

***CAPPING BACK: A GROUNDED THEORY ON AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENT MALES AND
EMOTIONAL SELF PROTECTION***

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DISSERTATION

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***CAPPING BACK: A GROUNDED THEORY ON AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENT
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An Abstract of a Dissertation

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the Faculty of the Graduate College of Social Work

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This qualitative study sought to generate a theory grounded in data to conceptualize the main concern of African American male adolescents about their educational experiences and how they resolve this main concern. There has been a proliferation of studies that attempted to address variables that are essential to the academic success of African American male adolescents. However, few of these studies have addressed the main concern that these adolescents have regarding their own educational experiences.

To discover the main concern of African American male adolescents and its resolution, adjusted conversational interviewing was used. A purposive sample consisted of 17 African American male adolescents. A theoretical sample consisted of 8 adults who were either African American male college students, parents of African American male adolescents or youth program workers.

A grounded theory analysis of the interviews revealed that the main concern was to protect self-worth and the freedom to explore authenticity when experiencing emotional vulnerability. Participants resolved this main concern by connecting with loved ones, friends, and supportive adults.

The main concern and its resolution resulted in the development of the theory, *Capping Back: A grounded theory on African American adolescent males' emotional self-protection*. Capping Back illustrates how participants, upon experiencing emotional vulnerability, are prompted to protect their self-worth and/or their freedom to develop authenticity. The subsequent protective responses are influenced by relationships with loved ones, friends and supportive adults. This theory holds practice and policy implications for Social Workers as well as educators who work with African American male adolescents.

Acknowledgements

I remember finishing my first assignment in the PhD program as a single person, only concerned with how this PhD would impact my life. Over the course of the program, I learned that this degree has more to do with others than it ever had to do with me. I learned that the heart of research is not in realizing how smart you can be and proving that to others. But the heart of research is discovering what make us human, how this connect us to others and how to recognize when others' rights to be human or threatened, and in some cases, taken away. Until I realized this, research was a very cumbersome and tedious obstacle that I was never able to conquer. I was seriously struggling with how I would be able to conduct a dissertation study that was authentic to my participants as well as true to my research philosophy. Then along came Susan Robbins! Susan, I thank you so much for being in my life at the point that I needed you the most. You supported in me making sure that this dissertation was as true to my research philosophy as it was to my participants' lives.

I'd also like to thank my committee members, Brene Brown and Sarah Narendorf. Thank you Brene for being an inspiring role model, coach, and rock star researcher. You have blazed a trail and opened the door for people like me to conduct authentic Social Work Research. Thank you for the countless hours you spent with me to make sure that we got this theory just right. Sarah, thank you for always being my cheerleader and my voice of reason throughout this whole process. I really appreciated having you there to point out areas that I missed, while at the same time, helping me to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

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support and enthusiasm. I also would like to thank the young men who participated in my study. You opened up to me about your lives, teaching me about social injustice, vulnerability and the need for connections that make all of us human.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Much has been written about the plight of the African American male, particularly in light of persistent systemic racism, discrimination, and other sociopolitical injustices. This discrimination and injustice has persisted throughout the history of the United States, with its roots originating in the era of slavery (Fultz and Brown, 2008; Majors & Billson, 1993). Today, the plight of the African American male is manifested through high rates of incarceration juxtaposed with low rates of educational attainment and limited occupational opportunities (Alexander, 2012; Fultz & Brown, 2008; Majors & Billson, 1993). Indeed, the subject has made a persistent presence not only in the academic literature, but also in mainstream society. This can be seen vividly in the recent cases involving the lethal shooting of unarmed African American teenagers Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown.

Though much has been written on the plight of African American males (Brown, 2011; Cokley & Moore, 2007; Davis, 2003; Harris, 2006; Harper & Davis, 2012; Howard, 2013; Noguera, 2003), there is still an incomplete picture of how discrimination and injustice impact the experiences of young African American males. Furthermore, there remains a gap in understanding the educational experiences of low-income African American males. Deepening our understanding of their perspectives and how they view and manage their educational experiences will help shed light on how teachers, families, and communities can better help these young African American males with issues that they consider to be important. Such a venture lends itself to the use of grounded theory methodology. Thus, the purpose of this study was to develop a theory, grounded in data that conceptualizes the main concern of low income African

American male adolescents regarding their experience in the formal education system and how they resolve this main concern.

Background and purpose

The academic achievement gap that exists between White youth and racial minority youth has dominated discussions on education in the United States. The discussion is particularly relevant when considering that in 2008, only 10.7% of all African Americans (16-24 years old) were enrolled in college, compared with 69.3% of all Whites (16-24 years old) (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Likewise, in 2009, of all males enrolled in college, whites constituted 63.8%, while African Americans constituted 11.8% (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). A similar pattern exists for females, with White women representing 61.2% of females enrolled in college and African American women representing only 16.1% (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). These data show that a gender difference also exists in educational attainment among African Americans, with more females enrolled in college than their male counterparts (Kurba, 2008).

These numbers have led many scholars to ask why there are so few African American males in college and many have attempted to discover variables that can describe this phenomenon (Cokley & Moore, 2007; Davis, 2003; Harris, 2006; Harper & Davis, 2012; Howard, 2013; Noguera, 2003). The results of many of these studies are limited by what Glaser (2009) would consider “*professional interest*” rather than from the perspectives of the students themselves (p.18). In other words, the main concern of African American males regarding their education usually is studied and presented within frameworks that impose predetermined variables that are of most interest to the researchers. While *professional interest* may be useful in creating

consistency in describing social problems and applying solutions, it also can be problematic. If we rely solely on *professional interest*, we neglect understanding what African American males define as their main concern in education and how they choose to resolve this concern. Having such knowledge can help provide a more authentic perspective of how African American males perceive their educational experiences. This knowledge also will lead to more authentic and effective solutions to those concerns.

This gap in knowing and understanding the perspective of African American males indicated the need for a grounded theory study that is based on African American males' own perspectives. Thus, the purpose of my dissertation was to discover the main concern of African American male adolescents in education and how they resolve this main concern.

Justification for Using Grounded Theory Method

Grounded theory (GT) has been described as “an inductive method that focuses on the experiences and perceptions of the participants” (Nathaniel, 2008, p.1). Others have described the method as both inductive and deductive. As Glaser (1978) noted, the GT study is initially inductive but becomes simultaneously inductive and deductive. GT becomes deductive in the sense that the inductive generation of ideas drives subsequent steps of GT such as theoretical sampling. One technique unique to grounded theory, theoretical sampling, involves a purposive sampling that is dictated by the emerging theory, and thus is considered deductive. As is the case in theory construction, development of a theory moves back and forth between inductive and deductive reasoning as the theory emerges (Chafetz 1978).

I believe that the use of GT was appropriate and necessary for this study for three reasons. First, no other methodology would have fulfilled the purpose of this study as well GT. This is so because the literature on African American males and education is lacking in theories

that are grounded in the experiences of African American males. The second reason is that GT is consistent with my personal belief about how research should be conducted. Thirdly this methodology is most appropriate for research in the field of social work, and I expand on this below.

Regarding the first reason, appropriateness of fit, Glaser (2009) advocated that GT studies are best conducted when there is scant existent literature related to the substantive area. At first glance, the subject of African American males in education seemed an unlikely candidate for a GT study due to the extensive literature available on this topic (Brown, 2011; Cokley & Moore, 2007; Davis, 2003; Harris, 2006; Harper & Davis, 2012; Howard, 2013; Noguera, 2003). However, Glaser (1978) advised that GT can be used in cases in which there is substantial research if one is willing to develop new skills in “reconceptualizing and reintegrating a field” (p.28). Glaser further discussed how GT can transcend the theories found in the existing literature while at the same time integrating them to advance the understanding of the subject. For example, one GT methodologist noted the rewards of applying GT in a field inundated by literature. Martin (2006) spoke of her experiences in conducting a GT study in her field of journalism. She noted that although there were numerous studies produced on a similar topic, she was able to present an innovative perspective to the field and to find elements that otherwise had gone unnoticed. Thus, although the amount of existing literature initially posed a challenge for me, I found the pursuit of a GT study to be useful in that it uncovered previously undetected processes that concern African American male adolescents regarding education.

In respect to the second and third reasons, I believe that GT methodology is amenable to my personal philosophy on research and is also consistent with social work values. When I first determined that the focus of my dissertation study would be low income African American male

adolescents in education, I was very hesitant to select variables for the study and to identify the problem. Although I felt compelled to do so to meet the requirements of quantitative research, I always felt that studying only select variables would limit the scope of data that the study would produce. Furthermore, I felt that imposing my professional interest on the participants would taint the process of getting to the root of participants' main concerns. Thus, I found myself gradually leaning toward GT methodology. Classic GT not only allows for, but requires that the theory emerges from the data itself without being driven by the researcher.

I realized how important GT methodology was to my personal research philosophy when I read an article from Glaser (2008) in which he described the experiences of the novice GT researcher. Glaser discussed his experience as a novice and detailed how he had fallen into the conventional methods of researcher-driven data collection. He had to realize that what he “thought was the main concern might really be a professional concern and not that of the participants” (p.12). Upon reading this, I also thought about how this methodology fits well with social work values. GT's requirement for the data to emerge from participants resonates with social work's concept of self-determination, one of the cornerstones of social work practice. This concept allows for the definition of a clients' problem to arise from the client without the practitioner imposing his or her own professional judgment (Freedberg, 1989). This notion seems very similar to GT's requirement that the identification and resolution of the main concern emerge from the participants, rather than the researcher. Thus, I believe that this methodology was very appropriate for a study within the field of social work.

Professional and Personal Relevance

The topic of this study is relevant to social work, especially social workers who interact professionally with low income African American male adolescents. This study provides such

professionals with a better understanding of the main concerns of African American males in regard to their education. Such an understanding provides implications for how this topic should be addressed with African American males and provide assistance as they resolve their main concern.

Both this topic and methodology are of professional interest to me and may be what Glaser (1978) referred to as a *life cycle interest*. The topic as a life cycle interest stems first from my previous work experience with a youth program. The program served mostly African American boys and girls between the ages of 6-18 with after school and summer programs. The goal of the program was to enhance the likelihood that the youth would become more engaged with their communities and improve school performance. Evaluation of this program showed that girls usually had better outcomes after completing the program than did the boys. In an effort to improve the program, I looked for research that would indicate ways that we could address the needs of boys more effectively. However, the literature seemed inconsistent and led to even more questions about how males think about their education and the factors that influence this thinking.

The topic of education and what it means to people who are engaged in the process is also relevant to me, as I also am a student. I often question my own concerns regarding my education. Thus, I was vested in learning how a group of African American male adolescents constructed their main concern about education and how they resolved this main concern.

Overview of Grounded Theory

I made the decision to use classic Glaserian GT after careful consideration of other variations of GT that are available. The essence of GT and how it should be pursued varies according to the school of thought. For example, Glaser and Strauss (1967) together wrote a

book to introduce GT methodology, *The discovery of Grounded Theory: strategies for qualitative research*. Ultimately, the two researchers developed divergent views as Strauss' version of GT changed while Glaser remained steadfast in using the traditional methods (Birk & Mills, 2011). Straussian GT offers more guidelines with specific techniques and strategies whereas Glaserian methods maintain the flexibility of the original method (McMillan, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Another evolution of GT came from Kathy Charmaz who embraced more of a constructivist approach in which the participant and the researcher together construct the reality of the substantive area (Birk & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006; McMillan, 2009). There are also a number of studies that have purported to be GT studies but lack the essence of true GT (Glaser, 2004). These studies may have used some GT terminology or techniques, yet the results are descriptive and not theoretical and therefore cannot be considered GT studies (Glaser, 2004). Importantly, the flexible methodology of Glaserian GT allows for data to emerge as opposed to being constructed or forced. This flexibility afforded me the opportunity to understand the main concerns of African American males about their education without bias or force.

Writing Style

I chose to write this GT study using the first person narrative. One of the benefits of using GT methodology is the mandate that the research be accessible to the participants. As has been noted since the early years of GT, the research must be written in plain English (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The first person narrative helps in meeting this goal. Also, as Lopez (2012) noted in her dissertation, the first person narrative helps to reflect the conversational style that was necessary for me to use when interviewing participants.

Dissertation Overview

This dissertation consists of five chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the subject of African American males in education and the purpose of this study. Additionally, the introduction provides an overview of grounded theory methodology and justification for its use in this study. Chapter 2 discusses the classic grounded theory methodology used in this study. I also provide details on the specific research process I used to collect and analyze data. The third chapter presents the main concern of the participants. In this chapter, I discuss the theory generated from the participants' main concern which I have titled *Capping Back: A Grounded Theory on African American Adolescent Males and Emotional Self Protection*. This chapter also discusses the qualities of properties associated with the theory. The fourth chapter is the literature review. In this section I will show how the theory Capping Back: A Grounded Theory on African American Adolescent Males and Emotional Self Protection reintegrates and reconceptualizes the field for understanding the experiences of young African American males and the basic social process of protecting self-worth and the freedom to explore authenticity. In chapter five, I will discuss the implications for social workers, educators and other professionals who work with African American male adolescents in schools and community based settings. I also will discuss implications for future research and policy.

Chapter 2

Methodology

Overview

The purpose of this study was to generate a theory grounded in data that conceptualizes the main concern of low income African American adolescent males about their experiences in education and how they resolve this main concern. The theory resulting from this study is:

Capping Back: A Grounded Theory on African American Adolescent Males and Emotional Self Protection. Classic grounded theory was the methodology used to generate this theory. Classic Grounded Theory (GT) has been described as the “systematic generating of theory from data, that itself is systematically obtained from social research” (p.2, Glaser, 1978). Although GT studies can use either quantitative or qualitative data, qualitative data are most commonly collected in GT (Glaser, 2004). Qualitative data were used in this study. However, I must emphasize the fact that the use of qualitative data in GT is different than that of Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA). The goal of QDA is to provide accurate descriptions of participants’ experiences (Glaser, 2004). In contrast, the purpose of this GT study was to conceptualize (not describe) participants’ experiences and to develop a theory that captures a basic social process. Before discussing the specific methods used, I will first discuss the concepts of *constant comparison* and *theoretical sensitivity* which are essential to the grounded theory process. Both theoretical sensitivity and constant comparison guide four other components of classic GT: theoretical sampling; coding; memoing; and sorting. Each of these essential methodological components is described in more detail below.

Constant Comparison

The systematic data collection and theory generating method of GT features a complex balance of inductive and deductive methods (Glaser, 1978). The initial stages of the GT study are inductive as themes begin to emerge. The intermediate and final phases become both inductive and deductive through the process of *constant comparison*. The constant comparison concept in GT is a balanced system that allows data to emerge while at the same time being verified. The process of constant comparison involves three steps (Glaser, 2004). The first step is comparing incidents in the data. After incident comparisons are saturated, concepts begin to emerge. Thus,

the second step involves comparing incidents to concepts. The third step involves comparing concepts to concepts.

The incidents and concepts being compared, of course, emerge from the data. In GT “all is data” (Glaser, 2004). The data in this study was collected from participants and, at later stages, from the existing literature. The constant comparison was conducted while, at the same time, I remained aware of theoretical sensitivity. *Theoretical sensitivity* is the ability to approach the data with an open mind, free from predetermined ideas.

Theoretical Sensitivity

A prerequisite for embarking on any GT study is theoretical sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity involves being open to what the data is trying to convey. In order to read the data accurately, the researcher must be able to suspend preconceived notions learned through personal experiences, professional experiences, and the existing literature (Glaser, 1978). This allows for the researcher to be *sensitive* to the data so that data can be collected and analyzed without the constraints of predetermined ideas.

This requirement was very challenging to address in this study, especially during the initial stages. However, I was able to manage it by using the following strategies. The first step in managing theoretical sensitivity was to remove the anxiety that I had about approaching this study from a grounded theory perspective. This was the first time that I conducted inductive research and there was the fear of not being able to conceptualize the main concern of participants. I knew that anxiety would keep me from being open to the theory that was emerging from the data. Once I decreased my levels of anxiety, the next strategy was avoiding literature that discussed variables that could possibly relate to African American males and studies related to the academic experiences of youth. This step was especially challenging due to the extensive

body of literature that can be found on both topics. This step was also essential because reading literature that specifically relates to the substantive area could have contributed to predetermined ideas about what should be found. This would have forced the data to fit into a theory. The study then would have been what Glaser refers to as a *verification* study in which I simply would be verifying what the existing literature suggested without adding new conceptualizations.

Although Glaser (1978) suggests that literature related to the specific substantive area being studied should be avoided, he does advocate reading the literature of other fields. In fact, he notes that becoming more familiar with literature in other fields, especially those that utilize a GT method, will enhance theoretical sensitivity. I followed this recommendation and read other grounded theories in fields such as journalism and nursing. I also read grounded theories from other social work studies. However, these studies concerned populations and substantive areas that were different from those in this current study. Reading the literature in other fields helped to promote my creativity. The other grounded theory studies also helped to alleviate my anxiety about using such an unconventional methodology.

