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AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS AND PHYSICAL AGGRESSION: A RESILIENCE STUDY ON HOW ADULT AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN OVERCAME PHYSICALLY AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR POST ADOLESCENCE

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Abstract

Adolescent African American girls who use physical aggression to resolve conflict are perceived to be a menace to society. Because adolescence is a developmental stage in the life cycle, society should understand that for many girls fighting is nothing more than a phase that these girls may eventually outgrow. Much like other adolescent youth, some African American girls who display physically aggressive behaviors can graduate from high school, go on to college and lead successful lives. This qualitative study focused on the resilience of African American girls who used physical violence in adolescence but later made a conscious decision to resolve conflict non-violently. In depth interviews were conducted with 10 college-educated African American women ages 24-46 that used physical violence to resolve conflict as an adolescent but as an adult learned alternate strategies. Findings included themes of age of first fight; how the girls learn to fight; the realization that fighting became an option for resolving conflict; was fighting enjoyable; were they bullied or harassed prior to fight; how family resolved conflict; how were disputes resolved within their community; source of fights in high school; the decision to go to college; how conflict was resolved in college; resolving conflict after college; the decision to change; reflections on the need to use physical violence as an African American woman. Findings suggest that in late adolescence or early adulthood the women come to the realization that the consequences for using physically aggressive behaviors are too great and that they have to find a more positive way of resolving conflict. Implications for clinical practice and future research are also discussed.

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**AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS AND PHYSICAL AGGRESSION: A RESILIENCE
STUDY ON HOW ADULT AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN OVERCAME
PHYSICALLY AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR POST ADOLESCENCE**

Kietra Winn

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2013

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the women who participated in this study. The stories shared demonstrated the resilience of the African American woman and her ability to succeed against the odds. Your insight and wisdom will be a source of encouragement to adolescent African American girls everywhere.

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Abstract

African American girls and physical aggression: a resilience study on how adult African American women overcame physically aggressive behavior post adolescence

Kietra Winn

Ram A. Cnaan, Ph.D., Dissertation Chair

Adolescent African American girls who use physical aggression to resolve conflict are perceived to be a menace to society. Because adolescence is a developmental stage in the life cycle, society should understand that for many girls fighting is nothing more than a phase that these girls may eventually outgrow. Much like other adolescent youth, some African American girls who display physically aggressive behaviors can graduate from high school, go on to college and lead successful lives. This qualitative study focused on the resilience of African American girls who used physical violence in adolescence but later made a conscious decision to resolve conflict non-violently. In depth interviews were conducted with 10 college-educated African American women ages 24-46 that used physical violence to resolve conflict as an adolescent but as an adult learned alternate strategies. Findings included themes of age of first fight; how the girls learn to fight; the realization that fighting became an option for resolving conflict; was fighting enjoyable; were they bullied or harassed prior to fight; how family resolved conflict; how were disputes resolved within their community; source of fights in high school; the decision to go to college; how conflict was resolved in college; resolving conflict after college; the decision to change; reflections on the need to use physical violence as an African American woman. Findings suggest that in late adolescence or early adulthood the

women come to the realization that the consequences for using physically aggressive behaviors are too great and that they have to find a more positive way of resolving conflict. Implications for clinical practice and future research are also discussed.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Historical context adult women and their influence (family)

In some African American families physically aggressive behavior is a cultural way of settling disputes. Among African American women, fighting can be traced back to the origins of sexism, racism and poverty. In an earlier time in history, women of color fought to protect themselves against sexual harassment and sexual violence from White males in the Jim Crow South (Stevens, 2002). These women not only fought to protect themselves and their daughters against sexual predators, but also fought as a means of defense against societal atrocities such as, racial discrimination, gender inequality and poverty. Hooks stated, assailed on the one hand by white patriarchy and on the other hand by sexist black men and racist women, black women must be vigilant in our struggle to challenge and transform the devaluation of black womanhood (Hooks, 1995, p.79). To that end, fighting is an opportunity to release the repressed anger about the negative images, and mistreatment that African American women have endured for centuries (Collins, 2000, pg.79).

As the struggle continued and African American women move toward achieving economic stability there are still many deterring challenges facing them in the guise of negative images in the media which shapes societal thinking about African American women and who she is, her dependence on the government or “the system” due to racial, educational and financial inequities and the level of disrespect she encounters on a daily basis (Collins, 1998). All things considered, some women find it necessary to employ an aggressive demeanor or fight per se, to overcome the multiple obstacles that hinder their progress toward upward mobility (Hooks, 1995;

Collins, 1998). Ultimately, the constant struggle and the anger that is produced from it becomes a part of daily living for many African American women because it is the only way they know how to survive. Subsequently when African American women become mothers, their children also experience multiple atrocities from society and bare witness to their mother's anger and response.

