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Abstract

Society's negative images of Black males have devastating consequences for their emotional and spiritual health. The PLAAY project (Preventing Long-term Anger and Aggression in Youth) is a multi-component program that seeks to reduce the anger and aggression of Black urban youth with a history of interpersonal conflict. The program components include in-vivo assessment and intervention during athletic movement (basketball play and escapist martial arts), cultural socialization therapy, and parent empowerment groups. In the martial arts and basketball intervention components, the role of movement is essential to understanding how the boys express their confidence and frustration. This article begins with a reflection on the author's own emotional and cultural anger towards the limits of Western scholarship and collegiality, examines the theological implications of imaging on Black male mental health, and finally describes the development and procedures of PLAAY. Theological and psychological implications of culturally relevant interventions will be discussed.

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The Cultural Socialization of Anger and Healing in African American Males

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Society's negative images of Black males have devastating consequences for their emotional and spiritual health. The PLAAY project (Preventing Long-term Anger and Aggression in Youth) is a multi-component program that seeks to reduce the anger and aggression of Black urban youth with a history of interpersonal conflict. The program components include in-vivo assessment and intervention during athletic movement (basketball play and escapist martial arts), cultural socialization therapy, and parent empowerment groups. In the martial arts and basketball intervention components, the role of movement is essential to understanding how the boys express their confidence and frustration. This article begins with a reflection on the author's own emotional and cultural anger towards the limits of Western scholarship and collegiality, examines the theological implications of imaging on Black male mental health, and finally describes the development and procedures of PLAAY. Theological and psychological implications of culturally relevant interventions will be discussed.

The negative images of Black males have left a hole so deep in the consciousness of the American society that rarely do Americans accept evidence to the contrary. And some of us are pissed about that. This is a rather bold statement coming from a professor of 12 years at an Ivy League institution where the racial politics are equally stressful and detrimental. I'm not ashamed of my association to an "Ivy-League" institution because all institutions carry a certain "peculiar arrogance" about its place in the world. "Peculiar arrogance" is Asante's (1987) description of the cultural hegemonic thinking of Western scholarship which is the arrogance of "not knowing that they do not know what it is that they do not know, yet they speak as if they know what all of us need to know." I do realize, however, that the academy is not the place for civil rights revolution or for changing these perceptions of Black boys pretending to be men, pretending to be big when they are small, pretending to just "be." Being "pissed," as it were, has its advantages, however. I, along with others, have fought within these "ivy" walls to preserve a modicum of dignity for the issues facing people who are different, who cannot speak loudly about their situation. Why is the academy so resistant? I believe it's because there are few

inside the walls willing to critique their own privilege or how this privilege maintains a cultural and intellectual hegemony.

My own response to this hegemony was anger, mostly at my inability to directly upend these subtle racial politics. So over time, I became embittered with my sense of helplessness. The more I engaged in useless "communication" with colleagues, the more helplessness, the more anger. But rather than pretend this anger did not exist or expect hope through flowery words of partnership, I decided to begin at the initial hint of emotional turmoil and from there construct a direct rather than indirect view of Black male psychological struggle. Only when I realized that a key element of self-alienation in the academy is my own distance from the mission that I held dear, did that anger change from an outcome to a motivation. This "distance from mission" is a type of distance from self, from family, from culture, from humanity; and the only one I had to blame was myself.

Eventually, I realized that being with the boys and girls and families I wrote and talked about was a beginning toward the healing of anger at anyone and anything that would dare play those race image games. Face-to-face challenging relationships countered the pseudo-niceness of Western society so prevalent in an academic environment. Why not come down from the ladder of erudite pleading and find peace in the very folks I so often spoke and wrote about? Why not teach the psychological judo skills to combat the emotional effects of negative imaging?

The negative images of criminal and animal for Black males would be more daunting than I thought, however, because they were and are so deeply rooted in the American dream. These images of Black tragedy are juxtaposed against but still reflected within that same "dream" Martin spoke of, and against but within those same "inalienable rights" that Jefferson spoke of, and against but within the "full measure of devotion" that Lincoln spoke of. Black pain, suffering, and tragedy have consistently been the backdrop to America's greatest historical moments, like a call for America to envisage a truer reflection of itself. Yet still, a Black man, a Black people must have some other ways to transform these images of Black maleness beyond the juxtaposition of painful agony and incontrovertible irony. To play "mammy," "driver," "therapist," or "consultant" to the agenda of White Western scholarship without pushing it over a cliff, any cliff, is not the way to heal this anger and pain, nor is it powerful enough to spin new images.