Ethical Consideration

The initial research protocol for this study was approved by the University of Houston Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects on May 13, 2013. The protocol was revised in June 2014 to allow for an expanded theoretical sample. The revised protocol was approved in September 2014.

Since the initial sample involved minors, I had to collect an *Assent to participate* from the participants as well as a *parental/custodial consent to participate* from the participants' parent or guardian. The adults in the theoretical sample (parents, college students and youth program staff) completed a consent form. Each participant, and in the case of the adolescents, their parents,

were provided with a cover letter along with the consent form. The cover letter provided an overview of the study along with my contact information should the participants or participants' guardians have any question. The consent form also provided sample questions that would be asked during the interviews as well as a statement on confidentiality and voluntary participation.

The cover letters and forms were given to participants before the interview so that participants and participants' guardians would have time to review and decide whether they wanted to participate. Although the forms were given beforehand, I still read the consent forms to participants before the start of the interview and allowed time for their questions to be addressed before the start of the interview. I also ensured that participants understood what was being asked of them, especially the adolescent participants. I also assured participants that they were under no obligation to participate and that we could stop the interview at any time.

Since the study involved a sensitive group, adolescents, I also had to make accommodations to ensure their confidentiality and protection during the one-on-one interviews. I always interviewed the adolescents in a room at the youth program center in which we were conspicuous to the program staff at all times. Additionally, I was prepared in the event that sensitive topics arose during the interview that indicated potential harm for the participant. The youth program had a contract counselor who was available for student referrals had such topics arisen.

Data Collection

I conducted most of my research at a nonprofit agency's youth program. I began recruitment for the study in October 2013 to coincide with the start of the agency's afterschool program season. The first few interviews also occurred during October 2013. The last interview was completed in February 2015.

Table 1

Summary of the Sample

Purposive Sample	
Description	n
African American boys recruited from Fifth Ward Enrichment Program ages 13-15	17
Theoretical Sample	
Description	n
Staff who serve as site managers at the fifth ward enrichment program and have daily interaction with the boys.	4
Parents of boys who participate in the fifth ward enrichment program	2
College students recruited from East Harris County Youth Program and Prairie View A and M University.	2
Total n = 25	

Overview of initial sample. Grounded theory studies begin with an initial sample, typically the sample for whom we want to know the main concern. In the case of this study, the target population was African American male adolescents. Thus, my initial sample consisted of African American adolescents who were between the ages of 13-15 at the time of the interview.

Research setting for initial sample. This research mainly involved participants from a youth program at a nonprofit agency that serves middle and high school students in a low income area of a major metropolitan city. The mission of this nonprofit is to empower youth to become responsible adults and productive members of their society. Youth served by this agency are recruited from schools that are located within a 15 mile radius of the agency. The majority of these youth are African American and range in age from 12-19. The agency’s programming centers on activities that encourage leadership and positive youth development. The data for this study was collected at the agency’s main location during the afterschool program hours. The CEO of the agency provided a letter of support to represent the agency’s commitment to allow

me to use their facilities for data collection as well as to allow me to recruit study participants from their program.

Description of initial sample. The initial sample for this study consisted of 17 African American males from the youth program. These participants ranged in age from 13-15 at the time that they were interviewed and ranged in grade from 6th thru 8th. The participant recruitment excluded any students with mental or physical disabilities since these students may have special needs that would have skewed the responses. The initial number of participants was determined by saturation of the data. In fact, around interview number 13, I started to reach saturation and could predict the types of incidents that the youth would discuss in the interviews. However, I felt that the theory would have stronger support if I continued to interview as many participants as was reasonably possible.

Recruitment of initial sample. Youth for the initial sample were recruited for the study starting in October 2013 to coincide with the start of the afterschool program season. Before the start of the study and the submission of my research protocol to the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects, I consulted with the agency staff to work out a plan for recruiting participants. The staff noted that they often have difficulty relying on parents and youth to return forms unless an incentive is offered. Thus, I offered the participants a chance to win a \$50 gift card to Wal-Mart. I held a raffle using the names of the youth who returned their consent and assent forms, regardless of whether they ultimately participated in the interview.

A week before the start of the afterschool program, I was a guest speaker at the parent orientation meeting. At the meeting, I had a chance to introduce myself and the study. I also provided parents with copies of the consent forms and cover letters and answered any of their questions. Some of the parents signed the consent forms and returned them immediately. Other

parents agreed that if that were interested in having their child participate that they would return the forms with the child. The staff who worked directly with the youth also helped in the recruitment process. When the staff brought the youth home at the end of each day, they would remind the parents of the study and ask if they still would like to participate. I checked in with the staff periodically (usually once a week) to find out if they had received any new consent forms. When they did receive newly signed consent and assent forms, I would go to the afterschool program on the following day to interview the new participants.

Overall, it took almost a year and a half to complete the youth interviews. Three factors contributed to why the process took this amount of time. The first is that I had to rely on parents with busy schedules to remember to sign and return consent forms. I also had to rely on the youth to provide their parents with the consent forms and cover letters and then to return them. The second factor is that some of the participants had unpredictable attendance patterns with the afterschool program. Some of the participants, even though they had submitted consent and assent forms, were not at the program daily. The staff members sometimes had no way of predicting which days those participants would be present. Some participants also dropped out of the afterschool program entirely and we were no longer able to contact them. The third factor is that the afterschool program operates on a seasonal schedule. Typically, the program starts in October during the first semester of the school year. Subsequently, there is a month long break for winter holidays and a week for spring break. The agency also operates a summer program. However, the amount of activities that the youth engaged in during the summer program made scheduling additional activities such as interviews for this study not feasible.

Overview of theoretical sample. One of the deductive features of GT is theoretical sampling. Once my data analysis process had begun, substantive codes began to emerge and

indicated a potential theory. The data began to indicate where I should go next and whom I should interview (Glaser, 2004). Although the adolescent participants were very sincere in opening up about their lives, I started to realize that there was a chance that they were presenting a side of themselves to me that may be different from the selves that they present to their parents and also to the staff who work with them on a daily basis at the youth program. Thus, I knew that I had to verify the emerging theory with parents and staff members as a part of the theoretical sample. My first group for the theoretical sample was parents. Once I interviewed parents and compared their data with that of the adolescents, I began to interview staff. The third group of the theoretical sample was African American males who were currently enrolled in a junior college or 4 year college. I wanted to include African American male college students because of the unique perspective they offered. The college students were able to provide an analytic reflection of their past experiences as adolescents, meaning that they were able to provide more insight to their thoughts and behaviors during that period of their lives. For the most part, the data that I gathered from the theoretical sample supported the emerging theory about the main concern of adolescent males and how they choose to resolve this main concern. The data from the theoretical sample helped to refine the language that was used in the theory and to strengthen the support for the theory.

Recruitment of theoretical sample. The first group that I recruited and interviewed as a part of my theoretical sample was parents or guardians of African American male adolescents who were enrolled in either the afterschool or summer program at the nonprofit agency (n=2). I recruited parents at orientation meetings and through letters sent home with the boys. The parent sample consisted of one mother and one father who were parents of adolescent boys between the

ages of 12-15 who were not a part of the initial sample. One interview was completed over the phone while the other was completed at the main location of the youth program.

The second group that I recruited and interviewed was the staff who serve as site managers with the youth program and have daily interaction with the boys (n=4). The staff was already familiar with my study by the time it became clear from the data that they should be included as a theoretical sample. Thus, I only had to ask them to participate and they willingly did so. Most of the staff members were African American men who remembered what life was like when they were adolescents. Thus, they were able to offer a unique perspective by reflecting on their past selves. They also provided insight to the main concern of the youth with whom they worked on a daily basis. Interviews were completed onsite at the main location of the youth program.

The third theoretical sample group that I recruited was African American males currently enrolled in a two year or 4 year college program (n=2). Participants were recruited through another youth program that offers services similar to the nonprofit agency used for the initial sample, however with a slightly younger population (elementary school age). This agency offers afterschool and summer programs for low-income elementary school students. The majority of the afterschool and summer program staff are undergraduate students and are mostly African American or Latino. I coordinated with the senior director of operations to identify eligible participants. Eligible participants were identified through a pool of staff currently employed with the youth program and through former youth participants of the program. The senior director of operations spoke directly with the eligible participants about the study and provided them with my contact information. Interested participants contacted me and we completed the interviews at

locations that were convenient for them such as coffee shop or the community centers where they worked.

Interview protocol. The paramount feature of GT is being able to elicit the main concern and experience of clients. Given this fact, the ideal method of data collection in my study was the adjusted conversational interview. GT is not compatible with interviews that follow a guideline consisting of predetermined questions, as this would have tainted the initial stages of the methodology that are purely inductive.

Nonetheless, I had to select an icebreaker by which participants would realize that I was taking a genuine interest in their main concerns and would feel comfortable in speaking about it (Nathaniel, 2008). Thus, proponents of GT methodology advocate the use of the “spill question” for interviews. The spill question is one that can allow participants to feel comfortable and begin to “spill” their life story (Nathaniel, 2008). For each of my sample groups I developed a spill question. The spill question used with the initial sample of adolescent males was: “tell me something good/bad about school.” The question was modified for the theoretical sample of parents and was “tell me something that your son thinks is good/bad about school.” The spill question was very similar for the staff who worked with the adolescents. I simply replaced the word “son” with “boys with whom you work.” I took a slightly different approach in the spill question with the college students as the data indicated a need for their reflection on their past experience as an adolescent. Thus, the spill question for the college students was “Looking back on your life in middle school, what was your life like?”

Usually, the spill questions were enough to get the participants to begin opening up. In some cases, the adolescent participants at first could not think of a good or bad thing about school. Thus, I had to try different ways of phrasing the question such as “what do you look

forward to everyday at school?” or “if you could change something about school, what would it be?” Even if participants at first gave a one sentence response, I was able to get them to talk more about the idea presented in that sentence to initiate a more conversational interview style.

During the first few interviews I was very anxious because I was accustomed to conducting qualitative interviews that require the use of an interview guide. GT, on the other hand requires the use of free flowing conversation during interviews. Thus, I was very nervous about this new way of thinking about research and data collection. I feared that in just having a conversation with a participant that I would miss concepts that they were trying to convey. This anxiety was also heightened by the fact that Glaser (2008) advocates against the use of technology and software to collect data in classic GT. He suggests that technology functions as a “handicap” to the analyst. For instance, he argues that using a tape recorder will sway the researcher to focus on capturing each word spoken by the participants. Instead, the focus should be on conceptualizing the participants’ words. Thus, the only equipment I used for data collection and analysis was a pen and a notepad. During the first few interviews, I was still in my qualitative data analysis mindset. I hung onto every word spoken by the participant and tried to take notes that accurately captured every detail of every incident they discussed. However, as I reviewed those notes I realized that the copious note taking actually interfered with the process of connecting with the participants and learning to conceptualize and not simply describe what they were saying.

Within 24 hours of each interview, I typed an electronic memo based on the written notes that I had written as well as the mental notes that I developed while trying to conceptualize that participant’s main concern. By the fourth interview, I was able to better engage with the participants and focus on the concepts and feelings that they were trying to convey as opposed to

the details of the incidents. To ensure that I appropriately captured the concepts that participants were trying to convey, I engaged in the process of member checking. Through the member checking process, if I sensed that a participant was conveying a particular concept through his story, I would ask him whether or not that concept applied to his experience. The participant would then confirm that my assumption was true or untrue and would provide explanation.

Data Analysis

Coding procedures. Coding in GT involves the following types of codes and coding: open coding and substantive codes; theoretical coding; and selective coding. All forms of coding played a role in discovering the core variable. The core variable is what indicated the main concern of the participants and explained how the main concern is resolved (Glaser, 2004). The core variable in this study was connection with relationships that help the participants navigate emotional vulnerability they experience while trying to protect their self-worth and freedom to explore authenticity. This core variable occurred frequently within the data and was able to relate fully with the other data as is required by GT methodology (Glaser, 2004). The core variable was then used to generate the theory: *Capping Back: A Grounded Theory on African American Adolescent Males and Emotional Self Protection*.

Although I had a good idea of what the core variable was around the 13th interview, it took some time for me to delimit the core variable to the connecting relationships. The difficulty was really in first determining the main concern of the participants to protect self-worth and freedom to explore authenticity when experiencing emotional vulnerability. In order to clearly identify this main concern and the core variable for resolving the main concern in the data, I engaged in the following steps: 1. Open coding; 2. Theoretical sampling; 3. Theoretical coding; 4. Selective coding and delimiting.

Open coding. The initial step in GT analysis is open coding (Glaser, 1978). The goal of open coding is to develop categories for emerging data that are relevant for developing a theory that captures the main concern of participants (Glaser, 1978). I used open coding to code each interview within 24 hours. I analyzed the data line by line and coded the data into as many categories as was necessary.

Although the term *open coding* gives the impression of unsystematic coding, it actually is systematic and governed by a set of rules (Glaser, 1978). The first rule involves questions that I asked about the data. Those questions are as follow:

1. *What category does this incident indicate?*
 - a. *What category or property of a category does this data indicate?*
2. *What is actually happening in the data?*
 - a. *What is the basic social psychological process or social structural process that processes the problem to make life viable in the action scene?*
 - b. *What accounts for the basic problem and process?* (Glaser, 1978, p. 57)

The second rule involved coding each line of the data. This second rule is consistent with the assertion of Glaser and Strauss (1968) that “all is data.” In other words, each line of the data was coded and given an opportunity to contribute to the final theory.

The codes developed during the open coding stage are referred to as substantive codes because they conceptualized the substance of the data (Glaser, 2004). Once the substantive codes had been saturated and theory started to emerge, I identified the theoretical sample. Gathering and analyzing data from the theoretical sample indicated whether or not the substantive codes were ripe for developing selective codes or if more open coding was needed. This process continued until all of the data were able to fit into theoretical codes and the substantive coding was saturated.

Theoretical and selective coding. Once the substantive codes were saturated, theoretical codes began to emerge. Theoretical codes resulted from the process of comparing the substantive

codes. The theoretical code described the implicit relationships between the substantive codes (Glaser, 1978). Once theoretical and substantive codes were discovered and verified through constant comparison, the core variable emerged. Once the core variable emerged, I used the selective coding technique. The selective coding technique involved recoding the data, specifically looking for instances of the core variable.

Delimiting. Once the selective coding was in progress, I began to integrate a theory around the core variable. This integration required that I delimit the theory on two different levels (Glaser, 2004). The first level is the level of the theory and the second is the level of the categories. In terms of delimiting the theory, I began to remove irrelevant data and integrate the related data into the theory. This reduction of the theory then led me to delimit the categories. The categories were reduced to the core variable and only those variables that related to the core variable were included in the final theory.

Memoing. Constant comparison drives much of the tension in GT that allows for the data to emerge. Constant comparison is indeed a complicated process that was difficult to manage at times. Thus, the memoing technique is another essential component of GT that I used. Memos are sets of theoretical notes that I continuously made to help me track the ideas emerging from the data and to begin forming concepts surrounding the data. Like constant comparison, memoing was an ongoing activity in GT analysis. The notes formed through memoing were recorded separately from the coding. The memos forced me to consider the emerging concepts and theories to ensure that they fit, were relevant, and worked with the theory (Glaser, 2004). I continually challenged myself to move from a descriptive analysis of the incidents in my memos to conceptualizing the ideas contained in the incidents.

Sorting. The constant comparison and coding of the data leaves the data in a fractured state (Glaser, 2004). After completing the interviews with the adolescents, I started to feel overwhelmed by the amount of incidents and concepts that inundated my memos. This was so even though I had a hunch of what the main concern was for the participants. The idea that I had to piece together this data into an integrated theory was very daunting. However, the only way that the theory would come together was by sorting the theoretical memos. I did this by creating a separate document that contained a table with columns filled with concepts. I then created a bullet list of each incident found in my memos. Next, I took each bulleted incident and fit it into a concept on the table. I revised the table several times until I had a fit for what looked to be a substantive theory. Once I tested the substantive theory and made revisions based on meeting with my dissertation committee methodologist and data gleaned from the theoretical sample, I revised the table again by re-sorting the data into the final categories used in the theory. The methodologist of my committee, Brene Brown, was very instrumental during this process. For many months, I knew what the participants' main concern was and how they resolved it but I had difficulty finding the terms that best captured their concern and its resolution. I worked with Dr. Brown to ensure that the terms that I used in the theory such as self-worth, authenticity and emotional vulnerability, accurately conveyed the participants' main concern and their resolution.

