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## Msculine Identity and the Education and Parental Involvement of African American Teen Fathers

Milissa McClaire Gary  
*DePaul University*

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Running Head: Masculine Identity & Teen Fatherhood

Masculine Identity and the  
Education and Parental Involvement of  
African American Teen Fathers

Milissa McClaire Gary  
Dr. Proweller  
DePaul University  
Winter 2011

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## Introduction

For those of us working in fields such as education, social work and others, the statistics surrounding youth of color in general, and young African American males in particular, are not new. They are still grim. When compared to their white peers, Black youth are more likely to live below the poverty line and to be reared in single parent households. Black youth are more likely to live in urban areas and attend underperforming schools, be identified for special education services, and are less likely to graduate high school and attend college. They are also likely to be expelled or suspended from school and involved in the criminal justice system. As they grow older, they are more likely to be unemployed and expected to live shorter lives (Kimmel and Traver, 2005; Majors, 1990; Meiners, 2007; Noguera, 2008; Paschal 2006)

Another point that gets less attention than the aforementioned is this – African American teens in low-income communities are at an increased risk of early parenthood. African American males, followed by Latinos, are the most likely to become teen fathers during adolescence. African American teens in low-income communities are at an increased risk of early parenthood (Paschal, 2006; Thornberry, Smith & Howard, 1997).

When we hear of parenting teens, the focus is typically on young women and the impact that being a teen mother has on their lives (Deutscher, Fewell & Gross, 2006; Luschen, 2007; Paschal, 2006; Roxas, 2008). Until recently, there has been very little information about teen fathers. The National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse (NRFC) (2007) reports that, despite an overall decline in adolescent pregnancy since peaking in 1991, teenage fatherhood affects alarming numbers of the nation's young people. The results of a 2002 National Survey of Family Growth reported that there were

over one million fathers in the United States between the ages of fifteen and nineteen. Additionally, fifteen percent of males between the ages of fifteen and forty-four years old had fathered at least one child before their twentieth birthday (NRFCA, 2007).

“Much of what we know about African-American adolescent fathers is based on adult male African-American fathers and from retrospective studies using adult participants who were once teen fathers” (Paschal, 2006, p. 16). Additionally, very little is known about the identity formation of non-white, non-middle class adolescents (Grotevant, 1987). This necessitates a teen voice among the literature.

In the fall of 2008, I was interested in how fatherhood impacts the choices that teen fathers make about their futures, particularly in terms of education. As one who identifies as African American and an educator in a predominantly African American school, I am particularly interested in issues affecting this community. This interest led to a mini-collective case study pilot project in which I interviewed three African American teen fathers attending the same public high school in a major midwestern city (McClaire, 2008). The conversations that I had with these young men and the study’s findings reflected the struggle that takes place as they try to fulfill multiple social roles.

African American boys in the nation’s public schools face unique challenges, such as those previously mentioned (Brunious, 1998; Noguera, 2008). These experiences shape the way that Black youth perceive themselves and conceptualize their roles as masculine figures in society. Building on this, I am interested in exploring the following question: How do conceptions of masculinity impact the identity formation and parental engagement of African American teen fathers? Additionally, how do their efforts to

fulfill various social and familial roles impact the ways that they consider their education and their future?

More information about teen fathers, particularly Black teen fathers, and the challenges and choices that they face, may help educators and others who work with these students understand this aspect of their lives, providing a more complete and nuanced picture of their individual circumstances. Research also shows that many teen fathers have left the traditional education system. Considering their role as fathers, and the way that they conceptualize this role, may redirect the efforts made to assist them elsewhere, like job training, in light of this specific possibility. It is possible that these young men are in need of more programs and support, in and outside of school. Research in this area may highlight that need.

To these ends, this research is a case study focusing on the life experiences of one African American teen father in a major urban area. It seeks to understand his conceptions of the multiple roles he's assumed within his complex context. The analysis of this research draws heavily from the literature on adolescent identity formation and human development. However, in order to truly understand the life of this informant and the reality that he has shaped for himself, it is essential to look into the fields of sociology, sociology of education, African American studies, and human development. This is not simply the story of a young father on the cusp of adulthood, juggling responsibilities. His is also the story about the will and power of this young man to envision and describe a life that contradicts the common narrative of the young black male. It is about a counter-narrative that leaves room for the potential for agency.

## Review of Literature

This research study is interested in the ways in which teen fathers perceive themselves and create an identity that allows them to relate to the people and world around them. What does it mean to be a student, man, African American or father? What experiences in and outside of school have shaped the meaning of these titles and what it means to fulfill these roles? Exploring questions about how a teen dad conceptualizes and assumes the role of father, of student, man or partner, is really about the development of their identity. “Identities such as social roles are imposed on individuals through various socialization processes” (Noguera, 2008, p. 27). The high school years are a pivotal time in shaping these identities. Noguera (2008) gives special attention to racial identity construction in the following quote.

As young people enter adolescence and develop a stronger sense of their individual identities, the meaning and significance of race also change. Where it was once an ambiguous concept based largely on differences in physical appearance, language, and styles of behavior, race becomes a more rigid identity construct as children learn the historical ideological, and cultural dimensions associated with racial group membership (p. 29).

Historically, as a function of racial and cultural othering, dominant group members stigmatize the culture, values, behavior, language, etc. of minorities, marking them as inferior (Ogbu, 2004). Such has been the case for African Americans. Over time and through the development and perpetuation of stereotypes, black American males are often conceptualized as shiftless and uneducated, hypersexual and violent. While they may be stereotyped as having innate athletic prowess, they are not typically generalized as highly intelligent (Noguera, 2008). Stereotypes of the black male – a deviant menace to society – abound in popular media. They have also worked their way into the

classrooms in which black youth are to be educated. Noguera (2008), Kafele (2009) and others maintain that it is the responsibility of teachers to acknowledge the system's bias against these students.

Kafele (2009) writes about the necessity to consider a variety factors of the lives of Black males in order to truly understand the context of their lives, as well as their personal and academic needs. These factors are need for inspiration; learning styles; goals and aspirations; experiences and realities; needs and interests; challenges, obstacles and distractions; peers, parents and neighborhoods; and history and culture (p. 8). One could argue that these factors are important when educating any child. However, they are essential in addressing the social and cultural disconnect between minority and low-income students and their middle class educators of the dominant culture. "Regardless of their ethnicity, teachers who have never lived in the inner city could probably never imagine much less endure the hardships that many of their students face" (Kafele, 2009, p. 16).

Bourdieu developed the notion of cultural capital when researching the unequal educational experiences and outcomes of students from certain communities and demographics (Bourdieu, 2006). Cultural capital includes physical goods, such as books, instruments and other resources. It also refers to long-lasting and engrained values and dispositions, as well as access to highly regarded institutions, groups and individuals (Bourdieu, 1986). Very closely related to Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is social capital. He has defined this as

[T]he aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to ... membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 110).



Differences in access to cultural/social capital and subsequent disconnects between young people and their teachers can impact a student's educational experience. Students from marginalized groups often lack the capital to reap the short and long-term benefits of education available and common among their dominant group peers. This is not to mean that urban black students, for example, are completely bereft of cultural capital. McLaren (1989) explains that "personal survival strategies undertaken by black students foster a particular cultural capital that is seldom congruent with mainstream or dominant practices associated with success" (p. 211).

Delpit (1995) has written extensively on the potential for cultural conflict and related misunderstandings in the classroom between students of color and their teachers from dominant cultural backgrounds. Such misunderstandings have been attributed to differences in class, culture and values, and language diversity (Delpit, 1995). It is also worth noting that these conflicts are not limited to white teachers working with minority and low-income children. "The middle-class African-American teachers who do not identify with the poor African-American students they teach may hold similarly damaging stereotypes" (Delpit, p. xiv). Armed with such stereotypes, and working within a system that seems to funnel minority boys into special education and disciplinary action, research has confirmed that teachers commonly hold lower expectations for Black and Latino students when compared to whites (Tenebaum & Ruck, 2007; Noguera, 2008).

There is great potential for the student/teacher relationship to impact a young person's sense of self, shaping the ways they come to perceive themselves, their worth

and potential. “Students are highly susceptible to prevailing stereotypes related to intellectual ability” (Noguera, 2008, p. 141). Unfortunate images of the unintelligent, uncivil and criminal young Black man abound in the media. Coupled with images of the Black professional athlete, these are the prominent and most accessible portrayals of the Black male available to so many young boys, as well as the larger society (Noguera, 2008; Majors, 1990). These stereotypes of the Black male and the image of the successful student are at odds with one another (Noguera, 2008; MacLeod, 2004; Kafele, 2009). Kafele (2009) elaborates on this dissonance in the lives of Black boys.