White heroism, worldviews, and eloquence cannot be the standards by which we judge Black male existence in the world. Black youth need new images. Such is the dilemma of the "young boys" we work with. These were "Bay-Bay's kids"—the kids that nobody wanted to watch, and nobody believed could be lovable—the kids that nobody wanted. And some of the boys don't believe they are lovable either. My anger was not the only reason for challenging negative stereotypes. I believe these images constitute a psychological rape or violation of the cruelest order. That is, a management of the image of a people involves narrowing the number of possible selves. This is an egregious problem that cannot simply be managed within a paternalistic welfare, research, or intervention paradigm. New paradigms for explicating the "narrowing" must be developed. As Maya Angelou (1988) once said, "the hardest part about rape on the body of a young child is that she goes from knowing nothing to believing nothing."

Unfortunately, too many of our boys have internalized the hype of their criminal and animal potential and are believing in very little, not even themselves. They literally buy the hype without the hope. And so there must be a different set of strategies and maneuvers we can use to wrestle with the psychological implications of this narrowing of potential selves for young Black males. Who to blame, you say? This is not about blame, and any healing agenda or wrestling match that includes blame is dead before it begins.

Wrestling with Destiny

Spiritually I found hope in the story of Jacob who, for better or worse, lived a hard life; one he was destined to live. Jacob was able to rise above his destiny as a second-class citizen, second-class brother, and second-class human. Jacob's identity image was negative from birth as he was the second twin holding onto the heel of his destined brother. His name in Hebrew is defined as "cheater" or "deceitful one." While he is most famous for swindling his brother out of his birthright by selling him a bowl of pottage (Genesis 25), this was one of many "trifling" incidents in which Jacob's honor as a human being was questioned. In this particular decision-making incident, his brother Esau was hungry and gave Jacob the avenue to cheat him out of his father's blessing. One might attribute this life of petty crime and insolence to Jacob because he was expected to be "a problem" from birth.

Often like Esau, Black males make short-term decisions in exchange for long-term promises. As West (1993) would say, the market driven economy rules the hearts and minds of men and boys, struggling to find themselves. When the kind of clothes and sneakers you have define your manhood such that you would fight to the death to protect those sneakers and clothes, one safely can say you are enslaved to a market driven economy. Boys perpetuate this enslavement by becoming fathers before they are ready to take on fatherhood. They do this by dropping out of school before they can read or write. They do this by not preparing themselves for a world that has minimum standards of acceptability and strong racial exclusion messages. What "goes around comes around" is the motto for the life of Jacob as he was tricked and cheated into working for 14 years instead of seven in order to marry Rachel. His "incarceration" or "jail-time" was increased all because he did not read the fine print in the slave contract.

Like many Black boys, Jacob finally realized his destiny by fighting for life in the face of awe. In Jacob's case the wrestling with the angel was a major battle (Genesis 32), yet he claimed, "I will not let you go until you bless me" (verse 26). In these words you can hear a kind of overwhelmed but purposeful begging. As Black boys are also looking for a blessing they are beset by

multiple Catch-22's which Stevenson and Davis (in press) have called "Catch-33." That is, if you apply effort at avoiding the world's images and stereotypes, you're damned. If you decide to "damn the torpedoes" and use the stereotypes to scare the world into respecting you, you're damned. So your only recourse is to change the rules of the game, or stop playing the image game altogether. Getting out of the game is what Jacob did. At some point, Black boys and Black professors must wrestle with God and with angels if we are to sidestep these perpetual "Catch-22s." This wrestling is ultimately a battle within ourselves that reminds us that our weapons of reason are limited and we must rely on something bigger than our intellectual and social skills to manage the world.

What I am trying to say is that in the gospel and in the appreciation of spirituality are the means to make sense of an irrational and unjust world. The benefit of spirituality is that it provides the meta-analytic checkmate necessary to counter negative image spin-doctoring. Spirituality provides the avenue to avoid worrying about the uncontrollable and to focus instead on what is possible to manage—one's self-alienation and self-appreciation. If the structural intransigence of racism is real, and it is, then Black males need a checkmate, an advantage, that allows them to look above the fray of racial politics and see the matrix for what it is.

This intransigence is identified by DuBois (1903) when he states that America daily asks every person of color a rhetorical question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" Whether you are exceptional or underachieving, rich or poor, strong or weak, Black folks cannot escape the fact that the basic orientation of American racial politics is oriented toward seeing them as a problematic group. Cultural socialization represents a set of messages, interactions and meta-analytic strategies to help youth sidestep the emotional, societal, and interpersonal pitfalls that await them as a function of their marginalized status. One strategy to avoid structuring your life to answer the question "how does it feel to be a problem?" is to pose a different question: a different script. So how does one engage in cultural socialization strategies for Black boys with a history of marginalization and anger at the world, at family, at self? We think it involves beginning with appreciating the anger that so easily besets them, the aggression that accompanies the anger, and then eventually playing with the anger so as to manage it.