Theoretical pacing. Constant comparison has been mentioned thus far as an integral part of most of the processes in GT. The simultaneous inductive and deductive tension created by constant comparison can lead to a never ending process. However, I could not rush the process along by forcing data to fit. To address this challenge, I followed Glaser's (1978) recommendations for a process referred to as *theoretical pacing*.

Theoretical pacing involves a combination self-pacing and creativity. Glaser (1978) suggests that enough time be allowed for sufficient data to emerge. At the same time, he cautions the researcher to be cognizant of when the data has been saturated and must be terminated. This was a difficult decision to make. Memoing and sorting helped me to determine when the data had reached saturation. However, it was still difficult to know when I should continue to collect more data. I then realized after sorting the memos, and having conversations with my committee members, that nothing new was emerging in my data and that I had sufficient data to generate a theory that works for conceptualizing the main concern of the African American adolescents in this study.

Theory Evaluation

Glaserian GT provided the most appropriate framework for carrying out this study of discovering the main concern of low income African American male adolescents and how they resolve this main concern. Through the inductive and deductive processes of GT, I developed a theory that conceptualizes the participants' main concern that at the same time meets quality research standards. Unlike qualitative descriptive analysis and forms of quantitative analysis, GT does not have set standards of reliability and validity. Instead, the results of GT are evaluated on the basis of whether the emergent theory can meet the following four requirements: 1. Fit; 2. Workability; 3. Relevance and 4. Modifiability (Glaser, 1978).

In terms of *fit*, the emergent theory was evaluated on the basis of whether or not it can account for the concepts and codes found in the data. This fit should not be forced upon the data, but should be allowed to emerge from the data. There were many times throughout the process that I felt that I was forcing the data to fit theories with which I was familiar. I was able to identify this flaw in my analysis by constantly checking for fit. Anytime it seemed as though I

had an emerging theory, I went back to every incident from every interview. Line by line, I compared the incidents with the tentative theory. If even one incident did not fit the theory, I knew that the theory was not an appropriate fit. I continued this process until I found the theory that fit each incident.

The term *workability* refers to the ability of the emergent theory to *work*. This means that the theory must be able to “explain what happened, describe what will happen and interpret what is happening” (Glaser, 1978, p. 4). Once I had developed a tentative theory, it was easy to see how that theory could meet two of the requirements of workability: explaining what happened and interpreting what is happening. The challenge was in figuring out whether that theory could predict what will happen. In this case, the theoretical sample and how I tailored my questions for this sample became important. I strategically structured some of my questions to see if the theory could predict the response of the participant. When the theory did predict their responses, I had even greater confidence that the theory was accurate.

In terms of *relevance*, the theory must be related to the core ideas in the study. Relevance is determined by whether or not the theory emerged from the data and whether it truly represents the perspective of the participants. I addressed this component very often during interviews. I always would check with participants to make sure that I understood them correctly. I also tried to conceptualize incidents during the interview. I then would ask participants if they felt that conceptualization captured the feelings and ideas that they were trying to express. *Modifiability* refers to the principle of the theory being able to change to fit further emergent data. The grounded theory, Capping Back, is definitely one that can be changed based on further emergent data. There are still many questions that I have and other researchers may have about

the origins of the participants' need to self-protect and if this self-protection is related to larger psychological and social concepts. Thus, this theory is one that can be modifiable.

In the following chapter, I discuss Capping Back in more detail. This discussion includes an in depth look at the properties of the participants' main concern which was specifically to protect their self-worth and freedom to explore authenticity and how this led to experiences with emotional vulnerability. I then delve into how the participants resolved their main concern by connecting with relationships that had the potential to help participants respond to emotional vulnerability in a way that affirmed their self-worth and preserved their freedom to explore their authenticity.

Chapter 3

A Grounded Theory on African American Adolescent Males and Emotional Self Protection

Overview of the Main Concern and Resolution

The adolescent participants in this study developmentally were in a phase in which they were discovering their identity. Even though participants did not have a fully developed concept of their identity, they felt protective of the self-worth attached to their emerging identities and expressed a desire to discover the authenticity embedded in these identities. Self-worth in this study is defined as how participants felt about their self-evaluation. Their self-evaluation included their perceptions of how others perceived them. The extent to which the participants had the freedom to develop and practice their authenticity also had an influence on their self-worth. Participants seemed to feel more self-worth when they felt unrestricted to engage in choices and activities that aided in the practice and discovery of authenticity. Authenticity, as it is used in this study, is an activation of identity (Hitlin, 2003) and involves activities and choices that are true to the self (Brown, 2010). It is important to note here that just as participants were

still in the process of sorting out their identities, they likewise were still in the process of discovering their authenticity.

All of the participants discussed being attracted to activities related to the development of their authenticity. These activities included those that fostered self-discovery; activities related to previously discovered interests; and activities that involved music. The participants specifically discussed music as a means of communicating and relieving stress, aiding in the development of authenticity.

Participants often felt that the activities that led to the discovery of authenticity were stifled due to bias in their schools, as well as injustice in the broader social environment. This triggered the participants' need to protect their freedom to develop authenticity. Furthermore, challenges to the freedom to develop authenticity, along with the processing of others' perceptions, prompted participants to protect their self-worth. More specifically, participants were protective when they experienced emotional vulnerability that challenged self-worth and the development of authenticity in academic, social and future visioning situations (how participants thought of themselves in the future). Emotional vulnerability used in this context refers to "uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure" (Brown, 2012). Therefore, the main concern of the adolescent participants in this study was to protect self-worth and the freedom to explore authenticity when experiencing emotional vulnerability in academic, social and future visioning situations.

Relationships with loved ones, friends, and supportive adults often influenced the participants' protective responses to emotional vulnerability. Indeed, relationships were an important factor in determining whether or not the participant would respond to emotional vulnerability in a way that made him more confident in his self-worth and authenticity.

Relationships also helped to facilitate the participants' engagement in certain activities that fostered the development of authenticity. The decision of the participants to connect with certain relationships was based on the potential of the relationship to help the participants navigate the emotional vulnerability they experienced. Thus, the participants resolved their main concern by connecting with loved ones, friends, and supportive adults.

Capping Back: A Grounded Theory on African American Adolescent Males' Emotional Self-Protection.

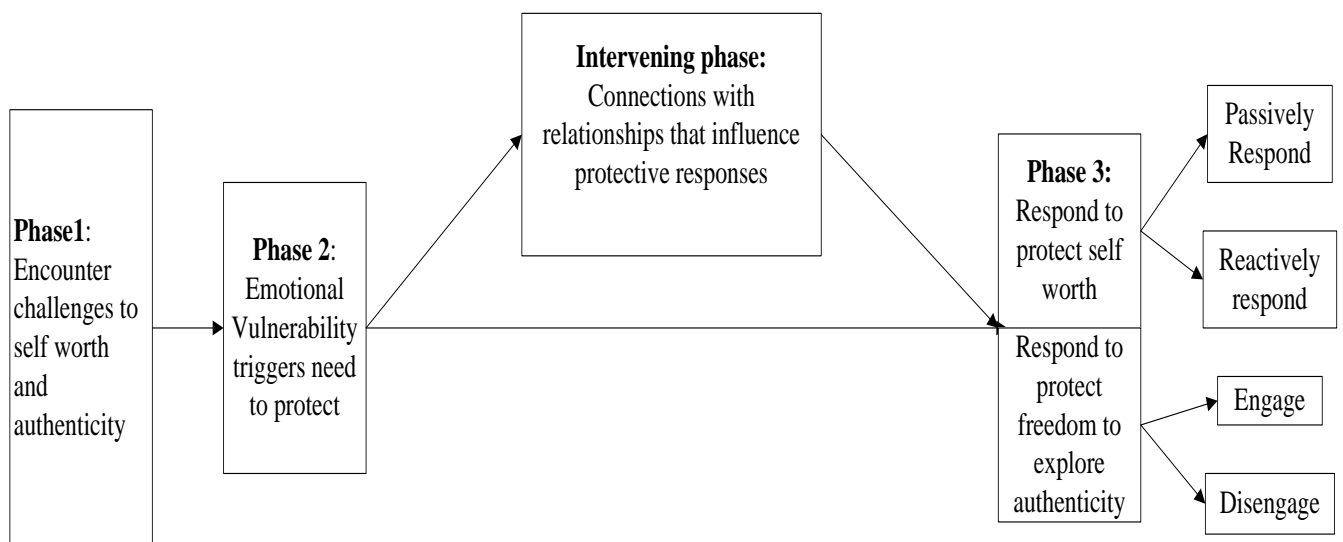
The main concern of the participants and its resolution are a basic social process that constitute the theory, Capping Back: A grounded theory on African American adolescent males' emotional self-protection. Capping Back illustrates how participants, upon experiencing emotional vulnerability, are prompted to protect their self-worth and/or their freedom to develop authenticity. The subsequent protective responses are influenced by relationships with loved ones, friends and supportive adults. The use of the phrase *capping back* in the title of the theory alludes to a phenomenon of the insult game called *capping* that the participants often referenced. During instances of capping, the participants were trying to find the cleverest one line phrase to insult a peer. The participant who is the recipient of the *cap*, then feels pressured to protect himself from the insult by *capping back*, with a more clever insult. This phenomenon is a metaphor for a larger psychological and social experience of the participants. They are constantly met with challenges to self-worth and the freedom to explore authenticity and feel the need to cap back, self-protect.

Phase one of the basic social process involves the participant encountering an academic, social or future visioning experience that challenges his self-worth or freedom to explore authenticity. Phase two illustrates how these challenges evoke emotional vulnerability in the

participants. The influence of relationship connections intervenes between phases two and three to help participants protectively respond to emotional vulnerability in a way that affirms their self-worth and preserves their freedom to explore authenticity. The following sections will describe each phase in more detail.

Figure 1

The basic social process of emotional self-protection



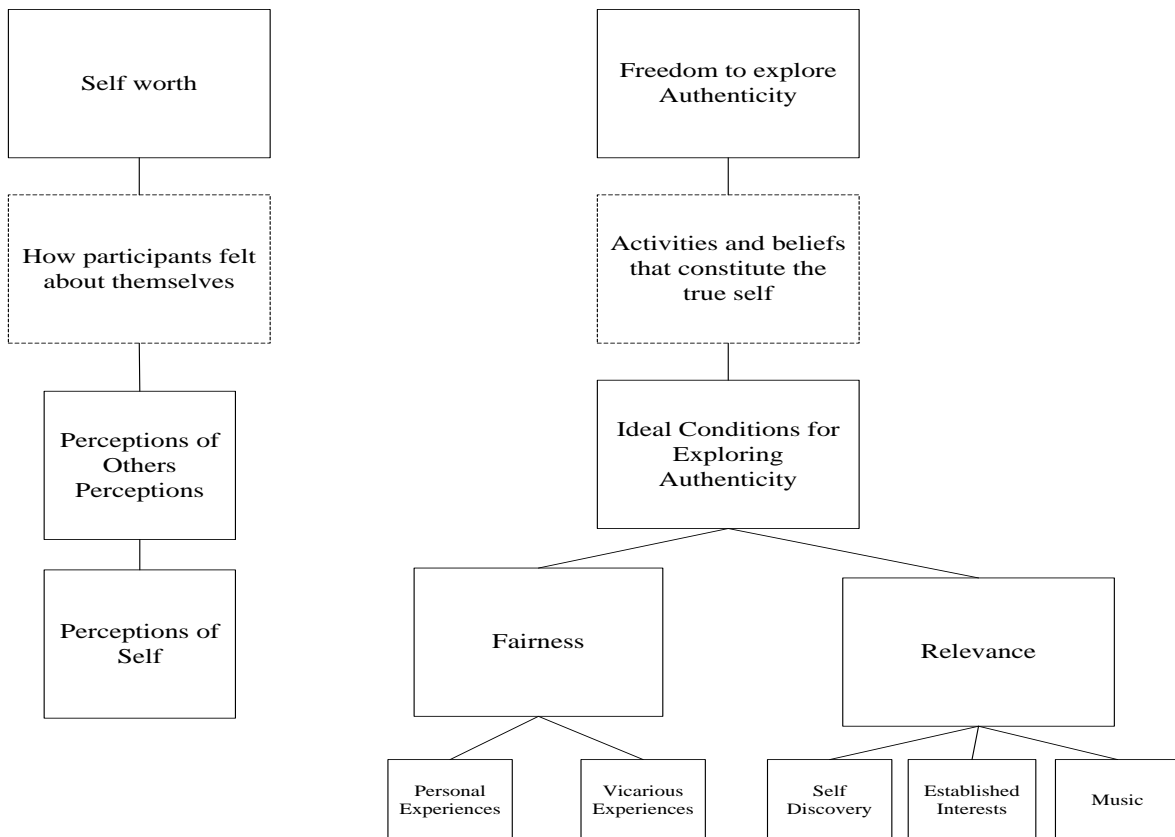
Phase one: Challenges to Self-Worth and Freedom to Explore Authenticity

During phase one of the basic social process, participants encountered challenges to self-worth and the freedom to explore authenticity. Self-worth and authenticity in this study are both thought of as products of identity. Originally, I thought that participants were mostly concerned about developing their identity. However, in reviewing the data several times and meeting with my committee, I realized that participants were not explicitly concerned with answering *who am I?* --a question that could be answered by identity. Rather, the participants were more concerned with answering “how do I feel about myself?” and “how can I explore more of what I think reflects my true self (for example, they were focused on finding activities that they enjoyed)?”

These questions are answered respectively, through examinations of self-worth and freedom to explore authenticity. Although participants were not explicitly concerned with identity, self-worth and authenticity are functions of identity. Self-worth concerns how the participants felt about themselves. Authenticity can be thought of as an activation of identity (Hitlin, 2003). Authenticity refers to the choice to engage in activities and behaviors that reflect the true self (Brown, 2010). This section provides more detailed discussion on self-worth and authenticity in the way that conceptualizes the main concern of participants. Additionally, I delineate the ideal conditions for exploring authenticity. This section will flow into phase two which provides more detail on how challenges to self-worth and freedom to explore authenticity elicit emotional vulnerability.

Figure 2

Phase one: Self-Worth and Freedom to Explore Authenticity



Self -worth. Self-worth was essential to the main concern because many of the participants discussed how their behavior was driven by the need to protect self-worth in situations that evoked emotional vulnerability. The use of the term self-worth in conveying the participants' main concern represents how the participants felt about themselves which, during this phase in their lives, was heavily influenced by their perceptions of what others thought of them. It's important to emphasize the affective origins of self-worth in discussing the participants' main concern. Although the participants were not always cognizant of the fact that they were protecting self-worth, they did acknowledge that emotions drove many of their protective behaviors. For example, there were many participants who admitted that they experienced uncontrollable anger in response to conflict situations in which they perceived their character was being attacked. These participants recounted that even when they "knew better" than to act on the anger (for example, by fighting), they could not seem to regulate their emotions during these conflicts. The participants often used the phrase "knew better" to refer to how they conjectured that those attacking their character were jealous or trying to get the participant in trouble. The phrase "knew better" also referred to the participants' knowing that uncontrollable emotions could lead to consequences such as school suspension.

More specific details on types of protective responses will be discussed in the section on phase three of the basic social process. Ultimately, however, depending on how participants were able to navigate experiences that challenged self-worth and evoked emotional vulnerability, protective responses either enhanced self-worth or prolonged the uncertainty of self-worth.

Authenticity. Authenticity, as used in the main concern, reflects the activities and beliefs that constitute the true self for participants. Many of the participants talked about the desire to learn more about themselves and also to define their own path in life as opposed to one that was

defined by others. However, they often felt that this search was quelled by unfair societal prejudices placed upon them as African American males. Indeed, the participants struggled with an overall concern of the bias against African American males in their schools and communities but also in the larger society. Specifically, however, their concerns about fairness emerged from personal experiences as well as vicarious experiences of other African American males with whom they identified. Aside from an assessment of the fairness of a situation, participants also were concerned with the relevance of the activities for developing authenticity. Relevant activities (a) promoted self-discovery, (b) involved established interests, and (c) music.

Thus, participants determined whether or not a situation was safe for developing authenticity based on fairness and relevance. When participants felt that the freedom to develop authenticity was at risk based on the presence or absence of ideal conditions, participants experienced emotional vulnerability and protectively responded by engaging or disengaging. Responses to protect freedom to explore authenticity also were influenced by relationships. Emotional vulnerability will be further explained in phase two and these protective responses in phase three. In this last section of phase one, I will expand on the concepts of fairness and relevance as characteristics of ideal conditions for developing authenticity.

Fairness. The adolescent participants all shared the fear that something unfair and beyond their control could happen that would diminish their authenticity. Usually, this fear was based on personal experiences or an experience of another African American male with whom they identified. Some of the participants recounted how they perceived that they had been pre-labeled by teachers as underperforming students or troublemakers. Because of this perception, the teachers would not give them a fair chance. This prejudice made the participants feel as though there was no point in engaging in school because they figured that there was little they

could do to change these perceptions. Some even struggled with wondering whether or not those perceptions reflected their authentic selves.