[I]t is a challenge for many black males to let their guard down and demonstrate to their teachers and peers how intelligent they truly are... It is not always cool to be smart among black males due to their perceived stereotypes of what it is to be a black male; if they attempt to demonstrate their intelligence, they may be ostracized or ridiculed by their peers. A related challenge that black males face is the myth that to be smart is to “act white” and therefore not be “down,” “cool” or “black” (p. 18-19).

Delpit (1995) talks about the power dynamics at work in classrooms. Especially important here is the power of teachers over students. Research has shown that these stereotypes impact the treatment of these students by the very individuals charged with educating them. As such, they have the potential to shape a child’s self-image (Brunious, 1998).

[W]hen teachers perceive students as unintelligent, bad, and incapable of learning, they expect below average work and misconduct from the children, and children respond in kind. Regardless of their own ethnicity, teachers who work with black disadvantaged children need to examine their attitudes, beliefs and assumptions about poverty and race for these have grave and lasting effects on school-age children (Brunious, 1998, p. 175).

The Achievement Gap is used to describe the educational disparities between Black and Latino youth and their white and Asian counterparts. “While 39 percent of white students scored at the proficient level or higher on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading exam portion NAEP, only 12 percent of black students and 14 percent of Hispanic students did so” (Education Week, 2004, para. 2). Statistics such as this illustrate the disparity. Statistically these minority groups lag behind in standardized test scores and graduation rates. They are underrepresented among those enrolled in advanced courses and on college campuses.

The gap is often attributed to a variety of factors. Among these are student tracking, test bias, and negative stereotypes like those mentioned above (Education Week, 2004; Kafele, 2009). Socio-economic factors, such as lack of funding in low-income schools and educational resources in low-income homes, have also been identified. Dickar (2006) makes clear that “as urban schools served more students of color, public investment in their education and cities in general declined” (p. 25). This reflects institutionalized racism, with blacks and Latinos being disproportionately poor. The US Census Bureau reports that 27 percent of Hispanic and 30 percent of black children under eighteen years old live in poverty, compared to 13 percent of white youth (Proctor & Dalaker, 2002, as cited in Education Week, 2004). Educational achievement, by mainstream standards, can grant access to increased social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2006). The achievement gap is evidence that this access is denied to particular students. This gap and lowered teacher expectations appear to be even more damaging for Black boys in particular when considered among other statistics such as drop-out, unemployment and incarceration rates.

Starting out, I suspected that growing up in low-income Black communities and within the public schools of a major metropolitan area, Shaun, the focus of this study, may have had experiences with the cultural disconnect, stereotypes and bias described here. Yet they were not to entirely define him. Hall (2007) writes about resiliency in young men of color. Although what resiliency actually looks like varies by context, it can be identified through characteristics at several levels. A resilient young person displays a strong sense of self-esteem and self-concept. Additionally, they tend to come from homes with strong family values and positive interactions. On the community level, strong networks outside of the home, such as church, schools and non-parenting adults are positive contributors to resilience building in young people (Hall, 2007). These attributes are especially important in understanding the narrative of my participant and his efforts to function within various contexts and roles.

Being that the bulk of information about teen parents focuses on the mothers (Kaplan, 1997; Luschen, 2007; Proweller, 2001), little is known about teen fathers in comparison. As with teen moms, low socio-economic status, poor academic performance and high drop-out rates are among the risk factors associated with teen fatherhood (Paschal, 2006). McLaren (1989) contends that students who are “forced to forfeit their own cultural capital, street-corner knowledge, and dignity” (p. 215) are more like “pushed out” of school. This is worth keeping in mind when considering the educational experiences of this case study’s informant.

In any case, the most abundant information on these young men is grim. Although data surrounding teen fatherhood is limited, race is among the antecedent risk factors that have been consistently identified. “A great racial disparity exists in teen

parenthood for adolescents” (Paschal, 2006, p. 7). While most studies on teen fatherhood don’t focus on cultural differences, it is important to note that despite a declining birthrate among African-American teens, this group is still more likely to become adolescent parents (Paschal, 2006). Thornberry, Smith and Howard (1997), among others, have found that African-American males, followed by Latinos, are the most likely to become fathers during adolescence. Higher rates of teenage fatherhood exist in America’s inner cities, which may be attributed to “intergenerational transmission of expectations and values about early childbearing” (Thornberry et al, p.507).

In investigating my research question, it is necessary to seek understanding of how African-American teen fathers perceive themselves as parents and their responsibilities. Identity, and specifically adolescent identity formation, is at the heart of this research question. Understanding what it means for these young people to fill the roles of man, student, father, etc. has to do with how they have integrated them into who they are. The ways in which teen fathers conceptualize fatherhood is rooted in their larger socio-cultural context (Paschal, 2007; Sullivan, 1985). Cultural norms and personal experience among other things has shaped the ways that they perceive this role, and their ability to fulfill it. Despite individual differences, each of the fathers in my pilot study prioritized their children and their obligation to support them.

Several factors contribute to young fathers’ conceptualizations of parenthood and among these are hegemonic notions of gender. “Hegemonic masculinity demands that men exhibit traits such as independence, pride, resiliency, self-control, and physical strength” (Paschal, 2006, p. 36). Marginalized boys who come to understand their roles

as men often do so from a place of subordination and in comparison to a dominant model that often paints them as inferior (Kimmel & Traver, 2005).

The American father has further been defined as family leader and breadwinner (Paschal, 2006). This role cannot be sufficiently enacted by the fathers in this study due to structural factors related not only to their age and family living arrangements, but to race and class as well. African-American men in low-income communities may only be able to partially enact hegemonic masculinity. African Americans are over-represented among low-income urban populations in the United States. Franklin (1989, as cited in Paschal, 2007) states

Our society today undoubtedly remains structured in such a manner that the vast majority of Black men encounter insurmountable barriers to the attainment of a “masculine” status as defined by most Americans (Black and white Americans). Black men still largely are locked within the Black culture (which has relatively limited resources), unable to compete successfully for societal rewards – the attainment which defines American males as “men” (p. 37).

Subsequently, African American men in low-income communities may only be able to partially enact hegemonic masculinity, which includes notions of fatherhood.

It is worthwhile to mention that contrary to stories and stereotypes of absent Black fathers, McAdoo (2002) wrote that Black men act as single fathers/primary caregivers of their children at slightly higher rates than their white peers – 3.9% compared to 3.5%. A 2005 study by Fathers, Inc, an organization advocating active involvement and mentorship among fathers in the interest of responsible parenting, explored teen attitudes about fatherhood, based on their experiences with their own fathers. It is possible that a poor father-son relationship in their childhoods would motivate some young fathers to be the dads that they never had. Additionally, Daly’s

work as cited in Connor and White (2007) suggests that men in modern America may look to their own fathers as “a point of reference to begin sorting out in which ways they want to be different” (p. 6). The fathers from the pilot expressed this sentiment:

My father is a prime example [of a bad father]. He’s a deadbeat. He come through some of the time, but he really don’t be there ... I don’t wanna be nothing like him. We share the same blood, the same genes but... I try as much as possible not to be like him. (Shaun, pilot study, 2008)

The absence of biological fathers in the lives of many teen dads makes it imperative to understand the roles of other men that prove to be instrumental in their lives. The quote that follows echoes one of the findings of my pilot research related to father-son relationships.

There seem to be major discrepancies between the negative absent father images of black men described in demographic studies and the picture of black men in fathering roles which emerges from structured interviews, narratives, biographical sketches, community-based observations, and ethnographic investigations (Connor and White, 2007, p. 2)

While none of the fathers participating in the study had regular contact or communication with their biological fathers, they each cited several men, most of whom were also African American, who provided a positive male figure in their lives. These men fulfilled many duties consistent with hegemonic father types. These non-biological father figures provided financial and emotional support, love and advice, consistent with the work of McAdoo and McAdoo (2002). These relationships and the notions of extended family and fictive kin in the lives of Black children are supported in the literature on African American families (Sarkisian, 2007; Hill, 1998).