Lorde (2007) discussed how her mother's greatest gift to her was silence as it taught her survival skills:

My mother taught me to survive from a very early age by her own example. Her silences also taught me isolation, fury, mistrust, self-rejection, and sadness. My survival lay in learning how to use the weapons she gave me, also, to fight against those things within myself, unnamed.

And survival is the greatest gift of love. Sometimes, for Black mothers, it is the only gift possible, and tenderness gets lost. My mother bore me into life as if etching an angry message into marble. Yet I survived the hatred around me because my mother made me know, by oblique reference, that no matter what went on at home, outside shouldn't oughta be the way it was. But since it was that way outside, I moved in a fen of unexplained anger that encircled me and spilled out against whomever was closest that shared those hatred selves (pp. 149-150).

The interactions between African American mothers and society are the frameworks that children draw upon when faced with a challenge. Because the child is not sophisticated enough to respond to challenges in a different way, they often use physical aggression to resolve their

disputes with one another (Lorde, 2007). The purpose of these implicit lessons is to teach the child the courage to stand up in the face of adversity. When an African-American young person has to fend for him or herself one of the few avenues to do so and release pressure is aggression. But, aggression is not and cannot be limited to interactions with the oppressive environment. Once a young person uses aggression to resolve conflicts it can easily become a normative behavior. Therefore the origin of the use of aggression in the lives of African American women provides some insight as to why many African American adolescent girls use violence to resolve disputes.

Physical Aggression – Definition

Physical aggression (also known as overt or direct aggression) is when both parties become involved in a physical altercation which is characterized by hitting, punching, yelling, etc. In most cases, physical aggression occurs after intervals of social or relational aggression. The difference between physical and non physical types of aggressive behavior is that it consists of episodes where individuals seek to damage the self-esteem or social standing of their peers through insults, verbal rejection, curses, gossip, rumor spreading, and social ostracism (Talbot, Celinska, Simpson & Coe, 2002). More than relational aggression, physical aggression has consequences that can be detrimental long term especially when African American girls rely on aggressive behavior as a means to solve conflicts.

For example, when girls are involved in a fight they are more likely to be suspended or expelled from school due to the disruptive and violent nature of the altercation. These girls are more likely to be reprimanded by school officials for physical aggression. For the girl who has created a persona as a fighter, the school is the right audience that she needs to further her reputation however it is also the least tolerant environment.

In my own experience, I have met multiple African-American women who speak about fond memories of their adolescent years that often include some type of aggressive behavior. In some cases the aggressive behavior could be a result of a dispute with their boyfriend or with another girl about their boyfriend, responding to the taunts of a bully or perhaps they may have been the bully themselves. Taken together, what many African American women have in common is that they have used physical aggression at some point during their adolescent years.

For many of these women, their stories of physical aggression do not always end with the girl walking away in victory. Sometimes the consequences can produce a lifetime of regret. The consequences can include; being expelled from school in their senior year and having to complete a GED instead of a diploma, dismissal from a university in their freshman year and unable to enter another college or the visible “war wounds” in the way of scars left on their face and neck as a result of a fight that never went away. In some case they have to live knowing that they harmed or scarred an innocent victim and at other times that their aggression made them unattractive to friends and possible dates.

Despite all of these repercussions, if these women were asked if they would fight again most of them would say yes because in their world fighting was synonymous with survival. In their world only wimps and losers avoided fighting and for those who graduated from fighting looking back at it brings back fond memories of this is how it once was. What is fascinating is that of the women I questioned they admitted that even today, they would encourage their adolescent daughters to try to resolve the dispute amicably and if it continued then fighting would be necessary to stop the harassment. They talk about it the same way veterans talk about the army: “I wish it was not needed, but it is a character building experience.”

The Problem

Aggression among adolescent girls continues to be a problem that deserves more attention because of its increasingly violent nature. In the past fifty years, the lack of research on aggression in adolescent girls may have contributed to fewer reported incidents. The assumption was that violent behavior was limited to males, thus the majority of the research focused on male deviance, with no emphasis on the problem of violence among females. Attention to girls and aggression was not reported in the literature until the 1990's, probably because by that time, violent incidents among female youth had risen to levels that no longer could be ignored (Moretti, Holland, & McKay, 2001). Understanding the nature of aggression among girls, including possible triggers and links to demographic factors, will enable clinicians, educators, and others responsible for overseeing youth to be able to address the underlying causes of physical aggression among girls before altercations take place.