Aside from actual experiences with unfairness, participants also were impacted by experiences of other African American males. This was especially true when it came to highly publicized current and historic cases. Participants particularly were influenced by historic cases such as Emmett Till, the African American boy, who at the age of 14, the age of many of the participants, was brutally murdered by two white men in 1955. Coincidentally, while the data was being collected for this study, the deaths of unarmed, young African American males had re-emerged as a topic in mainstream media. A year before data collection began, Trayvon Martin had been fatally shot. His death sparked discussions about the targeting and killings of young, unarmed African American males. One participant recalled how Trayvon Martin's killing changed his relationship with his white friends. The participant noted that before the Trayvon Martin incident, he felt that he had good friends who were white. However, after the Trayvon Martin incident, his white friends began making jokes about the case. At this point, the participant said that he became more aware that he lived in a different world from his white friends. He began distancing himself from his white friends because he felt that they would never understand what it was like to deal with the injustices of being an African American male.

The participants felt that most of the unfairness they experienced and the injustice experienced by other African American males were attributable to the fact that society prejudices them based on their appearance and not on their character or their circumstances. The participants often mentioned that they did not have the freedom to explore their authenticity through style of dress because of social implications in an environment that is biased against African American males. The contention between authentic styles of dress and social norms is

not unique to African American males. At some point, how all of us dress is judged according to a social norm. However, for African American males, the contention between style of dress and social norms can have fatal consequences. For example, some participants talked about how Trayvon Martin's decision to wear a hoody jacket was a personal style choice that contributed to another person's perception that he was a thug. This perception contributed to an altercation that then cost Trayvon Martin his life.

Thus, the concept of fairness is essential to understanding the challenges that African American males, particularly the participants in the study, had in developing their authenticity. Biased perceptions and behaviors of others stifled the developing authenticity of the participants. The biases can result in the participants believing that negative stereotypes are true of his authenticity. These biases also can cause the participants to feel that it is not worth taking a risk to pursue authentic interests (for example a new skill or career path) because something unfair, beyond their control, could happen that would negate their efforts.

Relevance. In addition to having fair situations in which to develop authenticity, participants also wanted to protect their freedom to have relevant activities that fostered the development of authenticity. These activities were ones that (a) promoted self-discovery, (b) involved established interests, or (c) involved music. The following section delineates the details of these activities.

Activities that promote self-discovery. The adolescent participants were developmentally at a stage in which the drive for self-discovery is heightened. I use the term self-discovery to refer to experiences in which they learned more about the values and activities that reflect their identity. These activities included afterschool classes such as those at the youth program that prompted self-discovery. Such programs prompted self-discovery through life skill related

course that challenged participants to become more knowledgeable about activities and values that reflected identity. Values in this sense, refer to beliefs that participants developed about their interactions with others. An example of a value that participants learned in life skill class would be those who talked about altruistic behaviors and wanting to help others. The participants also were exposed to opportunities to try activities that were new to them such as photography or robotics.

Although participants felt they were still learning who they were and what they wanted for their lives, many of them knew that they did not want to be forced into following a certain life path. Examples of this are found in the data from participants who talked about feeling external pressure (from teachers, parents, and the larger society) about education. The participants particularly felt they only had two options (a) be successful by graduating high school and then attend college, or (b) be unsuccessful by dropping out of high school and don't go to college. When only presented with two options, some participants felt overwhelmed by the requirements that must be met to be successful and they wanted to give up. They rarely felt that they had enough opportunities to explore authentic routes to success. For example, a participant noted that he was disappointed that the high school he would be attending had discontinued the shop classes and cosmetology classes. He felt that students who did not want to go to college should be given opportunities to develop work skills. Other participants wanted to go to college but felt they did not deserve that opportunity because of their current underperformance in school. They noted that teachers and parents often reinforced the idea that they were not college material. Thus, they were discouraged from even exploring whether or not college was an option for them.

Activities involving established interests. In addition to discovering new activities, participants not only appreciated but found security in their authenticity from having time to engage in established interests, especially sports. Although participants had various responses to the spill questions “tell me something you like about school,” one answer that was consistent among every participant was that they enjoyed gym class or time spent playing sports. The reason that they enjoyed sports had little to do with the fact that they aspired to be famous athletes. Rather, they described their experiences with sports as an outlet for developing authenticity. The challenge of physical activity and the opportunity to interact casually and bond with peers provided an ideal setting for them to maintain and further develop their authenticity.

Participants also developed authentic interests in school subjects taught by teachers who could attract their attention by using established interests. Adults in the study acknowledged that sometimes they have to “trick” the adolescents into being engaged in school instruction. One participant used the word “trick,” to express the idea that teachers have to start with an established interest of the adolescents before progressing into the instruction. An example of this is found in the data from many participants who wished that all teachers used a curriculum called *Flocabulary*. *Flocabulary* uses hip hop music to teach lessons in subjects such as grammar and math. The participants felt like they could relate to the lessons in *Flocabulary* because it uses music they find engaging. Once the participants were bought into the instruction through the use of established interest, they were more receptive to classroom instruction that had the potential to increase emotional vulnerability.

Music. Following physical activity, the adolescent participants frequently discussed the essential, and multifaceted, role that music played in their lives. Specifically, participants referred to music as a tool for communication and also as a means to escape daily stressors.

Lyrics of songs were a tool for communicating lived experiences. Often participants did not feel comfortable discussing painful events. However, they found a channel for expressing the feelings attached to these experiences either by listening to songs that depicted similar experiences or by creating their own lyrics. On the other hand, there were some participants for whom the expressive lyrics were not so much important as was the rhythmic patterns of the music that allowed for escapism from or de-escalation of tense situations. For example, one participant talked about how hard-core rap actually had a calming effect on him. Overlooking the violence of the lyrics, this participant focused on the constant rhythmic beats to help him maintain his focus while studying. This participant, along with others recommended that teachers allow students to listen to music on headphones while doing classwork. Another participant recognizing this calming effect of music, suggested that music be played in the school halls to deter the students from arguing and instigating fights. Other participants expressed a desire to listen to their music through earphones in class while taking tests and completing assignments. They noted that the music helped them to feel isolated in an environment in which they were easily distracted by others. Therefore, music, in particular, was seen as a tool for escaping daily stressors. .

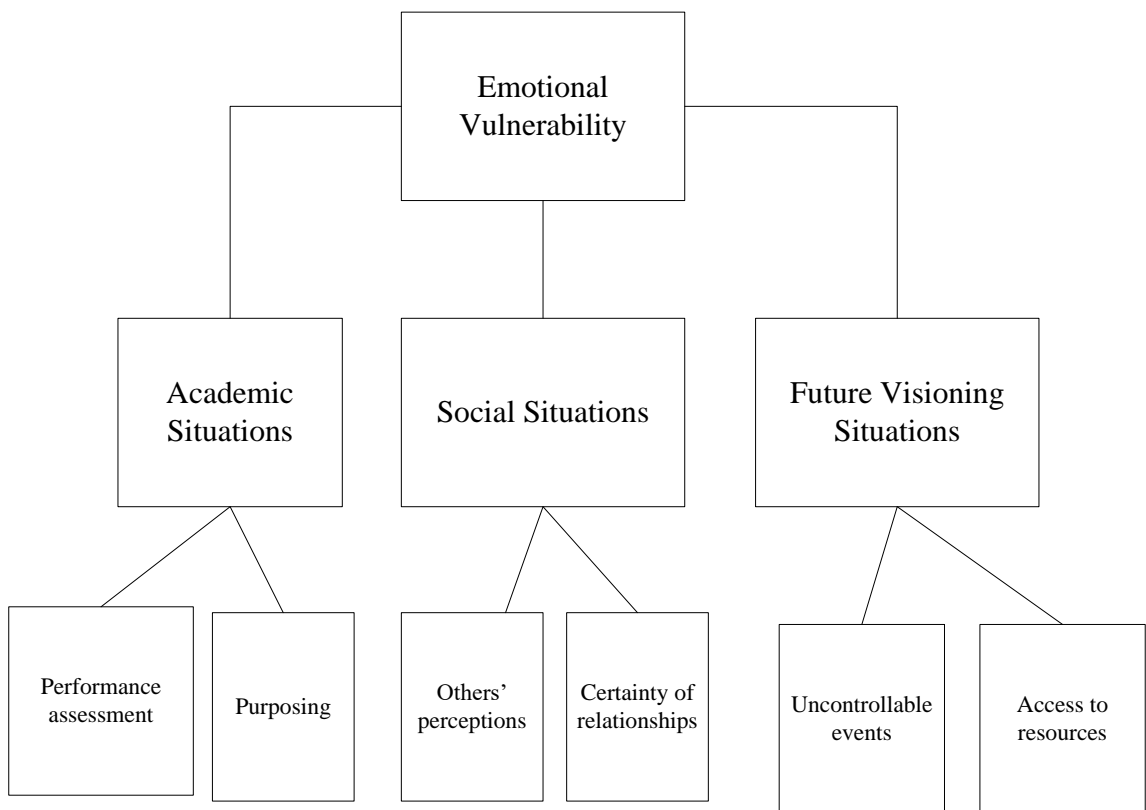
Phase Two: Triggering Emotional Vulnerability

Emotional vulnerability was the crux of participants' main concern because it challenged the participants' self-worth and their freedom to explore authenticity, triggering protective responses. Emotional vulnerability as used in this context refers to the "uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure" (Brown, 2012) that participants experienced. The influence of relationships often intervened between the vulnerability evoking situations and participants to influence the participants' protective response.

Although the purpose of this study was to explore the main concern of adolescents specifically in academic experience, participants also spoke about experiencing emotional vulnerability in social and future visioning situations. In this study, future visioning refers to the participants' thinking about their future selves. Academic experiences were often intertwined with concerns about social and future visioning, as all of these had the potential for challenging the participants' self-worth and freedom to explore authenticity.

Figure 3

Phase two: Emotional vulnerability



Emotional vulnerability in academic situations. The spill question was tell me “One thing good/bad about school,” thus, the participants unsurprisingly mostly talked about feelings

of vulnerability in academic experiences. There were main sub properties for experiencing emotional vulnerability in academic situations: performance assessment (for example, grades and test scores) and purposing (as in questioning the relevance of school). Some students reported overall positive experiences while others reported overall negative experiences with school. Whether or not their experience was positive or negative overall usually depended upon how well they felt they performed in school according to report cards and test scores. Students reporting low performance levels in school discussed their experiences of being sent to alternative schools. Some of these students also revealed that they feared not being able to graduate from high school. Students reporting high academic performance discussed their experiences with and the fear of making poor grades and disappointing themselves as well as others who expected them to do well.

Both high performing and low performing students discussed the difficulty of linking the purpose of classroom instruction with their current lives and also their future lives. For example, many of the students had difficulty engaging in classroom instruction because it was not interesting to them or because they could not figure out how the subject matter would be used to fulfill goals in the future. In this study, the process of questioning classroom instruction is referred to as *purposing*. A primary motivator for purposing was the threat to authenticity development, specifically, threats to relevance, an ideal condition, for developing authenticity. Also related to threats to authenticity was the issue of fairness in the school system. Both high and low performing students discussed either actual experiences or vicarious experiences with unfairness at school. These experiences with unfairness included teachers who were biased against African American males. This bias was especially demonstrated through harsh treatment

of African American male students (for example, withholding extra support from struggling students or shaming students) and unfair grades.

Emotional vulnerability in social situations. Social experiences in this study refer to the emotional vulnerability that resulted from interactions with others, including peers and adults. The sub properties of emotional vulnerability in social situations are: others' perceptions and relationship certainty. As discussed in the section on self-worth, the perceptions of others was essential to how the participants felt about themselves. Particularly, participants were heavily influenced by the opinions of their loved ones, peers, and teachers at school. Many of the participants, especially recounted the vulnerability they experienced in classrooms in which they felt the teachers were disrespectful towards them. For example, some participants reported feeling ashamed when teachers were impatient with the participants' learning process or made shaming remarks about them. Students also recounted situations in which peers said something negative about them or their family members (for example, a sister or mother). The participants in this study refer to these verbal exchanges as "capping." Capping is actually an activity common among African American males that may have existed since the days of slavery (Majors & Bilson, 1992). Throughout history, capping has had many names including, "playing the dozens" and "momma talky" (Majors & Bilson, 1992) and "ranking". Capping is an exchange that may start as a joke among adolescent males who are bored. However, the undercurrent of the capping process is the pursuit of peer respect (on the aggressor's end) and the triggering of shame when capping may touch on a subject about which the capping victim already felt vulnerable. Aside from negative opinions of others, participants also discussed feeling emotionally vulnerable when others had positive expectations for them. Participants sometimes

questioned whether or not they deserved to have another person thinking highly of them and they wondered if they could live up to those expectations.

In addition to the perceptions of others, lack of certainty in relationships triggered emotional vulnerability for participants. Being in unfamiliar social environments and making connections with others with the risk of losing those connections were causes of emotional vulnerability. All of the participants were in middle school and feared what life would be like once they were in high school. They were not sure if they would see the same friends that they had now. They also feared being physically harmed by older students. On the other hand, they also expressed some difficulty in trusting their current friends. Many of them had experiences in which peers whom they thought were friends had stolen from them or set them up to get into trouble at school and, in worst cases, trouble with the legal system. Participants also mentioned how they had taken risks to connect with family members and mentors, only to have those connections dissolve. In some cases, they may have experienced the death of a person with whom they had a connection, or the person simply cut off contact without explanation.

Emotional vulnerability in future visioning situations. The term *future visioning* is used in this study to refer to situations in which the adolescent participants thought about themselves in the future. The adolescent participants were at various stages of thinking about their future selves. A few of them admitted to not having thought much about their future (either 10 years from now or after high school). Regardless of whether they had begun to think about the future, they all talked about the emotional vulnerability that comes with thinking about the future. The sub properties of emotional vulnerability in future visioning situations relate to uncontrollable events and access to resources.

Consistent with the idea of fairness as an ideal condition for exploring authenticity, participants were afraid to think about the future because they felt that if they became attached to a future vision of themselves, something unfair and beyond their control could happen to negate the effort vested in the vision. As an example, one participant who was not sure if he would be an adult who lives a successful life, defined as having a house and career, or if he would succumb to homelessness or other negative outcomes. He said that he felt that he wanted to be a person with a house and career but just thought that something beyond his control could happen to thwart this vision.

Aside from facing uncontrollable events, participants also felt emotional vulnerability when they only had limited resources which hindered future visioning. A few of the participants had begun thinking about careers and activities that they would like to try but had not actively started planning to pursue these interests. Others simply had not thought very much about the future. Limited resources such as knowledge and opportunity contributed to the emotional vulnerability that participants felt about future visioning. The limited resources resulted in too many unknowns about future paths and how participants could pursue these paths. In these cases, they usually chose to avoid thinking about the future.

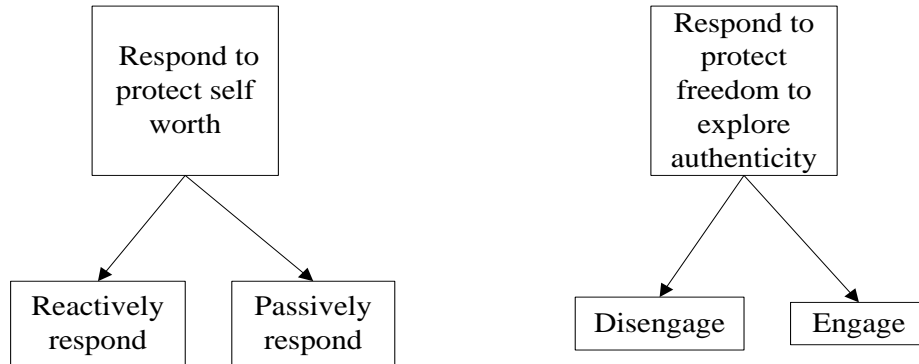
Phase Three: Protective Responses

This phase is the consequence of the emotional vulnerability that participants felt when their self-worth and freedom to explore authenticity were challenged and needed to be protected. When emotional vulnerability arose from challenges to self-worth, they typically responded either passively or reactively. Alternately, when the emotional vulnerability stemmed from challenges to the freedom to explore authenticity, they responded by engaging or disengaging.

Ultimately, the participants' chosen protective response either affirmed their self-worth and freedom to explore authenticity or it increased the uncertainty that they felt about both concerns.