This limited research on Black family structures and dynamics also includes theories and elaborations on the central roles of women (Utsey, 2009; Bush, 2000;

Paschal, 2006). Black mothers, and often grandmothers, play prominently in the lives of their children and their sons in particular. In response to the idea that female-headed households pose a risk to Black boys because “only a man can raise a man,” African American male scholars such as Stevens and Miller (Utsey, 2009), Kafele (2009) and others have written books and designed websites and social programs intended to support Black women raising sons without a father in the home. As previously stated, being reared in a single parent household has been identified as risk factor for early parenthood.

Some research has highlighted long-term negative effects that young parenthood has on the next generation father-child relationships. Men who father children in adolescence have less overall contact with their children than older fathers (NRFC, 2007). Additionally, seventy-one percent of high school drop-outs come from fatherless homes (Fathers, Inc., 2005). This would seem to support the “love them and leave them” stereotype surrounding young fathers. However, four out of six participants in one study of teen fathers expressed a strong desire to maintain romantic relationships with the mothers of their children, coupled with feelings of regret and remorse for the way they treated them in the past (Parra-Cardona, Sharp & Wampler, 2008). Among adolescent fathers, research has shown that the level of involvement, with both the mother and the child, decreases over time (NRFC, 2007).

Considering the statistics, and this review of the literature, one would be left with the impression that these young men are irresponsible and voluntarily uninvolved in the lives of their children. A deeper look, though, reveals youth who are forced to make adult decisions without necessarily having adequate support. There are organizations, researchers and authors that are working toward giving voice to this group that so often



appear as unfortunate statistics. Mercer L. Sullivan in *Teen Fathers in the Inner City: An Exploratory Ethnographic Study* (1985), challenges the stereotypes of the teenage dad. Findings of this study result in several suggestions of ways in which schools, agencies and social policy can better support these young men and their relationships with their children. In concluding his research among young fathers in low-income communities in Brooklyn, New York, Sullivan (1985) said of such support that “In order to be effective, these efforts will need to be part of an overall program of intensive and comprehensive services for inner-city children and adolescents” (p.19).

Similarly, the work of Parra-Cardona, Sharp and Wampler (2008) also present findings that challenge the stereotypes among teen fathers of color. In this case, they conducted a study with six Mexican-origin teen fathers from the American southwest who are involved in the criminal justice system. Each of the participants successfully completed a parenting program. The young men provide descriptions of personal experiences that made up a gradual process of accepting and developing a commitment to fatherhood. Among these were (a) not giving up and deciding to be a dad, (b) figuring out my relationships after becoming a father and (c) wanting to be a good father (p. 375). As I will discuss shortly, this is consistent with my findings. Upon completion of the program, most made a commitment to make changes in their lives, such as refraining from delinquent behavior, for the benefit of their children. Both of the examples listed above provide a view of teen fathers that is much more complex than most of the data would suggest. They also speak to the fact that, provided with the right support, young fathers can make decisions that make them responsible, involved and effective parents.

School districts have taken various approaches to support or simply deal with pregnant and parenting teens within their systems. These range from relegating young expectant moms to special classrooms, rendering them invisible within the school community, to providing on-site daycare, special parenting classes and support groups (Pillow, 1997). Research shows that some of the most effective programs focus on the mothers' physical and emotional well-being (Sadler et al., 2007), concentrate on child development (Deutscher, Fewell & Gross, 2006) and/or employ culturally responsive schooling strategies (Roxas, 2008). The large district in which my earlier research was conducted offers a variety of such programs for young mothers, including an entire high school dedicated to meeting their unique needs. Though the effectiveness of the district's initiatives is arguable, no such support is available for young fathers. This either fails to recognize their existence or assumes their lack of involvement in the lives of their children.

This lack of acknowledgement perpetuates the invisibility of these men and may have very real effects on the lives and futures of their children. Fathers with low education and/or income levels are less likely to financially support their children, which can cause conflict between the parents (Erkut, Szalacha & Garcia Coll, 2005). Parental relationships have a direct correlation with the level of a father's involvement. As such, the Fragile Family Study, an ongoing study of unwed minority parents, argues that it is in the best interest of the child and paternal relationships to "strengthen new fathers earning power by providing education and job training" (Erkut, Szalacha & Garcia Coll, 2005, p. 710).

Anthony and Smith (1994) write about an impressive parenting program in a Denver, Colorado public high school. A program originally intended for young mothers added a component for fathers attending the school. Program participation was voluntary and included eight fathers in its first year. The program was admittedly off to a rocky start, as the boys were resistant to the serious nature of the discussions, resorting to jokes and immature behavior. However, they eventually grew comfortable with each other and the meetings, which were held during rotating class periods, once a week during a regular school day. The program, in addition to building a support group and community of young fathers, put the students in touch with a variety of local agencies. Emotional and academic issues were addressed, as well as effective parenting strategies. Seven of the eight participants successfully completed the school year, with a slight increase in the group's grade point average.

This excerpt from the authors' conclusion is very telling and supports my belief that more support is needed for this population.

We believe that if services had not been provided to these adolescent fathers, they would have dropped out of school and experienced academic failure even if they remained enrolled. Services provided them an opportunity to express concerns, problems, and feelings and to experience recognition of and support in their circumstances (Anthony & Smith, 1994, para. 24).

Findings from my pilot study (McClaire, 2008) indicate that the students in my sample were consciously, and perhaps unconsciously at times, weighing various factors when making decisions about their futures. These determining factors and the tension between them emerged from the data as important themes. These themes are *a) Priorities and Responsibilities, b) Relationships and c) Self-Awareness and –Actualization.*

Additionally, I have identified a variety of sub-themes stemming from the themes

mentioned above. These were helpful in understanding the ways in which respondents attempted to adapt to their lives as students and young parents.

These teen fathers, who are also students, communicated a sense of stress and being overwhelmed when considering their “duties.” Their obligations to family, school and work impact their day-to-day decisions, all of which have the potential to affect their futures. Each of the participants maintained that school was important and that the completion of high school had significant implications for their futures. Respondents also prioritized being a good father, and as a group, provided a general and consistent idea of what that looks like. This image reflects hegemonic ideals of the larger socio-economic environment.

Their struggle to strike a balance between responsibilities manifested itself in the interviews and resulted in the young men making significant sacrifices and compromises that directly impacted their education. However, individualism and the contention that “I can do anything I put my mind to” were also recurrent in the interviews. This is an interesting contradiction in the accounts of the young men. It is also an illustration of the ways in which they’ve adapted to and internalized the middle-class norms of the greater, more dominant, socio-cultural environment.

In considering the lives of these young fathers from a human ecology and development perspective, it is imperative to explore how the young dads perceived themselves, their circumstances and their futures in order to understand how they are making decisions about their lives and education. Recurrent in my research and others (Paschal, 2006) is the balancing act that takes place as they negotiate the space where student life meets parental responsibility. Societal expectations of both roles inform their

self-perception. As such the values, resources and norms of the greater community form the context in which individual choices are made (Sullivan, 1985). How are their priorities, relationships and self-actualization influenced/impacted by their experiences as black youth? The work that follows seeks insight into the lives of these young men, who occupy a very unique place in our society. This research focuses on the narrative of one such young man.

## **Methodology**

### ***Methodological Approach***

Single case study is the approach that frames this research. Yin (1989) explains that “in general, case studies are the preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real life context” (p. 13). Additionally, Shaw maintains that case study designs are useful when concentrating on “how particular groups of people confront specific problems, taking a holistic view of the situation” (as cited in Merriam, 1988, p.11).

In exploring my informant’s reality, it was imperative that I seek understanding of the complexities that have made him a man, son, father, student, and African American and what these various positionalities/subjectivities mean to him. Given the nature of my research questions, it is apparent that the teen father who is the subject of this study cannot be understood apart from his context. This particular methodology is especially suited for such considerations (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1989).

While case studies allow for in-depth study, their breadth is limited. My research will attempt to fill a gap in the literature through the use of qualitative methods, but it is not intended to provide generalizability about the phenomenon of teen fatherhood or adolescent identity formation. Consistent with most qualitative research, my work here seeks to develop middle-level theory, building on what’s learned in interviews while speaking to issues in the existing literature (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Human ecology theory and the process model of identity formation provide much of the theoretical framework applied to this research. In her explorations of African American teen fathers and their constructions of fatherhood, Paschal employs human ecology theory in interpreting the experiences of her participants. Human ecology theory, as described by Bubolz and Sontag (1993), draws on several other frameworks used in the fields of ecology and human development. This theory maintains that individuals do not exist in isolation but as members of various complex concentric systems<sup>2</sup>.