Anger and Aggression Among Black Youth

Aggression and exposure to aggression constitute the most stressful and life-threatening health risks for African American youth (Cotten, Resnick, Browne, & Martin, 1994; Durant, Pendergrast & Cadenhead, 1994; Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, & Pardo, 1992; Greenberg & Schneider, 1994; Rosella & Albrecht, 1993; Wilson, 1990). Homicide remains the leading cause of death for Black men aged 15 to 44 years and approximately 33% of all Black men are incarcerated, on parole, or on probation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). A lesser known but disturbing consequence of violence is the physical injury of urban teenagers. Some very serious injuries, about 20% of all injuries to older adolescents, include broken bones, internal injuries, loss of consciousness, and moderate hospital-stay injuries (BJS, 1990; Fitzpatrick & Boldizar, 1993).

Males are more likely to witness or be the victims of physical violence than females (Fitzpatrick & Boldizar, 1993; Shakoor & Chalmers, 1991). The frustrated nature of aggression, anger, and fear of attack makes many bystanders (other youth) vulnerable within a given dispute (Hammond & Yung, 1991, 1993). Exaggerated images of Black violence promote detrimental psychological consequences for youth (Stevenson, 1993), despite the decrease in the violent crime rate in our society and the fact that only 15% of "high-risk youth are responsible for 75% of juvenile offenses committed" (Becker & Rickel, 1998, p. 245). These images are both rebelled against and internalized by Black teens to feebly demonstrate authority within powerless neighborhood and family contexts (Anderson, 1990).

Anger expression has been the topic of clinical intervention research for over two decades (Gibbs, 1993; Grier & Cobbs, 1992). Positively, anger can be motivation to support creative, competent, and productive activity. Anger toward institutions of discrimination is an appropriate response (Balcazar, Suarez-Balcazar, & Fawcett, 1994; Freeman, 1994; Greenberg & Schneider, 1994). Gibbs (1993) states there are detrimental aspects to anger for Black youth that include debilitating physical and psychological symptoms, negative and self-defeating attitudes, poor job performance, self-destructive behaviors, and loss of hope for

the future. The deleterious emotional effects of the expression and suppression of anger for African American males has been documented (Johnson & Greene, 1991).

How Society Responds to African American Male Aggression

The history of intervention with the anger and aggression of African American youth can be subsumed under the rubric of "control" (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Historically, enslavement in America was more than an economic enterprise in which Africans were expected to perform insurmountable labor without pay, under daily threat of rape, injury, and murder, and separated from loved ones and family sometimes with no chance of seeing them again. Enslavement involved psychological as well as physical torture over centuries while America struggled and experimented with developing a free and democratic society.

These unconscionable acts were justifiable only if one takes several assumptions as givens. First, the African was not believed to be human. Second, men, particularly white men in power, had to have sanctioning to engage in any form of aggression in order to protect what was deemed to be within their possession. This could include his property (including land or slaves, however acquired), his family (including wife and children), and his dignity (however defined, but primarily defined with maintaining power, control, and dominance among persons, place, and social status). In the least, the level of dissociation required to commit acts of violence upon the psyche and physical bodies of Africans can be explained if the level of fear and threat to possession is deemed to be extreme (Finkelman, 1992).

There is evidence to suggest that using long-term culturally relevant interventions can be more cost-effective and preventative than a multitude of state-controlled strategies (including probation, detention, incarceration, and infrequent but variable-ratio murder at the hands of police) (Frazier & Bishop, 1995). This is especially true for interventions that consider the historical, contemporary sociopolitical dynamics of American society as well as the intrapsychic, interpersonal, and familial struggles and strengths of the African American male. It can be said that the fact that serious injustices caused by authorities like police against the Black populace occurs sporadically only solidifies the psychologically damaging and horrific impact. This claim

would be consistent with behavior modification theorists' and researchers' long-held claims of the importance of variable-ratio schedules on the maintenance of certain behaviors (e.g., in this case, fear and distrust of social authority). The theoretical foundation for the development of culturally relevant interventions must consider historical and ecological as well as cultural contexts that influence individual behaviors and perceptions of Black youth.