Figure 4

Phase three: Protective responses



Protecting Self Worth. There seemed to be two basic paths for protecting self-worth in vulnerable situations: a reactive path and a passive path. The reactive protection path seemed to prolong uncertainty about self-worth. When participants followed this path, they were consumed with the opinions of others and found themselves constantly reacting to attacks on their self-worth. Sometimes it was easy to detect when participants were taking this reactive path. In the obvious reactive protection situations, participants immediately responded to the attack on self-worth, escalating the emotional situations (as in fighting). Others, however, reacted to attacks on self-worth by emotionally shutting down and retreating. A caveat, however, is that for some retreaters, the anger they had been suppressing would eventually explode in unrelated situations. For example, a participant who may have felt his self-worth attacked by a teacher may shut down immediately and then, later, channel his anger into a fight with a peer. The passive protection path, on the other hand, limited the extent to which participants allowed others' opinions to

influence their self-worth. When they followed this passive path, they were able to protect their self-worth in a way that eventually enhanced their self-worth.

To illustrate the difference between the reactive and passive protection of self-worth, I will use a hypothetical example that is representative of a typical confrontation experienced by the adolescent participants. In this example, a peer makes an insulting joke about a participant's shoes. The attack on the participant's shoes exposes the participant to vulnerability. In this situation, the participant may feel that his shoes are an expression of his authenticity. If his shoes are attacked, then this is interpreted by the participant as an attack on his identity. This vulnerability then would compel the participants to protect their self-worth. A participant taking the reactive protection path, would become overwhelmed by the opinion of his peer. He then might react in anger which could escalate into a physical fight. In contrast, the participant taking the passive protection path would protect his self-worth by responding in a way that allows him to disconnect from his peer's insult without further escalation. For example, a participant can respond passively by ignoring the peer's insult and walking away. He may realize that even though he feels vulnerable and his self-worth is being challenged, the best way to protect his self-worth is by limiting the influence of his peer's opinion.

Although the example offered above is a simplified version of the participants' more complex experiences, it illustrates the point that all of the participants felt the need to protect their self-worth but offered different paths for protecting their self-worth. The choice of a reactive or passive path for protecting their self-worth was related to the level at which the participant had developed and felt confident in his authenticity. Even more so, a participant's protective response was related to the quality of his relationships with others. Relationships with others ultimately played a large role in influencing their protective responses to vulnerability-

evoking situations. Relationships with others also affected the level at which the participant developed his authenticity. However, before I delve into the influence of relationships, I will discuss how developing authenticity also was essential to the main concern and how participants were vested in protecting not only their self-worth but also their freedom to explore their developing authenticity.

Protecting the freedom to explore authenticity. Since fairness and relevance are ideal conditions for developing authenticity, when these features were not present in academic, social and future visioning situations, the participants found it difficult to navigate the resulting vulnerability. Their protective responses to threats to authenticity development involved engagement and disengagement. To illustrate the difference in these types of responses, I again will use a hypothetical example that is representative of the participants' actual experiences. In this example, the participant is in a classroom in which he perceives that the teacher already has labeled him an underperforming student and grades him unfairly because of this. Additionally, the teacher delivers her classroom instruction perfunctorily without involving activities that the participant finds relevant. He would gauge this teacher's classroom as an unsafe environment for exploring his authenticity because it is both unfair and irrelevant to him. Thus, he will protect his freedom to explore authenticity by disengaging from the teacher's activities to engage, instead, in a behavior that seems more authentic him, which, in this case may be playing a game of pencil break with his classmate. On the other hand, if the participant feels that he has not been prejudged, the classroom system is fair, and the teacher provides classroom instruction that is relevant, he most likely will judge this a safe situation in which to explore authenticity. Likewise, he would be more likely to disengage with activities unrelated to classroom instruction such as pencil break with his classmate.

Intervening phase: connecting with relationships that can influence protective responses

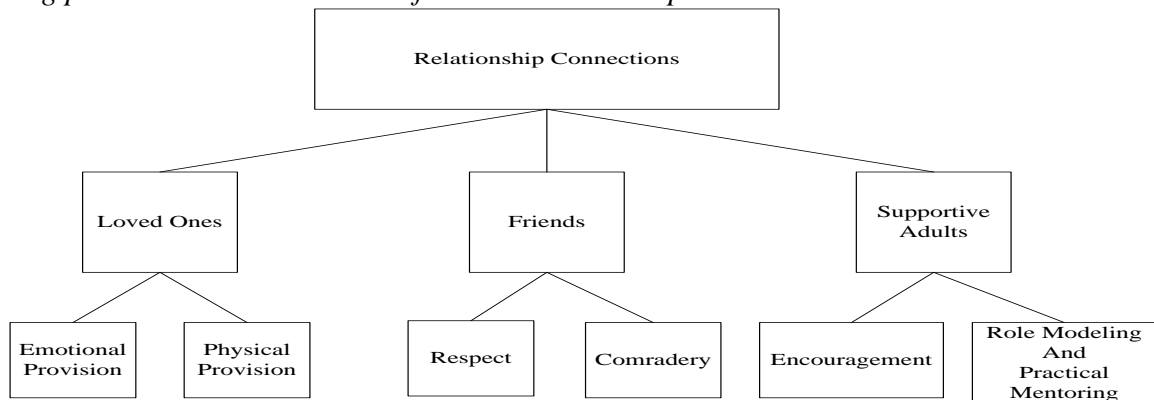
As the previous section has illustrated, participants were concerned with protecting their self-worth and freedom to explore authenticity when experiencing vulnerability in academic, social and future visioning situations. They protected their self-worth by either responding passively or reactively. They protected their freedom to explore authenticity by either engaging or disengaging in a given activity. Ultimately, these responses helped them either to become more confident in their self-worth and more aware of their authenticity or become less certain about their self-worth and their developing authenticity. The influence of relationships on self-worth and freedom to explore authenticity was especially clear in the data from the adult males in the theoretical sample who reflected on their past experiences. These participants discussed how relationships with others helped them navigate emotionally vulnerable situations, thereby having an influence on the type of protective response they employed. It is important to note here, that just as positive relationships influenced the adolescents to have positive protective responses, it is also true that relationships with others could lead the adolescents to respond in ways that lessened self-worth and limited the freedom to explore authenticity. For example, some adolescent participants discussed how they may have chosen to engage with friends who encouraged negative behaviors such as fighting. Nonetheless, the participants in the theoretical sample (who provided the most illustrative data of how the main concern was resolved) focused on the positive influences of connective relationships. Thus, my analysis will focus on the positive aspect of how participants resolved their main concern through connections with loved ones, friends and supportive adults.

The influence of these relationships had the ability to intervene the experience of emotional vulnerability and the protective response. Existing connections with family, friends, or

supportive adults, continually affirmed their self-worth and freedom to explore authenticity. The emotional security provided by existing relationships buffered emotional vulnerability. This emotional security then helped them to employ a protective response that enhanced their self-worth and authenticity.

Important to note is that the influence of the relationships was cumulative. In other words, the more positive connections that participants had across the three main categories, the more secure they were and more likely to respond to emotional vulnerability in a way that enhanced their self-worth and authenticity. Nonetheless, in situations in which participants only seemed to have one strong connection through one of the types of relationships, the connection still was powerful enough to have an effect on their ability to respond in a way that enhanced self-worth and authenticity. Each category of relationships and their sub properties that explain how connections influence protective responses are discussed in the following section.

Figure 5
Intervening phase: Connections with influential relationships



Loved ones. Participants often talked about their desire to care for their loved ones, especially their mothers and sisters. Although loved ones included mostly family members, a loved one also could be a non-family member with whom the participant shared a long-term,

caring connection. When participants felt connected with loved ones, they wanted to protect them from unfavorable emotions such as disappointment. They also wanted for their loved ones to be physically safe and comfortable financially. When they felt that their loved ones provided emotional and physical provision, and that, in return, they were able to also provide their loved ones with the same provisions, they felt secure enough to protectively respond in a way that affirms self-worth and authenticity. Thus, the sub properties of relationships with loved ones are emotional provision and physical provision. In the following sections, I will elaborate on how emotional and physical provision influenced protective responses to threats on self-worth and authenticity.

Emotional provision. As mentioned earlier, the adolescents were at a phase in which they were still discovering their authentic selves. Thus, their self-worth was heavily influenced by how they assumed others perceived them. Specifically, participants often turned to their parents to receive emotional support and validation. This is illustrated by a number of participants who admitted that were often afraid of doing poorly in school or engaging in a fight because they did not want to disappoint people who cared about them, such as their parents. Even though they admitted that they could be resistant to expectations set by their parents, they also appreciated these expectations. They felt more emotionally secure, when they knew a loved one held them accountable. Thus, the participants whose loved ones held them accountable were more likely to pursue protective responses to emotional vulnerability that enhanced self-worth and authenticity. One example of this is a participant who recounted a situation in which one of his peers insulted him. He responded that instead of fighting back, which is what he at first felt compelled to do, he walked away from the situation and decided to talk to the school principal about the situation. One of the factors that influenced his decision to respond in this way was knowing that his

mother would be proud of him for this response. However, he was glad that he responded in that way because he did not have to worry about getting into trouble for fighting. Thus, although he was first influenced by what his mother would want, his decision to walk away actually helped him in the long run to affirm his self-worth and freedom to explore authenticity.

Physical provision. Aside from providing and receiving emotional provision from loved ones, participants were influenced by the extent to which they could receive and provide physical provision. This physical provision included the desire to keep loved ones physically safe. For example, if a peer threatened a participant's family member, he would respond to protect his loved one, even if it means the response would escalate into a physical fight. The participants' self-worth is partially tied to his ability to protect his loved one, and he would therefore feel the need to respond in a way that protected not only his self-worth, but also his loved one.

Physical provisions also included the participants' desire to provide material and financial support for their loved ones. Many of the participants mentioned that they were more willing to overcome the emotional vulnerability evoked by future visioning situations when they knew that choices they make in the future could help them provide financial support or material support (for example a house) for their families. When they were able to make the connection between the school work and future opportunities that would help them provide for their families, they were more likely to risk feeling emotional vulnerability by engaging in learning situations that, for example, may not feel relevant or fair.

Friends. The participants frequently mentioned that the part of school they looked forward to the most was being able to spend time with their friends. Friends were peers who were a source of validation and fellowship. Thus, participants' protective responses were influenced by friends through the subcategories of respect and comradery.

Respect. Every adolescent participant discussed how earning the respect of their peers was important to them and their schoolmates. When asked how they knew their friends were peers who respected them, they gave answers that emphasized qualities such as trust and altruism. They expanded on the concept of trust by discussing how they knew that their friends would have “their back,” protecting them if they needed it. Thus, if a participant was in a confrontation with another peer, for example, and he had the security of an existing friendship, he was more likely to respond to the confrontation in a way that affirmed his self-worth. For example, the participant may choose to “cap back” with a clever remark without further escalation or simply walk away from an insulting comment. Clearly, having the respect of peers was indeed important. If they were able to find this respect through peer friendships, then they were less likely to feel as though they needed to reactively protect their self-worth in emotionally vulnerable situations with confrontational peers.

Comradery. In addition to respect, participants also considered a peer a friend when they shared enjoyable activities and interests. In this regard, friends helped them protect their freedom to develop authenticity. Engagement and disengagement, as conceptualized in the discussion on authenticity, were ways in which the participants protected their freedom to explore authenticity. Relationships with friends were very important in determining whether or not they would protect their freedom to develop authenticity by engaging or disengaging in a certain activity. An example of this is found in the stories of many of the participants who became involved in the youth program from which the sample was drawn for this study. Many of the participants mentioned that they joined because a friend invited them to enroll. Joining a new activity or group, such as the youth program, is a situation that can evoke emotional vulnerability for them

However, having a friend with whom to try these new experiences, made them feel some security, while risking the emotional vulnerability that comes with being in a new situation.

Supportive Adults. Many of the adolescent participants, and even the adult participants in the theoretical sample, recalled how supportive adults were instrumental in influencing protective responses to self-worth and also instrumental in helping them maintain their freedom to explore authenticity. These supportive adults included, but were not limited to, family members, teachers, and youth program staff. Adults were supportive when they encouraged participants to respond to emotional vulnerability in a way that affirmed their self-worth. Furthermore, supportive adults ensured that the participants had access to activities and resources that helped them explore their authenticity. Accordingly, the subcategories for relationships with supportive adults are: encouragement and role modeling.

Encouragement. The adolescents were very adamant in saying that they did not like feeling that adults were pressuring them into behaving a certain way or pressuring them to pursue certain future paths that did not support their self-worth or authenticity. They were, however, receptive to the guidance of adults who proved that they understood the emotional vulnerability that they experienced and provided guidance on how they could navigate the emotional vulnerability. Ultimately, the guidance of supportive adults helped them gradually become comfortable in navigating emotional vulnerability on their own. This type of encouragement helped them to respond to emotional vulnerability in a way that affirmed their self-worth and allowed them to more freely explore their authenticity. A representative example of this from the data is a participant who reported that he often got into fights at school. This participant developed a supportive relationship with a school staff member, and through this staff member he was encouraged to begin responding to conflict in a way that protected his self-

worth. The staff member had advised him to figure out what he appreciated about himself and to decide if that was worth risking by engaging in a fight. Consequently, whenever he was in a conflict situation with a peer or other adult at the school, he would remember this staff members' advice.

Participants also noted that the encouragement of supportive adults helped them to respond to emotional vulnerability in a way that protects their freedom to explore authenticity. As mentioned earlier, one of the ideal conditions for developing authenticity was the fairness of the situation. Supportive adults were able to help them process issues of fairness that they face as African American males. The supportive adults listened to their concerns about fairness and encouraged them to respond to unfairness in a way that would affirm their self-worth and preserve his freedom to explore authenticity. In addition to fairness, supportive adults also encouraged participants to persist with new activities that cultivated authenticity despite feelings of emotional vulnerability.

Role Modeling and practical mentoring. In the previous section on fairness as an ideal condition for developing authenticity, I discussed how participants often linked their beliefs about fairness not just to their personal experiences but also to the experiences of those with whom they identified. Likewise, they were influenced when those with whom they identified, especially if they were supportive adults, were engaged in activities that the participants felt might be an activity or career path they would like to try. In this way, supportive adults exposed them to possible future selves. Furthermore, learning how supportive adults navigated emotional vulnerability while protecting their self-worth and freedom to explore authenticity, inspired the participants to do the same. Thus, it was important for adults to go beyond role modeling to provide experienced guidance. I have conceptualized this guidance as practical mentoring.

There were many examples in the data of how participants benefitted from practical mentoring. For example, one of the participants talked about his experiences with a staff member in the youth program who helped him to start preparing for college. He appreciated the staff member for sharing challenges that he faced when he was in college. The staff member also advised him about factors he should look for when choosing a college and the steps he needed to take in the present to prepare for college enrollment. This is an example of how the practical mentoring of a supportive adult was able to help the participant navigate emotional vulnerability.

Summary

As illustrated in this chapter, the participants were mainly concerned with protecting their self-worth and freedom to explore authenticity. This concern arose when participants experienced emotional vulnerability in academic, social, and future visioning situations. The emotional vulnerability then triggered protective responses. Relationships were a very powerful influence that could help participants navigate emotional vulnerability by responding in a way that affirmed self-worth and preserved the freedom to explore authenticity.

The existing literature has addressed many of the components presented in *Capping Back: A Grounded Theory on African American Adolescent Males and Emotional Self-protection*. However, these components have not been conceptualized as they have been in *capping back* to relevantly capture the main concern of African American male adolescent participants. In the next chapter, I will explore how *capping back* agrees with but also challenges the existing, relevant body of literature.

Chapter 4

Literature Analysis

Overview

In Classic Grounded theory, the literature analysis is not initiated until the sorting and writing phase of developing the theory (Glaser, 1998). Accessing literature in the substantive area before this phase would interfere with the process of the emerging theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this study, I refer to a literature “analysis” and not “review.” In deductive studies, literature *reviews* typically occur at the outset of the study to provide conceptual and theoretical context. However, in the literature *analysis* of the grounded theory study, the literature is purposely accessed during the later phases of the study to serve as data that continues the constant comparison process of the emergent theory (Glaser, 1998). Furthermore, grounded theory methodology is best used when there is scant literature on the substantive area (Glaser 2009). However, grounded theory can be used in substantive areas (such as African American adolescents in education settings) in which there is already a body of existing literature, if the researcher is open to “reconceptualizing and reintegrating” the field (Glaser, 1978, p.28).

In conducting the literature analysis, I followed a process developed by Brown (2002) that also was also used in the grounded theory study of Lopez (2012). The process included asking these questions while analyzing literature in the substantive area:

1. Where does theory fit into the literature, and equally important, how do each of the concepts fit?
2. How do concepts and theory extend the literature?
3. How are the concepts and theory supported by existing literature and how do they conflict with the existing literature?

4. What is the literature teaching me about the theory?
5. How is the literature relevant, how does it fit and work with the theory?
6. How can the theory be modified to incorporate the literature as data?