These systems begin with the *individual* as the smallest, most central system. This is followed by the *microsystem* which includes home with family, school and neighborhood with peers – the primary interactions and activities between individuals. The *mesosystem* is the level at which various microsystems, such as home and school, intersect and interact in one's life. The *exosystem* consists of settings that an individual might not actually enter but that may indirectly affect them, such as mass media. The *macrosystem* is the most global level that is comprised of cultural values and norms. The *chronosystem* is the most recent addition to this model and represents historical changes in one's life (Harris and Graham, 2007).

Human ecology theory prioritizes the ways in which individuals adapt to and interact with and within these systems. One basic premise of the theory rests on a belief in interdependence - that one individual cannot be considered apart from their greater ecological/environmental context. This theoretical framework is applied to my research

in a way that allows teen fathers to be viewed as individuals with dynamic relationships with others and their environment.

For the purposes of my research, it is necessary to consider teen fathers as living and acting within various contexts, among them a family ecosystem. The attributes of these families may display a diverse set of characteristics, such as varying family structure and members, ethnicity and socio-economic status. While these families exist within various environments simultaneously, I find it most useful to focus on the ways that these individuals adapt to their socio-cultural environment to reach certain outcomes such as maintaining or improving one's quality of life.

In the past several decades, researchers have called on their peers to rethink traditional conceptions of adolescence. The most widely held traditional views understood adolescence as a series of biologically determined milestones and steps ultimately ending in well-adjusted adulthood. The notable research of Stanley G. Hall and his contemporaries in the early 1900s revolved around the belief that adolescence was a series of age specific patterns and events. Later that century, Erickson put forth another age/stage specific theory that acknowledged the impact of one's social environment (Ianni, 1989). More recently, a call has been made to expand on Erickson's framework.

In a continuation of the old nature versus nurture debate, Grotevant (1987) is among voices in the field calling for us to rethink this period in our lives and what it has meant for our identity construction. He promotes a process model of identity formation that has interesting implications if applied to my research.

This framework is developmental in its focus on the process of forming a sense of identity. It is contextual in that it considers the interdependent roles of society, family, peers, and school or work environments in identity formation. Finally, it is life-span in scope. Identity formation is



viewed as a life-long task that has its roots in the development of the self in infancy (Grotevant, 1987, p. 203).

Additionally, this model contains four major components – 1) Individual characteristics brought to bear on the identity process, 2) Context of development, 3) The identity process in specific domains, and 4) Interdependencies among the identity domains (p. 204-205).

This model and its components are compatible with Human Ecology theory as previously described. It is also particularly applicable to research about African American teen fathers for a variety of reasons, consistent with research suggestions by Harris and Graham (2007). The pair argues that a framework that represents a more integrated approach, allowing for the intersection of biological predisposition and cultural and environmental factors, is most appropriate when researching youth in general, and African American youth in particular. Case study and other qualitative methods lend themselves to such an approach.

Research needs to account for the cultural context so that we can characterize people in their everyday lives. The majority of developmental research treats children as if they exist devoid of culture; so we overlook many important points about development of all children, regardless of race and/or ethnicity (Harris & Graham, 2007, p. 25).

Black youth grow up within unique cultural contexts that may become anomalies when compared to dominant groups that are more accurately represented in the research. The traditional stage-theories of Hall and others, discussed above, may be problematic when investigating young people of color in the urban environment.

Duncan (2005) concurs, noting that much of the current research and methods surrounding adolescence do not have much to contribute toward understanding the unique lives and perspectives of young people who are poor, of color, or living in non-

traditional family arrangements. As such “youth of color, especially black teens, are largely excluded from conventional social science and medical representations of adolescence” (p. 5).

In addition to human development, fields surrounding cultural studies were also key in interpreting the research and understanding my informant’s reality. It is not enough to interpret his narrative through psychological and developmental lenses. His circumstances also needed to be read through a lens that prioritizes the complex social layers that have shaped them. The work of sociologists and researchers investigating issues surrounding identity, race, gender and class formation and education in urban America also informed this research (Fine & Weis, 1998; Hall, 2007; Kimmel, 2005; Majors, 1990; McLaren, 1989). Their research promotes the cultural, social, political, ethical, and historical understanding of marginalized youth. When considered alongside human ecology theory and the process model of identity formation, we gain a more complete view of the complex and interrelated dynamics within and among the participant’s various systems. As a minority in America, the urban, black teen father embodies a unique set of cultural and political realities. These are set against a backdrop of contradictions and inequities within the pervasive dominant culture, and are reflected in every facet of his life.

### *Sample*

Shaun (a pseudonym), the primary informant in this case study, was one of the fathers from my pilot (2008), which was a study on how parenthood impacts the educational decisions of teen fathers. The fathers for this study were identified primarily

by word of mouth and my own knowledge of students within their school building. At the time, I was teaching at the school attended by the participants; two of them had been my students several years prior to the research. These young men were bound as members of the same school community. They were also bound by the unique characteristics of being Black, teen fathers and high school students. Yet, my research found that they differed in individual ways – such as their varying levels of involvement in the lives of their children, their romantic relationships, employment status, and their different education and career plans.

I chose to continue working with Shaun because in my past experiences with him, he had been very retrospective about his choices and their impact on his life and future. He represents a very specific population that is overrepresented among teen fathers. He is African-American, lives in a major urban area, and is a life-long resident of low-income communities. As are half of all black children under the age of eighteen (Bush, 2000), Shaun was raised within a family headed by a single mother. As such, Shaun embodies many of the complexities that reflect his unique positioning as a young African-American male, student and father – negotiating that space where these roles intersect. He is currently 19 years old, placing him at an interesting point in his own identity formation. All of these factors considered, he represents an underrepresented group in the literature surrounding teen parenting and adolescent identity formation.

A considerable amount of time had passed between my initial conversations with Shaun about his parenting and education and our new discussions around the current research. When we last spoke, his relationship with his daughter's mother was unstable – the two were not romantically involved and he expressed some resentment toward her.

Despite the fact that his daughter lived with her mother and grandmother, he felt that he was making much larger financial and educational sacrifices. Additionally, the young mother was considering moving out of the city to attend a state university with intentions of taking their daughter with her. This understandably became a point of contention between the young parents. Shaun's own educational future was uncertain, as he had fallen behind academically and would be unable to graduate high school with his class that spring. He was weighing his options – finish up in summer and night school, attempt to leave traditional schooling to obtain a GED, or end his formal education entirely.

My prior knowledge of the young father's situation shaped the early interviews of this project. Research says that the involvement of adolescent fathers in the lives of their children declines over time (NRFC, 2007) and that this involvement is largely impacted by a father's relationship with the mother (Erkut, Szalacha & Garcia Coll, 2005). Therefore, it was necessary to recap with Shaun, as these key relationships may have changed in the last year. Such changes have the potential to impact the way that he perceives himself as a father, student and man, as well as the ways in which he envisions his future.

### ***Methods of Data Collection***

Unlike other types of research, case study does not claim or require any specific methods for data collection. Any and all methods can be used as a means of exploring one's research questions (Yin, 1989). Creswell (2007) also explains that case studies typically involve multiple information sources. The original narrative/anecdotal data used in this study was collected in a series of interviews spanning several months. Our first

conversation for this research occurred over the telephone. Shaun and I then met at a local library for an in depth interview. This was followed by another thorough telephone conversation. Interview protocols provided the basis for the interviews and unfolded into more detailed and elaborate discussions.

As previously mentioned, this thesis stemmed from an earlier pilot study in which I first worked with this informant. As part of that study, I conducted two forty-five to sixty minute interviews in person, about two weeks apart. This data was revisited as new data was collected for this research.

A young person's self image is shaped in large part by their environment and their place in it (Brunious, 1998). It was necessary for me to gain understanding about how Shaun perceives his school and community, and a great portion of the interviews focused on this. Interviewing was imperative in this research to prioritize the voice of my participant. In this research, as in other case studies, interviewing was not used as an objective means of obtaining information. This is consistent with current trends in qualitative research.

If we proceed from the belief that neutrality is not possible (even assuming that it would be desirable), then taking a stance becomes unavoidable. An increasing number of social scientists have realized that they need to interact as persons with the interviewees and acknowledge that they are doing so (Fontana & Frey, 2008, p. 116).

This research approached interview sessions as authentic conversations between two individuals. This process provided an opportunity to understand and honor Shaun's social history, context and perspective on the world in which he lives (Fontana & Frey, 2008).