A key flaw in current aggression intervention research is that very few studies address culture as a factor in youth emotional functioning. Cultural history, style and identity often mediate the peer interaction aggression of Black youth. Focusing on culture can address the emotional dynamics linked with aggression, however. Additionally, it is believed that racism is a stressor and a contributor to poor anger management and health and cultural socialization is key to improving adolescent emotional adjustment (Stevenson, 1997; Stevenson, Reed, Bodison, & Bishop, 1997; Stevenson & Davis, in press).

Playing with Anger

PLAAY stands for Preventing Long-term Anger and Aggression in Youth. The purpose of this multi-systemic intervention research is to assess, intervene with, and reduce anger and aggression during athletics (e.g., basketball play) for African American youth that have a history of aggression and to do so within a cultural-ecological resilience framework. The PLAAY intervention includes (a) martial arts aggression reduction curriculum (MAAR), (b) face-to-face in-vivo anger management coaching during basketball play (PLAAY); (c) community-based parent empowerment education (COPE); and (d) a rites of passage program (ROPE). The intervention is set to promote the development of safe and reliable relationships between youth and three key role model groups (i.e., peers, undergraduate students, and older adult volunteers) who want to spend time improving young people's lives. Over a five-year period, 240 (80 in each of years 2-4) at-risk youth between the ages of 10-19, who were identified by teachers and parents as at-risk were recruited from urban community programs. These youth were randomly assigned to either experimental or control groups, then followed up to 24 months after the intervention. The primary objectives were to: (1) collaborate with urban discipline schools to recruit aggressive youth and to reliably train project staff; (2)

develop measures that assess racial socialization, anger expression, and successful family and neighborhood contexts; (3) implement a cultural socialization intervention to reduce youth aggression during and after basketball play; (4) evaluate the efficacy, generalizability, and social validity of PLAAY to reduce aggression post-intervention, across settings, and compared to a control group; and (5) disseminate the results to local and national professional and educational constituencies.

It is because movement and athletics are meaningful contexts where the identity strivings and emotional expression of teenagers are stressed and bolstered, that we are so interested in this multi-systemic medium. Unfortunately, the literature on youth aggression lacks consideration of the cultural and ecological realities within the social contexts of Black youth, who make up a disproportionate percent of students at risk for school failure and social ostracism. PLAAY attempts to look for resilience of youth with disabilities within their cultural and ecological experiences.

Several culturally relevant theories that are sensitive to psycho-historical racism, cultural-ecological politics, within-race differences, racial identity development, anger and stress management, and neighborhood social capital were drawn upon to create PLAAY. African psychology places culture, socialization, and empowerment in the center of the explication and amelioration of Black youth behavior (Nobles, 1991). Within the concept of diunitality ("both-and"), opposites are synthesized rather than contrasted as in "either-or" conceptualizations. Empowerment theory proposes that individuals who gain and maintain control over their lives are likely to be more psychologically and behaviorally adjusted than those who do not (Zimmerman, Israel, Schulz, & Checkoway, 1992). Person-environment fit theories view stress as related to how the individual perceives, responds to, and is influenced by social, physical, and emotional environments (Kaminoff & Proshansky, 1982). Spencer's phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory presupposes five components: risk contributors, stress engagement, coping methods, emergent identities, and life stage outcomes (Spencer, 1999). This model advances the understanding of and intervention with the meaning-making experiences of minority youth. Social disorganization theory emphasizes the need for socially meaningful adult relationships in the lives of youth, and posits that the more socially disorganized a community is in supervision, closeness, and participation, the greater is the risk of negative youth health outcomes (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Massey, 1990; Sampson, 1992).

In summary, the theoretical underpinnings of PLAAY stress the importance of a multiple systems (peers-, young and elder-, family, and community leaders), culturally-relevant, "in-the-moment" intervention to reduce long-term anger expression. Particular foci involve empowering youth and parents, strengthening their racial identity and social supports, challenging cognitions about when aggression is appropriate, and tooling them with anger management skills.

Why Use Athletics to Reduce Anger for Youth?

Research on Black young men has identified the protective importance of "cool pose" coping strategies (Langley, 1994; Majors & Billson, 1992). The cool pose includes behaviors such as pretending to be apathetic to social convention, resistance to authority figures, and physical demonstrations of power, all designed to prevent negative perceptions from devaluing the self-esteem of the individual. The pose can become destructive if it keeps Black youth from expressing true feelings of anger and resolving them. Cool pose behaviors are often integrated in athletics where cultural gender identity is expressed in style, creativity, and movement.