Personal Reflection on the Literature Analysis

A delayed literature analysis served two purposes in this study. First, it allowed for the reconceptualizing and reintegrating of the literature on African American male adolescents' experiences in education. This would have been difficult to do had I analyzed the literature first. Instead of the theory emerging from the data, the data would have been driven by preconceived theories. Secondly, the delayed literature analysis helped ensure a focused literature search. I was able to target the literature that was relevant to the grounded theory instead of wandering aimlessly in the overwhelming amount of existing literature in the substantive area.

Nonetheless, having to suspend my preconceptions was very challenging at the start of data collection because I had a previous knowledge of the existing literature on African American males. Thus, I had to address my preconceptions of the substantive area. I first had to avoid reading any literature related to African American male adolescents as well as the general literature on youth and education. I refrained from actively seeking out literature or accessing any of the literature that I had already collected in the substantive area. However, it still was impossible to not inadvertently stumble upon articles or to recall theories and concepts to which I had been exposed. Thus, there were times, especially in the early stages of data collection that I would think about how concepts and theories from the existing literature would apply. In these instances, I had to address these preconceived ideas and concepts so that they would not contaminate the theory emerging from the data. I addressed this issue by comparing the preconceived concepts and theories with the incidents found in the data. I would read my

interview notes and memos line by line, comparing each line against those preconceived concepts and theories. When the preconceived ideas and theories did not account for every incident in the data, I was then able to disqualify them. Disqualifying these preconceived ideas then allowed me to be more sensitive to the emerging theory.

Literature in the Substantive Area

In this chapter, I discuss the literature that I constantly compared with the emergent theory, *Capping Back: A Grounded Theory on African American Adolescent Males and Emotional Self-Protection*. The emphasis in this literature analysis was on illustrating that the basic social process of emotional self-protection is not unique to African American male adolescents; rather this is a universal experience. However, what is unique to African American males is the fact that due to historical and current climates of discrimination, they more frequently and intensely encountered situations in which they felt that they had to emotionally self-protect (Spencer, 1999).

In reviewing the literature, I found that that this study is not the first to discuss the emotional self-protection of African American males (Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005; Corprew & Cunningham, 2011; Cunningham, Swanson & Hayes, 2013; Graham, Hudley & Williams, 1992; Harris, 1995; Majors & Billson, 1992; Spencer, et al, 1999). Accordingly, I first provide an overview of the two relevant frameworks and theories that have been used to explain the emotional protection of African American males, namely “Cool Pose” and the “Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems” (PVEST). The section following this initial discussion is organized according to the basic social process of Capping Back, which extends previous work on emotional self-protection. For each phase of the basic social process, I discuss

the relevant literature and the extent to which the phases of Capping Back supported or challenged the existing literature.

Overview of Relevant Theories

During the 1990's, the discourse on African American males' emotional vulnerability was launched by Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson (1992). Majors and Billson's book about a coping mechanism unique to African American men, termed *cool pose*, was written at a time during which African American men often were depicted in pop culture as being involved in criminal activities, gangs, and drug use (Fultz & Brown, 2008). During this time, African American males were seen as a type of endangered species and were the frequent subject of social and policy discussion (Fultz & Brown, 2008).

The crux of Majors and Billson's argument was that because of socioeconomic restraints and discrimination, African American males cannot live up to societal expectations of masculinity. These expectations of masculinity are rooted in European ideals of manhood, and include the ability to be "breadwinner, provider, procreator, [and] protector" (Majors & Billson, 1992, p.1). Since African American males were at a disadvantage for attaining this ideal manhood because of limited education and resources, they began to feel vulnerable (Majors & Billson, 1992). African American males then turn to the coping mechanism of cool pose to redefine masculinity (Harris, 1995). Cool pose conceptualized how the authors perceived that African American males coped with vulnerability through a counter culture that featured a unique style of dress and engagement in risk behaviors such as sexual conquest and violence (Majors and Billson). Many studies subsequently adopted the theory of cool pose to discuss how vulnerability in African American males often is translated into aggressive behaviors, or

hypermasculinity, as it also has been termed (Cassidy & Stephenson, 2005; Cunningham, Swanson, & Hayes, 2013).

A few years following the emergence of Cool Pose, Margaret Beale Spencer (1995) incorporated the idea of vulnerability in racial minority youth into an identity-focused cultural ecological model that she termed the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (*PVEST*). The *PVEST* model was a variation of Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model that illustrated how different social domains influenced an individual's behavior. The *PVEST* model emphasized structural inequality and other injustices that minority youth experience in social domains. The five steps of the bidirectional *PVEST* model examined how the synthesis of normal identity development, culture and context affect the behaviors and long term outcomes for minority youth. The model was bidirectional in the sense that all steps had mutual influence on the adjacent steps. Step one involved the individual's assessment of risk contributors. Risk contributors were seen as characteristics that may predispose an individual to an adverse outcome (Cohen, 2006). This step featured the individual's self-appraisal process which was based on a social-cognitive awareness of stereotypes and biases related to race, gender, socioeconomic status and physical status (body image and weight for example). In step two, the individual experienced a stressor such as neighborhood danger, disrespect, or social invisibility. Step three demonstrated reactive responses, either maladaptive or adaptive, to the stress experienced in step two. Steps four and five predicted how these reactions can stabilize overtime, and lead to the individual's development of identity with either long term positive outcomes (such as school adjustment and completion) or long term negative outcomes (such as dropping out of school).

Capping Back reflected elements of both Cool Pose and PVEST theories. Capping Back certainly supported the arguments of Majors and Billson and Spencer that African American males respond to feelings of vulnerability as they move through a phase of self-discovery. However, there were aspects of both theories that were challenged by Capping Back. First, Cool pose, and to a certain extent PVEST, argued that the vulnerability experienced by African American males was attributable to their frustration with the inability to meet ideal standards of masculinity. The current study could neither support nor refute this. Despite open ended questions that allowed the youth to address all topics of concern, they did not explicitly discuss masculinity and how messages about manhood affected their lives. Furthermore, emotional vulnerability was apparent in all participants, whether or not they engaged in behaviors that would be categorized as hypermasculine. However, this does not necessarily negate the possibility that external messages about manhood may have influenced the emotional vulnerability and consequent protective responses of African American males, and this may well be an area for future research.

It was apparent, however, based on the data in this study that applying the concept of masculinity could be problematic. The participants openly discussed difficulties with defining who they were and the lack of freedom to do so. Thus, if we were to restrict our understanding of the vulnerability of African American males to a framework of masculinity that has been defined by a dominant culture, this has the potential to be disempowering. These adolescents may be seen as deficient or deviant if they do not live up to the standard of masculinity that has been defined for them by a dominant culture.

Nonetheless, Capping Back shared many similarities with PVEST. Like PVEST, Capping Back illustrated how individuals encountered challenges in the midst of discovering and

appraising the self. However, in Capping Back, they were not only concerned with their self-appraisal but also with their freedom to continue exploring authenticity. Additionally, in Capping Back, participants were not as concerned with the lack of social access as they were with how the lack of social access challenged their self-worth and restricted their authenticity exploration. Capping Back also added a layer of conceptualization by illustrating how connections with relationships can intervene and help participants navigate the emotional vulnerability.

The PVEST model laid out a general process for reacting to stress in either a maladaptive or adaptive manner. Capping Back was similar in that it showed how participants can either respond to challenges in a way that affirms self-worth and preserves the exploration of authenticity or, conversely, in a way that prolongs the uncertainty of self-worth and authenticity of participants. Other similarities and differences between Capping Back and PVEST, include how the theories conceptualized the essence of emotional vulnerability. I discuss these similarities and differences in more detail below as I review the literature relevant to each phase of Capping Back.

The Main Concern and Resolution in the Context of Adolescent Development

As noted earlier, the main concern of the adolescent participants in Capping Back was to protect their self-worth and their freedom to explore authenticity when experiencing emotional vulnerability. Capping Back also conceptualized how participants resolved their main concern by connecting with relationships that helped them navigate emotional vulnerability and respond in a way that affirmed self-worth and preserved their freedom to explore authenticity. This connection that the participants sought was a universal need that included the “energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued” (Brown, 2010, p.19).

When placed in the context of developmental literature, it is not surprising that the main concern involved concepts of the developing or emerging self (Harter, 1988; Spencer, 1999). During adolescence, a preoccupation with the self is widely accepted as being developmentally appropriate and expected (Harter, 1988). Derived initially from psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theory, the developmental literature emphasizes that during adolescence, different ideas of the true self are converging and, at times, contradicting, which leads to intrapsychic conflicts (Harter, 1988). These conflicts are believed to challenge the individual's self-appraisal and elicit an emotional and behavioral response (Spencer, 1999). Although this process was expected of adolescents, the behaviors and experiences of African American males were often misjudged in the literature without consideration of how they actually, rather than theoretically, experience normal developmental phases (Spencer, 1999; Swanson, Cunningham & Spencer, 2003) Furthermore, the literature historically has neglected to consider how the normal adolescent development phases of African American males are challenged by injustice and bias (Spencer, 1999). *Capping Back* specifically addresses injustice and bias by demonstrating how these factors can impeded the development of authenticity and self-worth of these youth.

The resolution of the main concern, connections with others, also reflects an essential process of adolescence. Relationship connections can be seen as a complement to the establishment of autonomy during adolescence (Noom, Dekovik, & Wim, 1999).

Phase one: Challenges to Self-Worth and Freedom to Explore Authenticity

Self -worth. In *Capping Back*, self-worth was defined as how the participants felt about themselves which, during this phase in their lives, was heavily influenced by others' perceptions. This definition was consistent with processes of the self that were typical of adolescent

development (Spencer, 1999). This notion of self-worth was also similar to the first domain of PVEST. In the first domain of PVEST, individuals process messages about who they are according to social perceptions of risk factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status. They then develop an appraisal of themselves based on the perceptions of others. Spencer noted that this self-appraisal may be defined also as self-esteem or “how one feels valuable or valued” (p.44).

As Harter (1988) argued, adolescents intensely focus on the opinions of others. This focus is so intense, that they create an “imaginary audience” that is evaluating the self (Harter, 1988, p. 50). This assertion was consistent with Erving Goffman’s (1959) presentation of the self, in which individuals see themselves as having to perform for different audiences. Spencer (1999) further proposed that adolescents are consumed with the perception of others by arguing that adolescents are not only starting to develop an evaluation of self but are also making inferences about the assumptions and perceptions of others. This provided support for Capping Back’s finding that the participants in the study based much of their self -worth on their assumptions of how others perceived them.

Authenticity. In addition to self-worth, the participants in this study were trying to protect their freedom to explore authenticity. Authenticity was defined as the true self and the activities and beliefs that constitute the true self for the participants. Authenticity has been linked to self-identity and conceptualized in the literature as the subjective experience of being one’s true self or as being true to one’s values (Erickson, 1995). Brene Brown (2010) expanded on the definition of authenticity to include a “collection of choices” that an individual makes to “show up and be real” (p. 49). Indeed, emotional vulnerability was involved in practicing authenticity as one must be willing to step out of a comfort zone and risk being judged by others (Brown, 2010).

The adolescents in this study had not reached the point at which they had a stable concept of their authenticity and, as seen in the previous section on self-worth, they were in the midst of grappling with the perceptions of others. Therefore, they were not yet ready to take on the vulnerability of fully embracing their authenticity. However, they were interested in discovering the components of this authenticity.

The period of adolescence has been described in the literature as a “salient” time for us to develop authenticity (Harter, 2001). As Harter suggested, adolescents are discovering how they present different selves to different people. For example, an adolescent may present himself around friends in a manner that is different from how he presents to his teachers. This idea of multiple role related authentic selves was rooted in Erving Goffman’s (1956) *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which theorized that we present different authentic selves to different audiences in different situations. Just as the process of embracing authenticity was riddled with emotional vulnerability, the process of sorting through these different social selves and exploring one’s authenticity was even more so. This process was even more complicated for African American males as they dealt with injustices and biases that potentially limited their ability to develop authenticity. Accordingly, in the following section, I delineate the ideal conditions for African American male adolescents to discover authenticity and the review relevant supporting literature.

Fairness. Fairness was the most intimidating and difficult to remove barrier for participants who were trying to develop their authenticity, and with good reason. African American males are one of the most stereotyped and discriminated against groups in society (Brown, A., 2011; Cunnigham, Swanson & Hayes, 2013; Howard, 2008; Smith, Hung & Franklin, 2011). It has been well-documented that school systems in the U.S. have a history of

bias against African American males (Noguera, 2001; Raines, et al 2012). This history of discrimination involves biased school policies but also actors in the school systems (teachers and administrators) who have negative perceptions of African American males. These negative perceptions then affect how African American students are treated, and often contributes to the disproportionality of students labeled as behavioral problems or special education students (Raines, et al 2012; Wang & Eccles, 2012). One study has explored how even Ivy League African American college students reported experiencing biased treatment on their campuses (Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007).

Negative stereotypes have left African American males misunderstood as the larger society assumes that they are aggressive and uninterested in education (Harris, 2006; Harper & Davis, 2012). In actuality, as findings from a Harper and Davis study suggested, African American males care about school but often feel that educational systems do not care about them. Unfortunately, school is not the only social system in which African American males experience discrimination because discrimination permeates the larger society's ideas about these youth. Especially problematic is the perception of African American males as aggressive. This often contributes to unfair policing practices of African American males (Jones, 2014). In some cases, they begin to believe and internalize these stereotypes about themselves and subsequently adopt negative behaviors (Corprew & Cunningham, 2012; Noguero, 2013). Given these negative stereo types, African American males were also assumed to be lacking "moral fabric" (Spencer, et al, 1999). In actuality, however, as demonstrated by the PVEST model, these males are responding to the reality of unfair inaccessibility to social opportunity.

Relevance. In order for an activity to be relevant for the participants to develop an authenticity, at least one of the following conditions was required: (a) the activity promoted self-

discovery (for example, trying a new skill), (b) the activity incorporated an established interest, and (c) the activity involved music. Activities that promoted self-discovery were, in general, recommended in the literature for adolescents since they are in a phase in which different aspects of the self are being integrated (Dworkin, Larsen & Hansen, 2003; Waterman, 1984). Specifically, leisure activities such as art, music, and sports were linked to the discovery of self-identity because they were self-directed and allowed the youth to explore their interests (Coatsworth, et al, 2005). The literature also supported the use of established interests such as sports and hip hop to help participants engage in activities. For example, Stovall (2006) argued that using hip hop music in the classroom was a powerful instrument for developing teacher-student connections and engaging youth in learning. Additionally, some studies have found that physical activity was linked to improvement of mental health outcomes such as depression and anxiety, as well as overall academic experiences for youth universally (Biddle & Asare, 2011; Moylan, et al 2013; Singh, et al 2012).

When the participants talked about their experiences in listening to music and engaging in other creative mediums such as art, they described feelings of isolation and escapism that actually seemed to help in discovering authenticity. These are the same feelings that are produced through mindfulness-based activities such as yoga. Mindfulness activities for youth has been the focus of only a few, limited studies (Greenberg & Harris, 2011; Khalsa, et al. 2012;). However, these activities showed promise for helping youth, including African American males, improve their capacity for dealing with emotional vulnerability (Greenberg & Harris, 2011; Khalsa, et al. 2012).

These findings of the benefits of physical and mindfulness-based activities for youth in general, challenged the finding of studies suggesting that African American boys are associated

with sports, music and arts for two reasons: (a) Some African American boys may see music and sports as their only future career opportunities and (b) African American boys have been stereotyped as only being competent in sports and music (Cokley & Moore, 2007; Noguera, 2003). Thus, African American males often are stereotyped as athletes, whether or not they actually have athletic ability (Corprew & Cunningham, 2012). Furthermore, as one scholar noted, studies have found that African American boys see careers in sports and music as “more promising routes to upward mobility” and, consequently, they disengaged from school to focus on sports (Noguera, 2003). However, for the participants in Capping Back, sports and creative outlets such as music and art, served a different purpose, one that was rooted in the exploration of authenticity.

Phase Two: Triggering Emotional Vulnerability

The major distinguishing feature of Capping Back when compared with Cool Pose and PVEST, was Capping Back’s conceptualization of emotional vulnerability. In fact, the conceptualization of emotional vulnerability in Capping Back challenges how vulnerability historically has been presented in social science literature on adolescents. Vulnerability, as used in the literature, usually represents deficiency in social status or emotion. Specifically, vulnerability in the literature on adolescents has been used to indicate a social behavior or status that was linked to “an increased likelihood of negative outcomes” (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005, p.401). These outcomes generally were defined as those that potentially have adverse health and social consequences such as substance use, violent behavior, and sexual activity (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Vulnerability also has been used to describe emotional deficiency. In this respect, E. Tory Higgins, et al. (1986) referred to two categories of emotional vulnerability: (a)

agitation-related emotions (for example, anger and anxiety) and (b) dejection-related emotions (for example, disappointment and shame).