Additional data used to inform this research included existing literature drawn from scholarly journals and relevant publications by researchers in the fields of sociology, education and psychology, as well as my previously mentioned pilot.

### ***Methods of Data Analysis and Interpretation***

The analysis of data was an ongoing process in this research. Between conversations with Shaun, I consistently revisited the existing literature, looking for connections between my data and those of previous researchers in related fields. This practice is consistent with Merriam's (1988) suggestions for case study research.

During the qualitative research process, one must find a way to categorize the data prior to analysis in order to draw meaning from it. "The search for meaning often is a search for patterns... Often these patterns will be known in advance, drawn from the research questions, serving as a template for the analysis. Sometimes, the patterns will emerge unexpectedly from the analysis" (Stake, 1995, p.78)

The audio from each interview was digitally recorded and later transcribed. Interview transcripts were then manually coded into individual units of data. Each quote from Shaun was coded, and subsequently recoded, into a main idea. These codes were constantly revisited for comparison, as I looked for the emergence of new codes or the disappearance of others as the process continued. The most prominent and reoccurring codes were then categorized into larger themes, around which the findings of this study are organized (Creswell, 2007). Subsequently, my data and findings could be thematically arranged and interpreted as I sought to answer my research questions.

Researchers have a responsibility to ensure the validity of their data. As such, member checking was regularly integrated into interview sessions. Each time we spoke, I began with a short recap or clarifying questions from our previous conversation. This practice of taking my data interpretations to my participant helped ensure accurate understanding of the data, consistent with the informant's voice and intent.

### ***Limitations of the Research Design***

My original research design included limitations that significantly impacted my work, data and interpretation. Initially, this research about masculine identity was to include extensive discussions around the role of media in influencing this identity formation. While my participant and I did begin to explore the topic, many questions from my proposal had to remain unasked and unanswered due to scheduling issues and time constraints described below.

It was very challenging to schedule and follow through with meetings with my informant. Most of the complications were related to scheduling conflicts and time constraints between work and school. Additionally, he had transportation issues and relied on public transit to get to our interviews. It is also worth noting that I offered to meet him at a library closer to his home. He did not think that this was a good idea and expressed that he preferred not to spend too much time in his neighborhood. He later cited safety concerns as the primary reason. After several reschedules and phone conversations, I had to make the decision to forgo some of my earlier questioning. At this point, I have not been able to get in touch with Shaun for several months.

While these complications took away from my original design, I see them as reflective of something bigger than an inconvenience to my research. Each of the obstacles are illustrative of issues in the lives of low-income teens – inconsistent work, working far away due to lack of employment opportunities in the community, dependence on public transportation, and feelings of threatened safety (Brunious, 1998). It was important to keep these things in mind as I sought to gain a more complete picture of Shaun's reality. These are just a few of the factors that have shaped his perception of the world and his place in it. These issues are an essential part of his community context, which will be discussed in depth.

As compared to young mothers, there is a lack of information about teen fathers. This research experience reaffirms that this is not due to lack of interest. The lives of young men like my informant include circumstances that often pull them in oppositional directions. Commitments that they attempt to fulfill, determined by their various roles and responsibilities, are often in conflict with one another. When it came time for Shaun to make choices between his work and earning money and meeting with a researcher to talk about his life, he had to make the decision with the most tangible results and benefits for himself and his family.

My positionality presented the potential for other limitations in the research design. While I did not have evaluative authority over my participant, he first knew me as a teacher in his school, and I still may have been viewed as some sort of authority figure. Having prior knowledge of an informant and the details of their life has the potential of being detrimental to research and tainting the interpretation of the data. It



can also impact the informants' desire to share information that may have not been appropriate or related to the former relationship.

I do not have any evidence that my former status impacted the interviews in a negative way. It is worth noting that I am no longer employed at the school and the informant is no longer a student there. I believe that we are both currently too far removed from the school and my former role as teacher for this to have been a limitation. Rubin and Rubin (2005) note that "people are more willing to talk to you if they know you" (p. 89). The fact that the informant and I knew each other prior to the research worked in my favor. Fontana and Frey (2008) explain that gaining the informant's trust and establishing rapport are key in collecting qualitative data. I believe that the rapport and relationship that I had established with Shaun over the years were advantageous.

Although my informant and myself were raised in very different communities and circumstances, we both identify racially as Black. As such, it is possible that we have had similar racialized experiences, particularly as members of the same public school system. While cultural differences surely exist between us, we are both arguably witnesses to a unique brand of institutionalized racism. As a researcher, it was important for me to remain objective as I learned about Shaun's reality – not allowing my own feelings of racial group membership to drive the research or impact my interpretation of the data.

## **Findings**

As Stake (1995) suggests, the coding process revealed themes that connected naturally to the research questions, while others emerged unpredictably from the data. Four major themes arose as the foundation of how Shaun perceived his life, his options, and the people around him. These themes -- a) Becoming a (Black) Man, b) Central Role of Others, c) Educational Past and Present, and d) Option Weighing -- are interestingly related to the process model and ecological theories previously discussed.

Shaun is a captivating storyteller, and his answers to my interview questions typically took on a very narrative tone. His reflective/retrospective outlook was consistent in our conversations. As I worked at interpreting the data collected in our interviews, I noticed that Shaun described his life and experiences in terms that likened his life to a journey. His life was actually several journeys, perhaps being traveled concurrently. He also identified points in his journey where he made choices that altered its course, for example, making and keeping a promise to God that he would quit selling drugs after being arrested.

### **Becoming a (Black) Man**

#### *Conceptualizing Manhood/Fatherhood*

The characteristics that Shaun expressed as requirements to being a “good” man were also present in his description of a good father. Good men and fathers were to be responsible, self-sufficient/self-reliant, and able to provide for their families. Providing for one’s family was primarily described in material and financial terms, though Shaun did make mention of the importance of sound advice and strong discipline. Being able to

provide for one's family requires employment, and legal work is most desirable though not always available. According to Shaun, educational achievement is the best way to secure such employment. This is what gave school much of its value in his eyes. It is one instance in which Shaun's experience reflects the contention that black males have accepted dominant ideals of hegemonic masculinity. Gray (1995) explains that "[t]he competencies and responsibilities of black heterosexual masculinity... are organized by allegiances to the existing regime of patriarchy, heterosexuality, and gender relations" (p. 403). Shaun's description of a good man and father illustrates an adherence to dominant norms and values. Meanwhile, the potential for Black men and fathers to enact this masculinity has been limited due to restricted access to institutional power, specific types of employment and education (MacLeod, 2004; Majors, 1990). A more thorough discussion of Shaun's attitudes about education follows. As previously mentioned, Shaun's own biological father was absent in his own life. He described him as a "deadbeat" that he could never count on. This relationship, or lack thereof, provided Shaun with motivation to be the father that he never had. Despite this absence, Shaun cited various other male role models from which he learned life's lessons.

Shaun did not see any difference in what it meant to be a man based on race. "We all go through the same stuff." Some of the "stuff" he described, however, is specific to certain demographics. Not all young men have to overcome run-ins with the police and resisting the fast money of narcotic sale. Yet these are some of the challenges that men must face, according to my informant. This speaks to the importance of context in identity development, as proposed in Grotevant's process model (1987).

Previous research has identified lack of employment opportunities as a key source of challenges in the lives of black men in low-income communities (Boyd, 2007; MacLeod, 2004; Fine & Weis, 1998). Shaun provides an example of someone “forced” to traffic drugs on the street level. Challenges around employment have additional implications for men with children. Research by Sarkisian (2007) and Jordan-Zachary (2009) explains that lack of financial resources commonly result in familial disengagement and lowered levels of parental involvement for low-income men. Shaun’s reports of problems with the police are not unusual. “The police harass residents, particularly men, who live in poor central city areas, and they do so armed in part with the discursive construction of the black male as criminal, thief, and drug dealer” (Fine & Weis, 1998, p. 35). With race and class in America being so intertwined, it is difficult to tease apart aspects of Shaun’s experience that might be unique to him as a Black man or particular to living in a low-income urban community – or both. MacLeod (2004) explains, in his investigation of low-income urban males, “[R]ace and class (along with gender) are interwoven in variable patterns, and the resultant geometry is complex. Class and race work simultaneously, and each can magnify or mitigate the effects of the other” (p. 248).

This is further illustrated in Shaun’s description of schools in more affluent communities in comparison to his own. In his mind, suburban and private schools have more to offer their students in the way of after school activities and opportunities such as tutoring. In the previous academic year, Shaun’s school district lost over thirty students to gun violence in neighborhoods like his.

