological, social, and educational development and evolving station is enormous. We see our work here as only the beginning. We call on scholars and laymen/women from across disciplines, backgrounds, and practices to build on and expand AAMT.

References

Abdulla, M. (2012). Womanist mother: Loving and raising the revolution. *Western Journal of Black Studies, 36*(1), 57-67.

Anderson, J. (1988). *The education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Asante. M. K. (1980. *Afrocentricity: The theory of social change*. Chicago, IL: African American Images.

Asante, M. K. (1990). *Kemet, Afrocentricity and knowledge*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

Asante, M. K., & Mazama, A. (2005). *Encyclopedia of Black studies*. Thousand Oaks, CA; Sage Publications.

Baker-Fletcher, G. (1996). *Xodus: An African American male journey*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers.

Bernal, D. D. (2001). Learning and living pedagogies of the home: The Mestiza consciousness of Chicana students. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 14*(5), 1-17.

Brayboy, B. M. J. (2005). Toward a Tribal critical race theory in education. *The Urban Review, 37*(5), 425-446.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist, 32*, 513-530.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1986). Ecology of the family as a context for human development: Research perspectives. *Developmental Psychology*, *22*(6), 723-742.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1989). Ecological systems theory. In R. Vasta (Ed.), *Annals of child development, Vol. 6* (pp. 187-249). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (2005). *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Bush, L. (1997). Independent Black institutions in America: A rejection of schooling, an opportunity for education. *Urban Education, 32,* 98-116.

Bush, L., & Bush, E. (in press). God bless the child who got his own: Toward a comprehensive theory for African American boys and men. *Western Journal of Black Studies*.

Bush, L., Bush, E., & Causey-Bush, T. (2006). The collective unconscious: New thoughts on the existence of independent Black institutions**.** *The Journal of Pan African Studies, 1*(6), 48-

66.

Byfield, C. (2008). The impact of religion on the educational achievement of black boys: A UK and USA study. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29(2), 189-199.

Cajete, G. (1994). *Look to the mountains: An ecology of Indigenous education*. Asheville, N.C: Kivaki.

Cannon, K. (1988). *Black womanist ethics*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.

Collins, P. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (vol. 2) Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Donnor, J. (2005). Towards an interest-convergence in the education of African-American football student athletes in major college sports. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *8*(1), 45-67.

Duncan, G. (2002). Beyond love: A critical race ethnography of the schooling of adolescent black males. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *35*(2), 131-43.

Fernandez, L. (2002). Telling stories about school: Using critical race and Latino critical theories to document Latina/Latino education and resistance. *Qualitative Inquiry, 8*(1), 45-65.

Fordham, S. (1996). *Blacked out: Dilemmas of race, identity, and success at capital high*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the burden of acting white. *Urban Review, 18*, 176-206.

Fortes, H. (1967). Kinship and marriage among the Ashanti. In A. Radcliffe-Brown & D. Forde (Eds.), *African systems of kinship and marriage* (pp. 252-84). London: Oxford University.

Franklin, C. (1994). Men's studies, the men's movement, and the study of Black masculinities: Further demystification of masculinities in America. In. R. Majors & J. Gordon. (Eds.), *The American Black male: His present status and future*. (pp. 3-19) Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers.

Harris, W., & Ferguson, R. (Eds). (2010). *What's up with the brothers? Essays and studies on African American masculinities*. Harriman, TN: Men's Studies Press.

Herskovits, M. (1959). The myth of the Negro past. Boston: Beacon Press. Hill, R. (1997). *The strength of African American families: Twenty-five years later*. Washington, D.C.: R & B Publishing.

Holland, S. (1991). Positive role models for primary-grade Black inner-city males. *Equity and Excellence, 25*, 40-44.

Holling, C. S. (1973). Resilience and stability of ecological systems. *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics*, *4*, 1-23.

hooks, b. (2000). *Where we stand: Class matters*. New York: Routledge.

Howard, T. C. (2008). Who Really Cares? The disenfranchisement of African American males in PreK-12 schools: A critical race theory perspective. *Teachers College Record*, *110*(5), 954-985.

Jackson, A., & Sears, S. (1992). Implications of an Afrocentric worldview in reducing stress for African American women. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 71*(2), 184-190.

Jung, C. G. (1968). *Man and his symbols* (Reissue edition). NY: Dell Publishing.