Both Cool Pose and PVEST were consistent with the previous literature that focused on emotional vulnerability as an indicator of deficiency. In Cool Pose emotional vulnerability ensued when African American males felt that they could not control their social environments and live up to societal expectations. Similarly, in PVEST, individuals felt emotional vulnerability from the lack of social access to opportunities and resources. Furthermore, PVEST incorporated vulnerability related to social status. In the first phase of the PVEST framework, vulnerability is conceptualized as a net balance of risk (for example, academic disengagement, discrimination and poverty) and protective factors (cultural socialization, academic engagement) (Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003).

Capping Back adopted Brown's (2012) conceptualization of emotional vulnerability as a universal experience of "uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure" (Brown, 2012). In contrast to the deficiency perspective of vulnerability typically found in the literature, emotional vulnerability was seen as neither good nor bad, but rather as the core of the human experience and the root of all other feeling (Brown, 2012). Emotional vulnerability, in this context, provided a foundation from which one can discover and embrace authenticity and self-worth. This definition of vulnerability was the most appropriate for conceptualizing the participants' main concern in Capping Back because it emphasized a universal experience. Providing a universal lens to the experience of African American males was important, as their experiences were often stigmatized and misjudged in previous research (Spencer, 1999; Brown, 2011). Thus, situating the experiences of African American male adolescents within a universal human experience should help others to better relate to and understand their challenge (Brown, 2011).

Phase Three: Protective Responses. In the second phase of Capping Back emotional vulnerability resulted from challenges to self-worth and the exploration of authenticity. In the third phase, the participants responded in ways that either affirmed their self-worth or preserved their freedom to explore authenticity, or they responded in a way that prolonged their uncertainty. A conceptualization of how participants responded to emotional vulnerability was also the crux of Cool Pose and PVEST. In Cool Pose, the response to vulnerability fell within the realm of Goffman's (1959) impression management. African American males were perceived as responding with a calm, at times, aloof attitude to give the impression that they were in control. More specifically, Cool Pose was a "ritualized form of masculinity that entailed behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performance."(p. 4) Consistent again with Goffman's impression management, African American males were seen as being able to adapt their performance to meet the impression needed in any situation.

The PVEST model delineated two basic types of responses, maladaptive and adaptive. The adaptive strategies included those that are socially acceptable such as self-acceptance and school engagement. Maladaptive strategies included reactive behaviors such as social withdrawal and hypermasculine behaviors. Hypermasculine behaviors included those such as bravado that emphasized toughness and aggression (Corprew & Cunningham, 2012).

Consistent with PVEST, Capping Back features two tracks of responses to emotional vulnerability: (a) affirming self-worth and preserving authenticity exploration, and (b) prolonging the uncertainty of self-worth and authenticity. PVEST's conceptualization of responses as *adaptive* and *maladaptive* connoted finality, limiting the hope that the individual eventually can learn to respond in a way that affirms self-worth and preserves freedom to explore authenticity. Some participants in the current study were more receptive to developing affirming

and preserving responses only after having employed so-called maladaptive behaviors. Take for example, the participant in the data who reported that his frequent fights at school caught the attention of a staff member. The staff member began coaching the participant in how to respond in a way that affirmed self-worth and preserved authenticity exploration. In this case, it was more appropriate to not label the participant's behavior in the beginning as maladaptive but rather to see his responses along a continuum in which some responses are more affirming and preserving than others.

The use of maladaptive and adaptive to describe responses is also problematic in that it can be difficult to determine whether a certain behavior is maladaptive. For example, there is some discrepancy in the literature as to whether or not the hypermasculinity of African American males is truly maladaptive and not at all adaptive (Corprew & Cunningham, 2012; .Stewart, 2006). Although considered to be maladaptive in the original construction of PVEST, hypermasculine behavior was also seen in some instances of the literature as an adaptive response that may be necessary to protect physical safety for those who may encounter physically threatening situations in their daily lives (Cunningham & Corprew, 2012; .Stewart, 2006). Importantly, Capping Back does not consider responses as either maladaptive or adaptive. Instead, Capping Back views the responses along a continuum of affirming self-worth and preserving authenticity exploration.

Intervening phase: connecting with relationships that can influence protective responses

Capping Back found that loved ones, friends, and supportive adults helped participants to navigate emotional vulnerability, intervening between challenges to self-worth and authenticity to influence protective responses. More accurately, the level of connection that the participants had developed in these relationships influenced their responses to emotional vulnerability. This

phase of connective relationships was supported by a model known as the 5 C's of positive youth development model (Bowers, et al., 2010; Travis & Leech, 2014). The 5 C's stands for competence, confidence, connection, caring, and character. At the center of the nexus of the 5C's model is connection. Connection is defined as the positive bonds that exist between individuals and their family, peers, school, and community. Consistent with the role of connection in Capping Back, connection in the 5 C'S model had an influence on adolescents' empathy and prosocial decision making.

Capping Back built upon the 5C's description of connection to include the definition of connection from Brown (2012). Brown defined connection as "the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgement; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship." (p.19) This aspect of connection indicated the level of relationship that was required for the participants to learn to respond to emotional vulnerability in a way that affirmed self-worth and preserved the exploration of authenticity. In the following section, I discuss the literature that supports how connections with loved ones, friends, and supportive adults provides emotional security that helps these youth navigate emotional vulnerability.

Loved ones. In the 5C's model, connection is a bidirectional effort between adolescents and others (Travis & Leech, 2013). Connection covaries with the 5C's concept of caring. Caring is defined as a sense of sympathy and empathy. Importantly, caring evolves from connection and has the potential to influence adolescents' moral decision making. This linkage of connection and caring is consistent with how connection with loved ones in Capping Back influenced the participants' protective responses. Their protective responses particularly were influenced by their desire to emotionally and physically provide for people they loved. When relationship

connections resulted in mutual emotional and physical provision, participants were more likely to respond to vulnerability in a way that affirmed self-worth and preserved authenticity exploration.

When participants talked about their desire to protect and provide for loved ones, they mostly referred to the women in their lives, namely mothers and sisters. Instead of linking these desires to protect and provide with the concepts of caring and empathy (as with the 5C's model), the drive to protect family members, especially women, is often linked in the literature with societal ideas of masculinity (Majors & Billson, 1992; Wood & Hilton, 2013). For example, in *Cool Pose*, African American males were perceived as feeling that they were not capable of living up to standards of what it is to be a man and so they overcompensate by not caring for others (Majors & Billson, 1992). However, one study directly challenged this notion, showing that African American male adolescents described their ideal manhood as “relationally situated, socially responsive, and caring” (Isom, 2007, p.413). Exploring the participants’ concepts of manhood and how this influenced their experiences of emotional vulnerability and connection was beyond the scope of the present study. However, it was clear that the participants exhibited social responsiveness and caring to people who were important to them, which is consistent with the 5C's model. In turn, this social responsiveness and caring prompted the participants to respond to emotional vulnerability in a way that affirmed self-worth and preserved authenticity exploration.

Friends. In the literature, peers play an important role in the development of adolescents (Harter, 1999). Adolescents learn how to do new things from peers and this can enhance self-development in areas such as self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006). As seen in one study, adolescents reported higher levels of vulnerability when they perceived they were not accepted by their peers

and higher levels of emotional well-being when they perceived that they are being accepted (Guyer, et al., 2014). Not surprisingly the experience of African American males needing validation from their peers is not necessarily unique to them, but rather, is likely a universal adolescent experience in American culture.

What is different for African American adolescents is how they interact with peers and earn the validation they seek. *Capping* (aka playing the dozens) was one of the unique ways in which African American males sought peer respect in this study as well as in the relevant literature (Graham, Bellmore, & Mize, 2006; Majors & Billson, 1992). Capping was an insult game that has been used by African American men for many generations with its roots possibly in slavery (Majors & Billson, 1992). Capping may start with one participant making a joke about a peer's appearance or loved one. The peer may then "cap back," responding with a return insult joke. One theory was that *playing the dozens* started as a way for older African American men to teach younger men to control their anger (Majors & Billson, 1992). The thought was that if older African American males would hurl as many insults as possible at the younger African American male, this would teach the younger male to control his anger. Therefore when encountered by a White men hurling insults, they would not be quick to anger. Clearly, consequences could easily be fatal if younger African American men were to react in abrupt anger toward White men in this society. Most instances of playing the dozens, or capping, (as the participants referred to it in the present day) were harmless ways of having fun. However, the participants admitted that it was also a culturally acceptable way for African American males to get respect from peers.

Participants admitted that sometimes capping could go awry, if a peer's cap touched on a subject that was a vulnerability trigger for the participant. However, if the participant felt connected with

other peers that he considered to be friends, they were more likely to respond in a way that affirmed self-worth and preserved the freedom to explore authenticity.

Supportive Adults. Supportive adults in Capping Back buffered participants' emotional vulnerability by offering encouragement and practical mentoring. This type of support helped them become more confident in responding to vulnerability in a way that would affirm and preserve exploration of authenticity. This was clearly consistent with the literature on African American males, as well as for adolescents in general (Corprew & Cunningham, 2011; Wang & Eccles, 2013; Wooley & Bowen, 2007). Many studies have shown that adolescents who have supportive adults in their lives are more likely to engage in school and experience fewer behavioral issues (Corprew & Cunningham, 2011; Wang & Eccles, 2013; Wooley & Bowen, 2007). In fact, one study suggested that the impact of a teacher's support is greater for African American students than for European American students (Wang & Eccles, 2013). Another study conducted in the tradition of the PVEST model, found that bravado attitudes were lessened when participants felt supported by teachers and administrators at their school (Corprew & Cunningham, 2011). A third investigation found that when adolescents had strong adult support, the impact of teacher support was greater than peer support on the emotional and cognitive engagement of youth (Wang and Eccles, 2013).

In one study of the effect of social support on school engagement, teacher support was conceptualized by items that assessed the extent to which a teacher's relationship with the student goes beyond instruction during the class period (Wang & Eccles, 2013). These items included an assessment of how often the teacher helped the student with homework, how often he or she talks to students about other things going on in life, and whether or not the teacher understood how the student felt (Wang & Eccles, 2013). These questions also conceptualized

qualities in teachers that made the participants in this current study feel secure enough to face emotional vulnerability. As a few researchers have noted, when teachers are unsupportive, African American males are prone to fulfill negative stereotyped responses such as aggressiveness or other behaviors that may prolong the uncertainty of self-worth and authenticity (Corprew & Cunningham, 2012).

Although the literature discussed thus far referred mostly to school staff (administrators and teachers), studies also have shown that other supportive adults, such as mentors in the community and other family members, also may help African American male adolescents navigate vulnerability (Jones, et al., 2006). The literature also pointed to the need for role models who are African American men (Davis, 2003; Swanson, et al 2003). However, as one researcher has noted, it is not enough for these African American men simply to be role models (Brown, 2009). African American men understand what it is like growing up as both Black and male and, but while this was an important factor, it may not be enough provide a supportive relationship to African American adolescents (Brown, 2009). Instead, African American men, especially those who are teachers, must still employ a variety of strategies to address the complex needs of African American adolescents to provide meaningful support (Brown 2009).

Summary

Although Capping Back is not the first theory to consider how African American males self-protect when experiencing vulnerability, it both draws from and extends previous theories. In this chapter I examined the basic tenets of Cool Pose and PVEST, two relevant theories that also attempted to explain self-protective behaviors in this population. The most distinguishing feature of Capping Back is its ability to reconceptualize ideas from these previous theories,

such as emotional vulnerability and connection, to provide a more universal and humanistic perspective to the experiences of African American male adolescents.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Implications for Practice, Policy and Research

The result of this study was the development of a theory, *Capping Back: A Grounded Theory on African American Adolescent Males and Emotional Self-Protection*. This theory emerged from a small number of adolescent participants and was supported by a theoretical sample consisting of African American male college students, adult staff members who worked with the adolescent participants, and parents of the adolescents. The theory provides a foundation from which we can better understand the experiences of African American male adolescents. This foundation can be used to improve practice in the fields of social work and education, as well as to enhance educational policies concerning African American males. The theory also provides direction for future studies.

As discussed in chapters one and four, prior studies explored the issues facing African American male adolescents through theories that often viewed these adolescents as deficient or deviant (Brown, 2011; Bush & Bush, 2013). Previous studies limited our understanding of these males' experiences, with a focus on explaining why they are "poor, unemployed, uneducated, street savvy, and resistant" (Brown, 2011, p.58). This study sought to conceptualize the main concern of African American males without the constraints of existing theories and assumptions about who African American males are and what they are striving to do.

Capping Back captured the main concern of the African American male adolescent participants which was to protect their self-worth and freedom to explore authenticity when they experienced emotional vulnerability in academic, social, and future visioning situations. As

mentioned previously, the data from which the theory emerged was collected without the constraints of existing theory. Nonetheless, variations of the participants' concern of emotional self-protection has appeared in previous theories and frameworks seeking to explain the experiences of African American males (Corprew & Cunningham, 2011; Cunningham, Swanson & Hayes, 2013; Majors & Billson, 1992; Spencer, 1999). These existing frameworks and theories had a limited focus on the reasons why African American males self-protect. For example, in *Cool Pose* and *PVEST*, discussed in chapter 4, African American males self-protected against feelings of insecurity that mostly stemmed from limited social resources and opportunities due to discrimination. To a certain extent, this was also the case for participants in *Capping Back*. However, unlike the previous theories, *Capping Back* emphasized that the anomaly was not rooted in the participants' need to self-protect (this is a universal response) but, rather, the anomaly was the unjust social environment that created a more frequent and intense need for African American males to self-protect. *Capping Back* reconceptualized the emotional self-protection discussed in previous theories by merging the lenses of universal human behavior with that of social justice.

The main concern of participants to protect self-worth and the freedom to explore authenticity is a universal adolescent experience, and therefore, developmentally appropriate for participants of this age. During adolescence, we sort through different aspects of the self to form an integrated whole (Harter, 1988). The sorting involves appraising the self while figuring out the true or authentic self (Harter, 1988). In this process, adolescents not only learn to appraise themselves but also learn how to make inferences about how others perceive them (Harter, 1988; Spencer, 1999). This results in adolescents becoming consumed with how others' perceptions fit into their self-appraisals.

The already complex journey of establishing self-worth and authenticity, was even more challenging for the participants, who, as African American males, are one of the most stigmatized groups in society (Swanson, Cunningham & Spencer, 2003; Travis & Leech, 2014). This stigma is perpetuated through motifs in both the scholarly literature and pop culture that paint African American males with negative descriptors such as undereducated, uninterested in education, unemployable and thuggish (Brown, 2011; Harris, 2006; Harper & Davis, 2012). This stigma influences how others perceive and interact with them.. For example, teachers may misjudge an African American male who is disruptive in class as a resistant learner. In actuality, the participant may feel that the classroom environment is irrelevant and unfair. Another African American male who frequently engages in fights, may have his behavior referred to as hypermasculine. In reality, this participant may have been protecting either his physical or emotional safety. Such misunderstanding contributes to disproportionate numbers of African American males being labeled as disciplinary issues in school, and also contributes to structural injustices that manifests in the overrepresentation of African American males in the criminal justice system (Monroe, 2005; Raines, et al 2012; Roderick, 2003; Toldson, 2008; Travis & Leech, 2014).

Social stigma and structural inequalities contributed to how participants appraised their worth and also their perception of their freedom to develop authenticity. They became aware of the stigma and structural inequalities through past personal experiences, but also through the vicarious experiences of those with whom they identified. Vicarious experiences of other African American males were particularly poignant for the participants. Data collection for this study started shortly after Trayvon Martin, a young, unarmed African American male, was fatally shot. Over the duration of the data collection, there were many other national stories about fatal

shootings of unarmed African American males. Not surprisingly, the participants were affected by this, in conjunction with the stigma and structural inequalities they faced in their daily lives. Many of their discussions about current and future activities were tinged with the fear that something unfair and beyond their control would happen to negate any of their efforts.

The awareness of societal stigma and structural inequality, combined with daily interactions (or confrontations) in school, community, and home challenged their self-worth and freedom to explore authenticity. These challenges resulted in the participants experiencing emotional vulnerability. Emotional vulnerability, as used in this study, refers to the universal experience of “uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure” (Brown, 2012). This definition differs from the way in which vulnerability is typically used in the literature, especially when used to describe the situation for African American males. The term vulnerability has been commonly used to indicate a social behavior or status that was linked to “an increased likelihood of negative outcomes” (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005, p.401). In contrast, vulnerability as defined in this study, has the potential to positively affirm self-worth and preserve the exploration of authenticity.

The participants’ ability to manage emotional vulnerability depended largely on their connections with loved ones, friends, and supportive adults. Connection was defined in this study as the “the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgement; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.” (Brown, 2012, p.19). Participants were able to not only endure vulnerability but use experiences of vulnerability to affirm self-worth and preserve freedom to explore authenticity when they had the following types of connections: mutually sustaining relationships

with loved ones; the respect and comradery of friends; and the encouragement, role modeling and mentoring of supportive adults.