Society expects girls to be timid and use relational or indirect aggression to resolve disputes instead of physical aggression (Jones, 2010). When girls step outside of this norm, they are classified as not being feminine and often viewed as delinquent. Once adolescent girls receive these messages they begin to craft a persona as a fighter. They are perceived and referred to as a fighter and that label tends to stick. This is especially the case if they are not hopeful about a normative future that includes successful education, gainful vocation, and traditional marital life (Jones, 2010). For African American girls negative labels that portray delinquency can be detrimental to their self esteem, but once they develop a reputation as a fighter and realize that they are good at it, they come to accept this fate not because they want to but they are

recognized for doing something well. Given the limited avenues for social mobility it is easy to see why young African American female fighters cling to the label and the respect it brings.

African American Girls and Adolescent Identity Formation

Being an African American girl creates a social identity that encompasses multiple meaningful identities to deal with the myriad complexities of coming of age in a racist society (Stevens, 2002). As with most adolescent youth, African American girls look to adults as role models when searching for an identity to adopt. During the early stages of adolescence, the adolescent commits to gender, racial and ethnic values, and norms to create a social persona—presentation of the self to the outside world that embodies a social identity (Stevens, 2002). Throughout the adolescent period, youth will try-on multiple personas until they find one that is suitable. This is known as self-presentation (Goffman, 1959).

Self presentation can be traced back to Goffman who referred to the performance of an individual as a mask (1959). He explained that the mask represents the ideals that we have formed about ourselves and the roles that we are trying to live up to which in turn is the self that we would like to be (Goffman, 1959). For the adolescent girl who uses physical aggression to resolve disputes, this identity is carefully crafted to ensure that she receives status and that her reputation of being “tough” is preserved.

Inner-city girls, like most American girls, feel pressure to be “good”, “decent”, and “respectable” (Jones, 2010). Yet, like some inner-city boys, they may also feel pressure to “go for bad” or to establish a “tough front” in order to thwart potential challengers on the street or in the school setting. They too believe that fighting is necessary (Jones, 2010). In doing so, these girls, and especially those girls who become deeply invested in crafting a public persona as tough

or violent, risk evaluation by peers, adults, and outsiders as “street” or “ghetto” (Jones, 2010). Over time, the public performance can become part of the girl’s personality which can serve as a defense mechanism to guard her true identity.

Goffman called the performance a front which is the behavior that is displayed outwardly to convince others that this is their true character (1959). The front is comprised of physical appearance and manner or behavior of the performer. Like an actor, the girl who uses physical aggression rehearses this role daily to ensure that the persona is believable. In essence the front is a type of deception but with a grain of truth. It is an act of taking one element of oneself and magnifying it to represent one’s whole while hiding other aspects of one’s personality and being. Once the chosen self is selected and acted it is often hard for others to see the individual in a different light. What these girls often grapple with is when they want to be perceived as “good” others are not so willing to allow them to switch characters because they are known as a “tough girl”.

Many people adopt more than one self-presentation and shift them based on the circumstances and needs. The ability to switch personas from “good” to “tough” is similar to what many African American girls have seen in their mothers and other women, which is known as code switching, or shifting (Anderson, 1999; Jones, 2010 & Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). For African American women, shifting occurs in response to oppression to ensure survival in society (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). More than any other group African American women use shifting to serve and satisfy others by hiding their true selves to placate White colleagues, Black men and other segments of the community (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Adolescent African American girls have observed and learned how to navigate their environment by copying

the behaviors of their mothers and other women in their community. In an environment where survival is necessary women will prepare the next generation of girls by teaching them these “unwritten” rules of life even if it sometimes means switching personas to ensure success or safety (Jones & Shorter-Godden, 2003).

Contributing Factors

Transferring the message to fight to the next generation

In the theme of survival some African American mothers pass on the message to be aggressive to future generations who in turn resolve their disputes in the same manner as their mothers and grandmothers (Jones, 2010; Pugh-Lilly, Neville, & Poulin, 2001). Over the years girls in families with this belief system have watched how their mothers have been treated by society and how she handles each exchange. Depending on the severity of the infraction, the mother has to make a choice to determine how she will address the issue. Shifting from compliance to aggressive behavior, the daughters noted that using aggression has its merit and gives one a special positive status.