You ain't never heard about that in no suburbs... Say if somebody from the east side [of the city] move to the suburbs and start messing up, that would be the only way that that school would be bad.

*The Journey to Manhood*

At one point, Shaun informed me that he had been through significant events that were his 'steps' to manhood. These events, and his interpretation of them, are very telling of what he believes manhood to be and what a man should look like. The first of these steps was the conception of his daughter, which can be interpreted several ways. It could literally be taken to mean that virility equals manhood – men make babies. However, the statement that followed says a lot too – “My mama told me I'm on my own.” His mother and her declaration that he was to deal with the situation on his own pushed him closer to being a man. Shaun's second step into manhood was marked by the period in time when his daughter came to live with him for three months because her mother was ill. This was an experience that he believed made him unique among teen dads, and he spoke about it with great pride. Admitting that he'd had the help of his own mother, he expressed that acting as sole caregiver for this time helped him mature as a father and grow closer to his child. The third step towards his becoming a man happened more recently as Shaun struggled to adjust to the personal responsibility required to be successful in college. A professor told him that his success in class “is really up to me because he can't force me to come to school or do anything... if I just wanted to sit down and do nothing, he won't say a word to me, just mark the grade.” Shaun previously described some aspects of his former high school experience as being supportive, and in hindsight he appreciated this support.

As Shaun shared the stories of these events – these steps – he almost made them sound like rites of passage. These events are bound by messages of independence and responsibility – characteristics that are prominent in this young dad’s conception of fatherhood. Interesting connections can be drawn here between Shaun’s steps and traditional stage models of identity formation. He is describing his maturation in much the same way as researchers such as Erickson (1968). Identity development is interpreted as a series of steps and milestones. The “steps” Shaun describes may not be what theorists of the past had in mind, but they share a similar chronological quality. I am not sure whether or not Shaun believes that his journey to manhood is complete or if he is only on his way. It is quite possible that a year from now, he could have added a few steps. In any case, his becoming a man was communicated in a linear fashion, indicating progress and lessons learned along the way.

### **Central Role of Others**

Consistent with human ecology theory, Shaun sees himself as being just one person in a world much larger than himself and as a member of a community of which he is critical. Individuals are the smallest unit within this systems theory. One’s microsystem is the most basic environmental level. “It includes the setting for a child’s behavior and the activities, participants, and roles in that setting (e.g., home with parents, home with siblings, school, and neighborhood with peers)” (Harris & Graham, 2007, p.33). He tells the story of his own maturity as a series of personal experiences and independent realizations or lessons learned. Yet at the same time, the role of others within his microsystem emerged as a theme from the data.

*Positive Motivators*

Most prominently, his mother and adults in his educational life seemed to act as positive motivators in Shaun's life. Being the oldest of three boys being raised by a single mother, Shaun was bestowed with big responsibilities at a young age. He saw himself as being the "man of the house" and claims to have been under pressure to set a good example for his younger brothers. Feeling overwhelmed while attempting to fulfill the role of an absent father is common among teenaged black males (Bush, 2000).

Shaun's mother, a teacher, had high hopes for her sons' education, but her actual level of involvement in their education is unclear.

Despite having told Shaun that he was "on his own" to raise his child, my informant's mother was repeatedly mentioned as a source of love, support, advice and financial assistance as the young man learned to become a father. Shaun valued his relationship with his mother and considers them to be quite close, although he knows that some of his life choices have disappointed her. He wants to make her proud. This relationship is consistent with the limited literature on black single mother/son relationships. This concept of the loving mother is coupled with claims of the detrimental effects of female-headed households. Among these effects are higher rates of poverty, academic disengagement, and delinquency (Bush, 2000). Randolph (1995, as cited in Bush, 2000) suggests that these may be attributed to lack of a second income resulting in poverty, not the lack of an adult male in the home. In any case, with roughly half of Black households with children being headed by women (Bush, 2000), the role of mothers in the lives of their children is an important one.

This young dad also made repeated references to adults from his high school that set high expectations for him. A football coach that instilled values of teamwork, a teacher that challenged her students not to fail and a disciplinarian that truly treated students like young adults – these are among the adults that left an impression on Shaun. Amidst peers who he perceived as immature or “going nowhere,” Shaun heard messages to strive to be his best and assume responsibility for all of his actions. He also heard messages that were more implied. First, he had gotten the message that girls are smarter and more mature than boys. As a result, teachers hold them to higher expectations. Second,

[Teachers] really didn’t put much time into the ones that didn’t want to have nothing good in their life. You know, the ones that come to school to throw paper balls, run around in the hallway, starting fights and stuff.

He admitted falling victim to peer pressure – “Sometimes you gotta do things you don’t wanna do to fit in.” Expressing regret for not living up to the expectations of these adults in his life, Shaun felt that he really missed out on important events, such as senior prom and walking across the school’s stage in cap and gown. “Looking back, I know I coulda passed.”

*In comparison to others*

Going into the research, I expected to find that Shaun’s life experiences had caused him to be and feel “othered,” in contrast to dominant group norms and ideals. In exploring the data, I found that Shaun’s perceptions of his peers and others in his life were instrumental in his perception of himself, but these comparisons were not race-based. He consistently described himself in opposition to his peers. He saw himself as making better decisions and as a better father than those of his friends with children. He



told elaborate stories of his friends in compromising positions with the police for example. He'd end the story by saying that he knows better or is too smart to end up in such situations.

What is interesting here is that I have known Shaun, through his own admission, to have been involved in many of the same illegal activities as these other young men. Perhaps he was in fact "smart" enough to have left those activities in his past. To this decision he credits the birth of his child.

My daughter... That's why I had to leave the street life alone – it only takes that one time to be in the wrong place at the wrong time... I just can't leave my daughter out here with her mother.

Shaun's perception of other teen fathers and his own child's mother provide a foil against which he creates his own identity as success as a parent. He sees himself as a good father who does "whatever it takes," stressing that the young parents provided their child with diapers and formula with the assistance of public aid. He is not the deadbeat that his father was. He did not agree with some of the choices that his child's mother was making and did not believe that she always prioritized their child. There was a period of time when she was not working or going to school. He also claimed that she parties too much and spends nights away from their daughter. In comparison to her actions, he looks like the better, more responsible parent.

Shaun views the individuals in his life as positive or negative and partially defines himself based on these binaries. These are not explicitly racial, yet much of what he identified as undesirable is consistent with the stereotypical black male. He has defined himself in opposition to the absent father, the drop-out, the criminal, the unemployed. In his daily life, Shaun is presented with various representations of Black men, such as those

previously described. He has made decisions, in his life and in his conversations with me, that contradict those representations. Gray (1995) has written about such decisions by Black men. He maintains that even as many Black men adopt dominant notions of masculinity, throughout history they have also challenged stereotypes of what it means to be a *Black* man. In doing so, they seek to create an image that they want to own, instead of the one that society has prescribed for them.

### **Educational Past and Present**

Lannegrand-Willems and Bosma (2006) and other researchers in the field tell us that school is one of the primary sites of identity development for adolescents. We often assume that schools are places in which young people are universally valued, encouraged and supported, both academically and as well rounded individuals. Students are expected to leave school subscribing to a certain set of values and norms. So, what can be made of an academic history like Shaun's?

His education experience is not uncommon among teen dads in that he chose to leave the traditional educational system. It is also not uncommon for young black men in general. When we first began our talks in 2008, Shaun was a struggling high school senior, facing the possibility of not graduating with his class and participating in senior traditions, such as prom. He was considering the options of attending summer school or possibly repeating his entire senior year. Ultimately, he chose to drop out. When we reconnected for the purposes of this research, he continued the story of his educational journey where we'd left off. He took me through the series of events that lead him to his high school diploma and his current status as college student.

‘Cause I, I felt that if it woulda took me a long time, I probably woulda gave up. So, I just started looking and asking around, like, ‘what’s the easiest way to get a high school diploma?’ Then my cousin, his mother put me on this place called... That’s the place I bought the test from... I took the tests, past ‘em, all the courses, and they gave me my high school diploma.

To him, education was important, not necessarily for its inherent value or a deep desire to learn, but because he believed that the more advanced degree one has, the more money and wealth are available to them. In turn, the more one can provide for their family. Bulman (2007) explains that the belief that academic success is the key to wealth and opportunity is a very middle-class ideal in the United States. Shaun’s perceptions of education reflect his adaptation to more dominant ideals within his larger ecosystem.