Practice Implications

The grounded theory, Capping Back, developed in this study holds practical implications for professionals who work with youth, especially social workers and educators. As seen with Capping Back, and also with a supporting study (Travis & Leech, 2014), connection is the key to helping African American male adolescents successfully navigate experiences of emotional vulnerability. The first step toward building this connection is for professionals to be aware of their own attitudes and biases toward African American males. The participants reported feeling less certain about their self-worth when teachers failed to provide assistance or when they ridiculed the students in classroom settings. They also expressed frustration when they knew that teachers had low expectations of them. To address this, professionals should strive to understand empathetically that African American male adolescents are experiencing normal adolescent concerns, while at the same time being challenged by experiences with systematic oppression in a discriminatory social environment. Professionals should be aware of the power of their ability to connect with these students and help them navigate emotional vulnerability. Social workers and educators can buffer concerns of these adolescents by offering emotional support and helping students to access opportunities for authenticity development. For example, professionals can introduce African American male adolescent to new opportunities and activities. These activities can involve self-discovery as well as an exploration of goals they would like to achieve in the present and the future. When professionals combine these opportunities with encouragement, the students would be more likely to feel secure in their self-worth and authenticity development.

In addition to helping the adolescents directly, professionals also are in the position to help loved ones and other supportive adults develop connections with African American male adolescents. Professionals, especially social workers who provide services through youth serving organizations, can reach loved ones and supportive adults in the community through trainings that create awareness of how to help African American male adolescents navigate their emotional vulnerability.

Policy Implications

Capping Back also has implications to revise and support educational policy. The most relevant initiative related to this is a program called *My Brother's Keeper*. In 2014, the White House initiated My Brother's Keeper to improve outcomes for boys and young men of color nationwide. The task force of My Brother's Keeper (2014) charged with leading the initiative has defined "boys and young men of color" as African Americans, Hispanic American and Native Americans. The current study and grounded theory is only focused on African American males whereas My Brother's Keeper focuses on all boys of color. Nonetheless, Capping Back does provide support, with modifications, for policy recommendations and findings in the My Brother's Keeper's task force report of May 2014. Specifically the theory supports the task force's recommendation for creating fair school environments and encouraging the exploration and planning for life after high school. Additionally, Capping Back provides policy recommendations for relevant physical and mental activities through which to explore authenticity that are not explicitly included in My Brother's Keeper. These recommendations are discussed in more detail below.

Creating a fair school environment. Many of the participants in the study were frustrated with the unfairness they experienced both personally and vicariously in the school environment.

There were numerous stories in the data about teachers and principals unfairly targeting African American males for discipline referrals and special education classes. These stories were consistent with the literature confirming that the disproportionality of discipline referrals and placements in special education classes is prevalent for African American males (Monroe, 2005; Raines, et al 2012; Roderick, 2003; Toldson, 2008). One of the reasons for this disproportionality may be due to the subjective perspective of teachers who may be biased towards African American male students (Raines, et al., 2012). There are two recommendations for addressing this issue: the incorporation of standardized behavioral and mental health screenings, and training and support for school personnel.

Many of the participants in the study felt that teachers were biased against African American males and subjectively singled them out as behavior problems. This results in an overrepresentation of African American males receiving harsh punishments or being sent to alternative schools (Raines, et al, 2012). This issues could be rectified if makers of school policy adopt a universal behavioral and mental health screening process recommended by scholars (Raines, et al., 2012) and also My Brother's Keeper (2014). The proposed screening should use valid and reliable assessment instruments that provide a more transparent method of screening youth for mental and behavioral issues (Raines, et al, 2012). Although this standardized process will eliminate some of the subjectivity in the treatment of these students, school personnel still should be provided with training opportunities that will help increase their awareness of their possible negative attitudes toward them. Also, school personnel should be trained in ways to develop more supportive connections with their students. Further, it is important that all school personnel, including food service, custodial, security and office staff, in addition to teachers,

receive such training. There were many stories in the data of how all staff members at school had the potential to provide connecting relationships with participants.

In order for school staff to connect with students, approaching the relationship with fairness and empathy, the staff themselves must feel supported by school administrators (such as school principals and the school district leadership). Indeed, teachers who are tasked with the challenging job of educating children also may feel that their self-worth and authenticity are challenged (Fernet, et al., 2012). The participants often talked about overcrowded classrooms and depressing physical environments in their schools, and these factors also may affect teachers (Fernet, et al., 2012). It is also important to consider the possibility that some teachers may be externalizing their personal frustrations through unfair treatment of their students. Thus, teachers also may benefit from activities and trainings that assist them with recognizing and navigating their own emotional vulnerability so that they are able to more fully meet the needs of their students. Additionally, school administrators should make efforts to recognize feelings of vulnerability in teachers and support them through encouragement and resources.

Encouraging the exploration and planning for life after high school. College attendance is typically the default future experience expected for students who finish high school (Selingo, 2012). Due to this, many resources and efforts in schools are exerted toward pushing youth through a narrow path to college (Selingo, 2012). However, many African American males may not feel that they are ready for college soon after high school, or may not feel college is the right fit for them. Many participants expressed feeling overwhelmed by the pressure to go to college without having alternative options such as attending a trade school. Finally, some students felt overwhelmed because they wanted to go to college but were not sure if they would be admitted due to their current school performance.

School policy should be flexible enough to provide support for students' exploration and planning of all possible future paths that interest them. Guidance counselors should be trained to help students figure out the best plan for their lives after high school whether their choice is to (a) go to college (b) attend trade school (c) enter the work force immediately or (d) pursue artistic and entrepreneurial endeavors. Schools should incorporate opportunities for the students to learn about and explore future paths through career days, college visits, and other field trips. Nonprofit agencies also can assist schools with this endeavor by linking students with opportunities and supportive adults in the community who can provide practical mentoring and encouragement.

Nurturing authenticity through relevant activities. Participants clearly benefited from relevant physical and mental activities that could promote their exploration of authenticity, or true selves. School policies should support this benefit to students by making provisions for physical and mental activities throughout the school day. Physical activity could include, for example, traditional athletic opportunities such as basketball, but also incorporate contemplative activities. Contemplative activities such as yoga show promise for nurturing mindfulness in and relieving stress in youth (Greenberg & Henderson, 2011). Yoga, therefore, might be beneficial for those who expressed a need to distance themselves from environmental distractions. These environmental distractions included, for example, conflict with peers and the pressures to perform well academically.

School policy also should allow for the incorporation of relevant music with contemplative and instructional activities because many of the participants mentioned the emotional reward they found in music. Combining hip hop music with a contemplative activity such as yoga is a promising activity for some African American male adolescents (Chopra,

2013). Although there are purists who believe that yoga should be conducted in silence, Deepak Chopra found a healing benefit for youth who practiced yoga to music that was culturally relevant. Specifically, Chopra provided an example of a program in which youth practiced yoga to hip hop music that they themselves wrote and produced. The youth in the program first benefitted from the emotional reward of telling their story through the lyrics of the music. They subsequently benefitted from the opportunity to meditate to music that was culturally and personally relevant to them.

Students also would benefit from school policy that allows for music to be integrated throughout the school day. Students should be allowed to listen to headphones while completing in-class assignments. One study found that students' listening to music while studying did not deter them from completing their assignment nor did it predict low-grades (Rosen, Carrier & Cheever, 2012). Although additional studies are needed, the use of music while working doesn't appear to pose any risk, and, in fact, it may be beneficial to some students who otherwise may have difficulty focusing on their work.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

The benefit of Capping Back is that it generated a theory from the main concerns of African American adolescents, rather than researchers' ideas of what this population wants and needs. This study, however has some limitations that can be used to direct future studies. The first is that participants for the study were recruited from a youth program that provides an environment that nurtures positive youth development. Many of the participants I interviewed were within the first year of the program, some of them having started the program only a few weeks prior to the interview. Nonetheless, despite the fact that they may not have been in the program for very long, there is a possibility that their responses were influenced by the

environment in the youth program. Furthermore, due to the fact that the purpose of this study was to generate a theory, further research is needed to perform a confirmatory analyses of the theory and its properties. Specifically, research is needed to further investigate how the different categories of connections with loved ones, peers and supportive adults were able to help participants navigate emotional vulnerability. This research should explore the nuances that occur within those domains and be able to predict which combinations best serve as factors for helping African American males navigate emotional vulnerability. One hypothesis is that African American male adolescents are able to navigate emotional vulnerability when they are able to experience the following in their relationships: mutual love and provision; encouragement and mentoring; and validation and friendship. Future research will be needed to determine if there is a rank order to these qualities, in other words, if one relationship quality weighs more heavily in determining how these males will respond to emotional vulnerability. It did seem clear, however, that the closer a participant was to having relationships that met all three of these qualities, the more confident he would be in navigating emotional vulnerability in a way that affirmed his self-worth and protected his freedom to explore authenticity.

Additionally, there is a gap in the literature on understanding the impacts of emotionally rewarding activity on the mental health and self-development of these youth. One way that this gap can be filled is through studies that employ pilot testing of emotionally rewarding activities. For example, it would be beneficial to discover the influence of music, art, and sports on the self-development of African American males. For example, a pilot study could investigate the effects of playing music in school hallways and allowing students to listen to music through earphones while completing in-class assignments. Another pilot study might involve discovering the effects of contemplative practices such as hip hop yoga or creative practices such as writing and visual

arts. Studies also should investigate how sports and other physical activities are related to the emotional health of these adolescents.

Since Capping Back described a basic social process, it would be useful to explore how the theory might apply to groups other than African American male adolescents. Particularly relevant would be a study exploring how the theory could apply to the experiences of parents, educators and other professionals such as social workers who interact with these adolescents. The data indicated that adults also may experience emotional vulnerability and this may influence how they interact with African American male adolescents. Future research is necessary to examine the extent to which Capping Back would apply to adults who play a central role in the lives of African American male adolescents.

Since the theory emerged from African American male adolescents whose families have a low income, future studies should explore the extent to which the theory accurately conceptualizes the experiences of those whose families have middle to high incomes. Although African American males in middle to high incomes may not be affected as strongly by systemic discrimination, they still experience discrimination to a certain extent. For example, a study (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007) of African American male college students, some of whom attended an Ivy League college, reported being treated with hostility in a climate that discriminates against African American males. This suggests that discrimination can play a role in the life of any African American male. Future research could indicate to what extent this discrimination is experienced differently and also how the need to emotionally self-protect may be the same or different. Also of interest would be a study that explores similarities and differences in emotional vulnerability and protective responses of African American female and male adolescents.

Conclusion

This study generated the theory, Capping Back: A Grounded Theory on African American adolescent Males and Emotional Self-Protection. This theory reconceptualized and reintegrated the research related to African American adolescent males. This grounded theory emerged from their main concern from data collected using classical grounded theory methodology.

A study conducted with classic grounded theory methodology was necessary because, as Brown (2011) has noted, there have been few studies conducted without the influence of preconceived ideas of African American males. Thus, the theory Capping Back has helped to fill the void of studies that are grounded in data from the participants themselves. This study has implications for professionals, scholars, and other adults who are present in the lives of African American male adolescents. Hopefully, this theory leads to empirical studies that will aid more African American males in managing their emotional vulnerability in order to lead productive lives.

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Appendix A- CURRICULUM VITA

Alicia R. LaChapelle-Friday

EDUCATION

- May 2015 The University of Houston
Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work
Cappin Back: A Grounded Theory Study of African American Male Adolescents and Emotional Self Protection
- May 2007 University of Houston
Master of Social Work
- May 2003 Howard University
Bachelor of Arts, English
Minor, Psychology
Phi Beta Kappa

RESEARCH INTEREST

Academic achievement gap (especially among minority youth); racial/ethnic disparities; positive youth development; research methods and program evaluation

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

- June 2011- June 2013 Research Assistant with Dr. Suzanne Pritzker
The Child and Family Center of Innovative Research
- Analyzed quantitative and qualitative data related to the civic engagement of Hispanic youth
 - Conducted mixed method study of youth ethnic/racial label choices
 - Prepared manuscripts for publication
- August 2010-May 2011 Research Assistant with Dr. Patrick Leung
The Child and Family Center of Innovative Research
- Conducted quantitative study of factors that contribute to depression and anxiety in the Latino population
 - Prepared manuscripts for publication
- June 2010-August 2010 Summer Research Fellow
Mathematica Policy Research
- Analyzed data from 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program National Evaluation
- August 2009-May Research Assistant with Dr. Monit Cheung

- 2010
- Prepared and published book chapter on racial disproportionality in the child welfare system
 - Analyzed data for innovative teaching methods in Social Work practice
 - Presented at national conference

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- Spring 2012 Teaching Internship: Minority Males in the Criminal Justice System
The University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work
- Prepared syllabus and activities that focused on understanding factors related to racial and gender disparities in the criminal justice system
 - Developed online course activities to facilitate practical application of in-class material
- Spring 2011 Teaching Fellowship: Social Work Assessment (MSW level)
The University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work
- Prepared syllabus, course lectures, and activities that focused on cross-domain social work assessments
 - Delivered course lectures and facilitated class discussions
- Fall 2010 Teaching Fellowship: Research Knowledge Building and Social Work Practice
The University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work
- Prepared lectures and facilitated class discussion in foundational research methods
 - Mentored students in conceptualizing research ideas and provided guidance as they developed research posters

PUBLICATIONS

Peer reviewed articles

Leung, P., LaChapelle, A., Scinta, A., & Olvera, N., Factors contributing to depressive symptoms among Mexican Americans and other Latinos, *Social Work* (2014), doi: 10.1093/sw/swt047

Pritzker, S., LaChapelle, A. & Tatum, J., "We need their help": Encouraging and discouraging Latino/a adolescent civic engagement through Photovoice, *Children and Youth Services Review* (2012), doi: [10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.07.015](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.07.015).

Book chapter

Cheung, M. & LaChapelle, A. (2011). Disproportionality from the other side: the

underrepresentation of Asian American children. In D.K. Green, K. Belanger, R. McCoy & L. Bullard (Eds.), *Challenging racial disproportionality in child welfare: research, policy, and practice.* (pp. 131-139). Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America Press.

Manuscripts in Progress

LaChapelle, A. & Pritzker, S. (in preparation). Labeling myself: Adolescents' expression of race and ethnicity.

Pritzker, S. & **LaChapelle, A.**, (in preparation). Civic development among urban youth: Understanding contextual influence on civic engagement.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Pritzker, S. & **LaChapelle, A.**, (2013, January). Civic development among urban youth: Understanding contextual influence on civic engagement. Oral session presentation at the Society for Social Work Research, San Diego, CA.

LaChapelle, A., Leung, P.. & Scinta, A. (2012, October). Toward an understanding of depression in the Latino/a American population. Oral session presentation at the Council of Social Work Education, Atlanta, GA.

LaChapelle, A., Cheung, M. & DeLavega, E. (2011, October). Experiential application of transtheoretical integration through a five-way learning model. Oral session presentation at the Council of Social Work Education, Atlanta, GA.

Fellowships

2009 - -2011	University of Houston Graduate Assistant Research Tuition Fellowship
2010 - 2011	University of Houston Doctoral Teaching Fellowship
2010	Mathematica Policy Research Summer Fellowship: Parental influences on the academic success of African American youth.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

January 2011 - Present	The Council on Alcohol and Drugs Houston, Houston, TX <i>Evaluation Coordinator</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluate the agency's yearly program outcomes and present findings• Design and implement program evaluation processes
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- Make recommendations for streamlining program operations

- August - November 2011 Precinct2gether, Houston, Texas
Contract Consultant
- Conducted organizational assessment of the youth program
 - Presented written and oral report on findings and recommendations
- November 2007- August 2009 Change Happens (formerly Families Under Urban and Social Attack), Houston, Texas
Assistant Director
- Managed and developed new initiatives for two after school and summer programs for youth at-risk for the use of drugs and alcohol and academic failure
 - Co-Chair of Kid's University, a week-long event to expose elementary and middle schools students to college opportunities
- May 2007- November 2007 United States House of Representatives, Texas District 22
Field Representative
- Developed and coordinated district outreach initiatives and served as liaison for local community affairs

COMMUNITY AND UNIVERSITY SERVICE

- 2010-2011 The University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work: Perspectives on Social Work Journal. Reviewer
- 2009-2011 Howard University Alumni Association-Houston Chapter. Corresponding Secretary.
- 2010-2011 Our Mother of Mercy Church Girls Rights of Passage Program. Mentor and workshop presenter on girls and self esteem
- 2007 National Association of Black Social Workers-The University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work Chapter. Secretary.

PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIPS

Council on Social Work Education
 Society for Social Work Research