Athletic aggression is a relevant arena for observing and intervening with emotional difficulties of youth (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986; Elias & Soth, 1988; Thirer & Rampey, 1979; Wandzilak, Carroll, & Ansorge, 1988). On the playground or court, a variety of angry and aggressive outbursts occur. The martial arts component in PLAAY is situated to teach boys how to manage their emotions internally through exercises that stimulate minor frustration. These same frustrations can be found in the multiple physical contacts in basketball play where the focus is on external expression of anger. We believe that the process of simultaneously getting frustrated and successfully managing these frustrations is key to the prevention of long-term aggression and development of prosocial relationships.

Sport psychologists and researchers have begun to understand the emotional and mental health benefits of athletics participation, sports intervention, and effective coaching for wayward

youth (Barnett, Smoll, & Smith, 1992; Bell, 1997; Bell & Suggs, 1998; Smoll & Smith, 1998). Elias and Soth (1988) found that basketball contributed to aggressive youth feeling less threatened when receiving critical feedback, more cohesiveness as a group, and more comfortable in developing friendships with team members. All of this research points to the athletics of Black youth as a worthwhile in-vivo arena for improving prosocial behaviors.

Why Use A Cultural Socialization Model?

Racial socialization represents different processes whereby families prepare youth to survive in a world hostile to race. Interventions must integrate racial and cultural socialization strategies if they expect to meet the cultural and emotional needs of African American youth (Stevenson, in press; Stevenson & Davis, in press). We believe that cultural and racial socialization are necessary as buffers to protect African American youth from the onslaught of subtle and blatant racial violence. It is assumed that these forces are systemic and operate apart from any identifiable institutional support. Without protection, it is assumed that youth are at risk for psychological maladjustment. Active cultural socialization is necessary since youth themselves may be unaware of these onslaughts. It is equally true that these onslaughts can be exaggerated and thus leave many hyper-vigilant youth at risk for seeing danger where little exists, thus taking them out of the opportunity loops that society has available.

The journey toward culturally relevant psychological interventions must make several stops along the way. One stop must include appreciating and embracing the cultural history as well as the concomitant expression of anger of the people under study. The good, bad, and the ugly of one's history must be identified and recognized if psychological healing is to take place and long before reconciliation of these disparate aspects of the extended self can be expected. Another stop should include an integration of the cultural style and language of the people who are under investigation. A third stop must include the recognition that the dynamics of mental health are intertwined with the need for intellectual and psychological liberation as well as economic and political power. A fourth stop must somehow integrate ways to manage the subtle and the blatant statements of symbolic racism in the lives of the participants/clients as it pertains to their unique experiences (i.e., Black males). Finally, in our research endeavors novel and creative methods must accompany this journey from beginning to end where the "usual suspects" of methodology and interpretation within the Western psychological canon are questioned and critiqued for lacking knowledge of people of African descent. The PLAAY project seeks to integrate multiple theoretical and intervention perspectives that entertain the relevance of culture and ecologies while simultaneously including the daily experiences that Black male youth endure. While paradoxical in nature, we think that playing with anger has potential to match the myriad subtleties and obtuse ironies of American justice and freedom for Black boys who live in a world expecting them to be a problem.

Can Black Boys Get a Name Change?

When God changed Jacob's name to Israel, meaning "The prince who wrestled with God and men and prevailed," it was a moment of ultimate redemption and rewriting of the image script. By changing our name, God takes the very essence of our identities and allows us to start anew. For Jacob, starting anew comes only after facing God and one's past and future simultaneously such that those images we carry with us become the motivation we use to cross over to a different place. Jacob was now free to write his own life script. In the life of Jacob are the ingredients for understanding the challenges of living within a limited negative image paradigm. Wrestling with the images, facing one's limitations and Catch-33 status, and emotionally and spiritually overstepping animalistic and criminal destinies constitute the best that a spirituality-based therapeutic model can offer. The wrestling place was called "Peniel" which means "I have seen God face to face and my life has been preserved" (Genesis 32:28).

In order to protect the future of African American boys, we must first appreciate the anger that underlies many of their life decisions and track this anger to its roots. Second, we must rewrite the scripts and change the paradigms that house the research and intervention questions seeking to understand and help Black males. This will undoubtedly involve a critique of the privilege that researchers and the professionals benefit from and which unwittingly undermines the appreciation and influence of anger in folks from marginalized communities. Finally, the future of African American males will rely upon a cultural

socialization agenda that promotes the internalization of meta-analytic psychological strategies to help boys wrestle with self, other men and women, and God, thus helping them to step-over the images that are historic and relentless. But there must be a struggle. As Frederick Douglass (1857) so eloquently described antislavery,

> Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters…. Power concedes nothing without a demand…. Without a struggle, there is no progress. It may be a moral one, or a physical one, but there must be a struggle…. (Holland, 1895, p. 261)

Then, and only then can one's anger subside enough for peace to reside in its place.

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