Kaku, M. (2005). *Parallel worlds: A journey through creation, higher dimensions, and the future of the cosmos*. New York: Doubleday.

Karenga, M. (1980). *Kawaida theory: An introductory outline*. Inglewood, CA: Kawaida.

Kenyatta, M. (1983). In defense of the Black family. *Monthly Review, 2*, 12-21.

Kolmar, W., & Bartkowski, F. (Eds.). (2005). *Feminist theory: A reader* (2nd edition). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Lynn, M. (2006). Race, culture, and the education of African Americans. *Educational Theory*, *56*(1), 107-119.

Mazama, A. (2001). The Afrocentric paradigm: Contours and definitions. *Journal of Black Studies, 31*(4), 387-405.

McAdoo, H. (1988). *Black families* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

McCubbin, H., Thompson, E., Thompson, A., & Futrell, J. (Eds.). (1998). *Resiliency in African-American families*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Ming-Dao, *D. (*1986). The wandering Taoist. New York: Harpercollins.

Montenegro, M. (2010, February 16). Urban resilience. *Seed Magazine*, 1-4. Retrieved May 20, 2011 from Rhttp://seedmagazine.com/content/article/urban_resilience/

Nettles, S. M., Mucherah,W., & Jones, D. S. (2000). Understanding resilience: The role of social resources. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, *5*, 47-60.

Nettles, S. M., & Pleck, J. H. (1996). Risk, resilience, and development: The multiple ecologies of Black adolescents. In R. J. Haggerty, N. Garmezy, M. Rutter, & L. Sherrod (Eds.), *Risk and resilience in children: Developmental approaches.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Nobles, W. (1980). African philosophy: Foundations for the Black psychology. In R. Jones (Ed.), *Black Psychology* (pp.23-36). New York: Harper & Row.

Ogbu, J. U. (1991). Cultural diversity and school experience. In C. E. Walsh (Ed.), *Literacy as praxis: Culture, language, and pedagogy* (pp. 25–50). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Pellerin, M. (2012). Defining Africana womanhood developing an Africana womanism methodology. *Western Journal of Black Studies, 36*(1), 76-85

Santrock, W. J. (2008) *Life-span development* (11th ed). New York: McGraw Hill.

Singer, J. (2005). Understanding racism through the eyes of African American male student-athletes. *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, 8(4), 365-386.

Singh, A. (2003). The hidden factor: An approach to resolving paradoxes of science, cosmology and universal reality. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse.

Stinson, D. (2008). Negotiating sociocultural discourses: The counter story telling of academically (and mathematically) successful African American male students. *American Educational Research Journal 45*(4), 975-1010.

Solórzano, D., & Bernal, D. D. (2001). Examining transformational resistance through a critical race and Latcrit theory framework: Chicana and Chicano students in an urban context. *Urban Education, 36*(3), 308-342.

Somé, M. (1993). *Ritual: Power, healing, and community*. Portland, OR: Swan and Raven.

Spencer, M. B., Dupree, D., & Hartmann, T. (1997). A phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST): A self-organization perspective in context. *Development and Psychopathology, 9*(4), 817-833.

Sudarkasa, N. (1980). African and Afro-American family structure: A comparison. *Black Scholar, 11*, 37-60.

Swanson, D. P., Cunningham, M., & Spencer, M. B. (2003). Black males' structural conditions, achievement patterns, normative needs, and "opportunities." *Urban Education, 28*(5), 608-633.

Taub-Bynum, E. (1984). *The family unconscious: An invisible bond*. Wheaton, IL: Theosophical

Publishing House.

Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review, 79*(3), 409-427.

Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton: Princeton University.

Watts, R. (1993). Community action through manhood development: A look at concepts and concerns from the front line. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 21*, 333-359.

White, J., & Cones, J. (1999). *Black man emerging: Facing the past and seizing a future in America.* NY: W.H. Freeman and Company.

Williams, P. (2009). *Exploring teachers' and Black male students' perceptions of intelligence.* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Miami, 2009).

Woods, V. D., Montgomery, S., Herring, R. P. Gardner, R., & Stokols. D. (2006). Social ecological predictors of prostate-specific antigen blood test and digital rectal examination in black American men. *Journal of the National Medical Association, 98*(4), 492-504.