Lareau and Horvat (1999) found that the value that many Black families may ascribe to school often contradicts their experiences or their levels of involvement and success. For a variety of reasons related to cultural capital and access, race has the power to shape key interactions students and their families have with the school system (Lareau and Horvat, 1999). Lacking capital in these interactions, such as parent/teacher communication, has the potential to negatively impact the educational experience and ultimate success of a student. There are many contradictions to be noted between the way Shaun says he feels about school in general and his personal education and experiences. Most of the ideas that he verbalized about education are consistent with middle class standards and ideals. According to Shaun, school is expected to be hard work; good students are dedicated, obedient and compliant. One’s education is something that can never be taken away.

He repeatedly expressed a belief that education is a pathway to great opportunities and success. He defined success as both social status and financial wealth, with the latter being more prominent. Success also means a chance at upward mobility - an opportunity to leave the street life behind and move “out the ‘hood.” Once again Shaun reflects dominant norms (Bulman, 2002) and his macrosystem. The idea that anyone can “make it” if they try and work hard enough is a common discourse as individuals, or groups, negotiate their lives and attempt to make sense of their situations (Fine & Weis, 1998). The historical acceptance of this ideology runs deep in the black community.

In the face of American society telling African Americans that they could *not* do certain things, *not* actualize the American Dream, an oppositional culture developed wherein blacks were told within the community that they *could* do a great many things, irrespective of dominant ideology about blacks (p. 67).

A closer look provided evidence that Shaun either had not completely bought into these ideas or that they were not consistent with his experience and reality. Despite all of the opportunity that school offers, Shaun reported being disengaged from school for most of his life. Besides a short stint on the football team, he was uninvolved in extracurricular activities. He maintained that it is best to stay disconnected from the social happenings at school. As a slightly below average student, this eventually led to his total academic disengagement. He did not see school as a place to mature and learn. Instead, Shaun considered school to be “something to do,” a place where he could find friends and free hot meals. It kept him out of trouble in the streets, though he managed to find other kinds of trouble in the classroom. He claimed to have eventually grown bored with the immaturity of his peers, particularly after the birth of his child. If academic success was

of any importance before he became a father, going through the day-to-day motions of being a “regular” high school student became an even lower priority for Shaun.

This academic experience is notable for several reasons. First, it contradicts mainstream notions about the importance of school in a young person’s life. School may have helped shape Shaun’s self-image and development, but not in the ways we might expect. Instead of being a focal point in Shaun’s young life, school has been a space, among several others in his microsystem. School exists alongside his neighborhood and homelife. It is possible that school is the least influential of these.

While many may feel that it is unfortunate that Shaun’s traditional education was one of disengagement that ultimately ended with him dropping out of public school, it is not uncommon. In fact, Noguera has written extensively about the regularity of such academic experiences for young Black men. Additionally, Shaun spent all of his public school years within a district with a high school drop out rate above 40% for all students and above 50% for Black males (Chicago Public Schools, 2010), far from uncommon, but no less disappointing.

### **Option Weighing**

#### *Control v. Powerlessness*

When Shaun is making decisions about his life, his education, his daughter, it seems that he is really considering options based on his perceived level of control. The process model of identity formation and human ecology theory prioritize one’s context. People in general, but especially youth, live within contexts that are largely beyond their control. Without explicitly saying so, my informant understands this as well, and seems

to make decisions accordingly. His context, as a young Black man, under 21, in a low income urban community, a student, father and dependent son of a single mother have seemingly decided a lot of things for him. At times during out conversations, he used strong language to talk about things within his power. At other times, he credits circumstances to forces and factors beyond his control.

The following table displays these sentiments as they appear in the data. Note that the number of items in one column doubles that in the other.

**Shaun’s Perceived Control v. Powerlessness**

<b>Situations Within Shaun’s Control</b>	<b>Situations Beyond Shaun’s Control</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not being/becoming like his father</li> <li>• Instilling particular values in his daughter</li> <li>• Being a role model to his younger brothers</li> <li>• Level of involvement in his daughter’s life</li> <li>• Poor decisions that have impacted in present and future</li> <li>• Deciding to go back to school and taking the necessary steps</li> <li>• “Forcing” daughter’s mother to find work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being “forced” to sell cocaine</li> <li>• Stressed in his life</li> <li>• God blessing him with a job</li> <li>• Potential of being “tied up” in court ordered child support</li> <li>• Peer pressure and involvement in the street life</li> <li>• Need to stay geographically close to his mother</li> <li>• Missing school and special events in order to care for daughter</li> <li>• Getting written up or fired at work</li> <li>• “Sold soul” to provide for child</li> <li>• The pregnancy</li> <li>• Life/the world are uncertain</li> <li>• God and prayer got him out of jail</li> <li>• Hardship and struggle are inevitable</li> <li>• Negative interactions with police in the community</li> </ul>

Shaun presents himself as confident, in control of his life and future, making statements such as “You gotta be in control of every operation you put yourself into.” Yet he constantly acknowledged and alluded to the fact that he is part of a larger context.

Additionally, some of these sentiments are at odds with one another. For example, Shaun feels in control of the level of involvement in his daughter's life. Simultaneously, he doesn't feel in control of whether or not the courts will mediate this relationship. One could argue that several of the items listed as "Beyond Shaun's Control", like succumbing to peer pressure and selling drugs, are entirely in his hands.

Fine and Weis (1998) landed on something similar while conducting research among a group of urban black men as they spoke about their education.

With the systemic critique floating among black men, it is absolutely striking that not one black man holds the school accountable for his (failed) interaction with it. It is always, in the final analysis, the fault of the individual man if he went astray from the school system (p. 69).

Along similar lines, Shaun has identified "mistakes" in his past. These range from early parenting, to selling drugs and dropping out of school. Yet one thing that is so striking when speaking to him is his insistence on assuming personal responsibility – even when talking about things that he recognized as being beyond his control. It is true that he has made individual personal choices that have shaped his past. However, he almost seems unwilling to acknowledge any structural factors that may have limited his options to begin with. This data suggests that Shaun works to negotiate opportunities to exercise agency in his own life and assume responsibility, all the while being constrained by things he perceives to be inevitable. Such perceptions are among the individual characteristics that the process model acknowledges as shaping the identity of a young person. In the face of a society that sees him as a threat, drop-out or failure, Shaun is struggling to contradict the stereotype. In other words, as he describes his life to me, and

in part by actions that are sometimes at odds with one another, Shaun attempts to construct himself as a success.

*Imagining and Planning for the Future*

This young father prioritized his daughter as he envisioned his future. He was thinking about where she'd begin elementary school and the individual she was becoming. Research suggests that the parental involvement of teen fathers in the lives of their children declines over time (NRFC, 2007). At the time of this research, Shaun's relationship with his daughter's mother was quite strained, and he was not being allowed to see the child. It had been three weeks at the time of our last interview, and he was pretty distraught over the situation. Nonetheless, when prompted to imagine his future, he saw his child and her mother playing prominent roles.

In our conversations, Shaun expressed a desire to continue his education. Looking ahead, Shaun hoped to be able to secure a job working with electronics and computers once he earned his degree. To him, this type of job would ensure financial stability for himself and his family. To be truly independent, he'd also have to move out of his mother's home, but expressed a need to have her nearby. He saw himself as working toward a better quality of life and remaining a resident of his current community was not an option.

He expressed plans to move "far, far away," by which he meant one state to the east. The crime and schools in his community are not acceptable for his child. He perceives himself to be a better parent than the child's mother and even mentioned the possibility of obtaining full custody one day. When I asked if this would be his ideal, he says no. If he could have it his way, the three of them would live together as a family.



“If she was a different kind of girl, I’d probably marry her.” He doesn’t see this as being a possibility now though, due to the current stress and complications of their relationship. He expresses his aspirations in terms closely related to class, and socioeconomic status plays a role in group stratification among African Americans (Lemelle, 2001). He never says that he wants to live in a white community, but in one that has better schools and is without drugs and gangs. He wants his daughter to be raised lovingly by both of her parents. He wants a happy marriage and to own a home. He wants a job that would provide him with the money and time to take his daughter on vacation. These are dreams associated with life among the middle class.

## Conclusion

From our very first interview in 2008, Shaun always struck me as someone who was very sure of himself. I often found myself wondering how a person so young could be so sure about “who he is” – his identity – and life’s complexities that people decades older struggle with. I now realize that in spite of his confidence, he has acknowledged that this identity is not fixed.

Consistent with Grotevant’s process model (1987) and human ecology theory, Shaun’s life is significantly shaped by factors outside of himself. It is important to remember that these factors include social and cultural circumstances that have the odds stacked against him. They include experiences that are unique to people living in communities like his. Many of them are common to people who lack the cultural capital to gain access to the jobs and education valued by the dominant members of our society.

Shaun also acknowledges that life is a process. Who he is has been shaped by a variety of experiences and the influence and assistance of others. Grotevant (1987) maintains that the expectations of teachers along with parents and peers may provide incentives for adolescents making life decisions. These “expectations may influence students’ future achievement through the process of self-fulfilling prophecy” (Tenebaum & Ruck, 2007, p. 254). McLaren (1989), Noguera (2008) and others remind us that as black males, these expectations may be different for young men like Shaun. Stereotypes can hinder the high aspirations of others. The need to prove one’s manhood in urban America may trump academic discipline and success.

Considering the complex lives of young Black fathers, which are described in this work, these young men may be faced with competing expectations on a daily basis. This

research does not put forth definitive answers about identity formation in Black teen fathers, or how it impacts their educational futures. However, my findings highlight the reality of competing expectations and offer insights into the complex lives of young men like Shaun.

Shaun is writing a counter-narrative, which is not consistent with the most prevalent images, stereotypes and statistics surrounding Black males. In describing himself as a legally employed, responsible and involved parent, and focused on education, he is challenging the dominant representations of the young Black man and father. How he perceives himself and the experiences for which he credits his past and present matter. Furthermore, the position in which he feels himself to be situated has implications for his future. As Fine and Weis (1998) explain

[W]here people locate critique, that is, where they place blame and responsibility for tough times bears serious consequence for how they conceptualize remedy, if they can imagine alternative possibilities for themselves and their children, and whether they see themselves as potential activists engaged for social change (p. 19).

Shaun's life seeks to maintain a unique balancing act. He has acknowledged and attempted to assume a certain level of responsibility as a father. In his quest to fulfill this responsibility, as well as his other roles as student, son, young man, and African American, he is pulled in various directions. This space he's trying to negotiate, this mesosystem, is in flux with shifting perceptions and levels of control. These varying domains of Shaun's identity are interdependent, and have shaped what he believed it means to be a man, father, and the conflicting ways that he has prioritized his education.

It is the responsibility of educators and other adults who work with these young men to understand these complexities and support them during this critical developmental

time in their lives. This work takes a small step towards providing a voice to these young men who are often invisible among us. In communities like Shaun's, programs to support young mothers are often available. Programs geared towards young Black fathers may focus on job training or other post-secondary options (Anthony and Smith, 2004; Parra-Cardona, Sharp and Wampler, 2008). However, this research reflects a need for programs to help teen parents – not just mothers – become good parents, strengthen relationships and cope with the stresses of their lives as they strive to be students, parents, partners and well-adjusted adults and negotiate all of their roles simultaneously.

Schools have an opportunity to step in and provide various forms of support to parenting students, both male and female. Teen fathers are largely invisible in our schools. If they work to identify young dads and develop support programs like the ones described by Anthony and Smith (2004), we may see increased involvement of these young men in the lives of their children. Schools and teachers are in a better position to serve their students when they have a more complete picture of their lives outside of the classroom and beyond the normal school day. In schools where parenting rates are high, mentorship groups or programs could be beneficial. Fathers who have managed to reconcile the demands of school, work and parenthood can help others navigate the way. Schools often refer students and their families to a variety of resources and services when the need is apparent. This research helps to make the needs of these young men evident.

Additionally, this research highlights the need for more longitudinal studies of adolescent fathers. In the short two years that I worked with Shaun, a lot had happened in his life that impacted his relationship with his daughter and her mother, as well as his educational journey. Only time will tell whether or not he will remain an involved parent

in the young girl's life or if he will reflect suggestions in the current research that they will grow apart. We must know more about why and when these relationships change to support fathers like Shaun.

## Endnotes

1. In this research, I use the term Black in referring to American born people of African decent. Here the term is used interchangeably with the term African American. It is not intended to include individuals who have immigrated from Africa or countries with African descendants among their populations.
2. Human ecology theory considers a variety of concepts simultaneously. According to Bubolz and Sontag (1993), an individual is first considered as belonging to a family ecosystem with diverse characteristics, such as structure and ethnic origin. The family and individual interact with diverse environments (natural/physical, human-made and social-cultural) and adapt in order to reach outcomes, primarily quality of life and environment. Ideally, if these outcomes are reached human betterment and environmental stewardship is achieved.

## **Appendix A – Information Sheet**

### **INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDY**

#### The Impacts of Black Masculinity on the Education and Parental Involvement of African American Teen Fathers

You are being asked to participate in a research study being conducted by Milissa McClaire, a graduate student at DePaul University as a requirement to obtain her Masters degree. This research is being supervised by my faculty advisor, Dr. Amira Proweller. I am asking you because I am trying to learn more about your education and parenting role as an African American teen father. This study will take about 8 hours of your time, to be spread over several months. If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to complete 5 interviews, each 1 hour in length. 3 additional hours will involve our working together exploring the Masculinity Project website. The interviews will include questions about your educational experiences and your ideas about manhood/fatherhood. You can choose not to participate. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to participate or change your mind later.

If you have questions about this study, please contact Milissa McClaire at (773)684-2836 or [mrmcclaire@cps.edu](mailto:mrmcclaire@cps.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact Susan Loess-Perez, DePaul University's Director of Research Protections at 312-362-7593 or by email at [sloesspe@depaul.edu](mailto:sloesspe@depaul.edu).

***You may keep this information for your records.***

## **Appendix B – Interview Protocol**

**Thank respondent for his time. Assure him of confidentiality**

### **Educational Background/School & Community**

Can you tell me about school? How are your classes going?

How are your grades this year?

What about attendance?

What are your plans for school? Do you think you'll finish up this year?

How would you describe your high school?

What are the kids like? The teachers?

Are there any adults at school that you have strong relationships with?

Ask for elaboration based on response.

How did these relationships develop? What makes them different?

What expectations do you think the adults in school have for you?

Ask for elaboration.

Are these expectations realistic?

Does it matter if a teacher or adult in the building is a man or a woman?

How might that impact the way you get along?

When you think about your experiences in school, so you think boys and girls are treated differently?

Ask for elaboration based on response.

Do you think, in a school like yours, that the race of a teachers/administrators matters?

That's interesting. Can you tell me more about why/why not?

How would you describe your community?

Can you tell me more about it?

What do you think schools might be like in different kinds of neighborhoods?

Ask for elaboration – Where did you get that idea? Why do you think that may be?

### **Parenting & Relationships**

How is your daughter? How old is she now?

What is she like now that she's getting older?

How would you describe your relationship with her?

How are things going between you and her mom?

How often do you see Sonya and her mom? How many times in an average week?



What kinds of things do you do when you guys are together?

Has your relationship with your daughter or her mom changed as she's gotten older?  
Can you say more about that?

How would you describe yourself as a father?

How do you think your daughter's mother would describe you as a dad?

Is there anything that you think could make you a better father?

### **Race & Masculinity**

How do you identify racially?  
What does this mean to you?

Are there differences between what it means to be a black man, white man, Latino, etc?  
If yes, why do you think that is?  
Where do these differences come from?

Where/how do you think most people learn how to be a man?... A father?

Who did you learn from?

Did you have negative examples or fathers or men in your life? Did you have positive examples?  
Can you tell me more about these examples?

What kind of messages did you get in school about being a man?  
Who did these messages come from?  
How are young men expected to act in school?

What examples of black manhood do you see on television or in movies?

Can you give me some examples of black fathers that you've seen in the media?

How do you feel about these men and fathers on TV?  
How realistic do you think they are?

Who do you think young guys, your peers, are looking up to or modeling themselves after?  
Why do you think people look up to them?

What do you think about the examples of manhood that these "role models" set?

You said earlier that a good man is \_\_\_\_\_.  
Do these role models and celebrities that you mention match your definition?

### **Future/Goals**

What are you currently doing to make money?

What do you think you'll do when you're finished at GHS\*\*?

When you think about your future now, what does it look like?  
That's interesting... can you say more about that?

What role does school play in your future?

When you think about your future, does it include your daughter and her mother?  
What does it look like?

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*\*\* Acronym for respondent's high school, a pseudonym*

Would you like to add anything else?

**Thank Interviewee.**

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