These incidents then shape the girls perception of how disputes should be handled or not. Having a front row seat to the injustices her mother faces on a daily basis – sometimes moment by moment—the adolescent develops deep resentment and anger toward society based on the way her mother is treated and how her family is viewed in the public eye. The anger and hostility then fosters a mentality of trying to dispel those negative perceptions about her and her family due to their impoverished situation (Collins, 1998). This in mind, the adolescent girl then lashes out at anything that symbolizes or seeks to place her in that box of being a poor helpless black girl. By experiencing racism and sexism—sometimes at young age—the African American adolescent girl’s view of herself becomes shaped by these events and therefore her mother’s sole

purpose is to teach their daughter how to defend themselves against any type of threat that may negatively impact her self-esteem. Often, the one place that a girl can get ahead is among her peers. Getting to a state where her peers will revere her and respect her requires using aggression and coming to be known as a fighter.

In addition to raising girls to withstand the racism and sexism they are likely to encounter as grown-up African American women in America, mothers, grandmothers, caring for their children's children, and other-mothers, mired in the trenches of poverty, must teach girls how to manage the physical threats they are likely to encounter in everyday life (Jones, 2010). At a young age many African American parents encourage fighting as a means to build a tough exterior in girls so that they will not be taken advantage of in the cruel world of racism and sexism that so many African American women face. By defending themselves, parents feel that their daughter will develop skills to become assertive. Not only will fighting release anger, but it will build self-esteem when faced with a challenge especially if the girl is triumphant in the battle. Children are often told by their family not to allow another person to "put their hands on them" and if they got into a fight and lost, the child could expect to be punished when they got home or sent back out for a re-match with the other child.

When fighting is encouraged in families, the child perceives the message to fight as being not only necessary, but the best method to resolve a dispute. Stevens (2002) asserted that the family is the primary context for the adolescents' first meanings of racial, ethnic, and gender roles. To that end, some girls use fighting as a means to resolve any issue. Numerous girls fight as a result of being bullied, perceived disrespect or simply because they know no other way to resolve a disagreement. Many believe that girls who resolve their disputes with violence are

simply delinquent, lacking familial support, but what society may fail to understand is that often they are encouraged by a legacy of fighters (Jones, 2010; Pugh-Lilly, Neville, & Poulin, 2001). In other words, fighting is a part of their culture. For most young African-American girls fighting is not a personal deficiency or inability to assess social cues. For these girls, fighting is a social expectation and a cultural norm that is generationally transmitted (Jones, 2010; Pugh-Lilly, Neville, & Poulin, 2001). It is part of their social inheritance.

Esping- Anderson states that scientific evidence suggests that social inheritance is based on a persons' ancestral origin which is derived from the social standing of their father and grandfather (2005). The thought is that those who come from a legacy of economic deprivation has implications about their future and can predict that they will also follow the same pattern of behavior (Esping-Anderson, 2005). To break the cycle intervention needs to occur to teach families how to achieve upward mobility through education and the attainment of financial stability. Until the intervention occurs the pattern of behavior will continue and be passed on to future generations. Just as lessons of how to maintain social status and financial stability are transferred to the next generation so are the norms of how to resolve disputes that can lead to delinquent behaviors.

Shoemaker's (2005) reference to inheritance assumes that there is a correlation between delinquency and inheritance. The assumption is that behavior in general is determined by factors that are not only present at birth, but transmitted, biologically, from parent to child (Shoemaker, 2005, pg. 27). The generational inheritance explanation also assumes that delinquency must be caused by bad or negative sources, thus ignoring the possibility that a good cultural trait might result in both good and bad consequences (Shoemaker, 2005, pg. 27).

In general, therefore, the factor, or factors, that underlies delinquency are considered abnormal or aberrant (Shoemaker, 2005, pg. 27). Just like wealth is transferred to the next generation, so are culturally transmitted wisdom and lessons learned from previous generations such as how to handle disputes. While many mothers prefer that their daughters would not fight, sometimes it is necessary (Jones 2010; Ness, 2004 & Pugh-Lilly 2001). Because of their previous experience some African American women socialize their girls for survival by teaching them to use aggressive tactics such as fighting (figuratively and literally) to protect their personal boundaries.

Contrary to popular belief, this presents a dilemma for women who are trying to be good mothers and for those women who are committed to raising African American, inner-city girls to become respectable Black ladies (Jones, 2010). Passing on such lessons to adolescent girls violates widely held beliefs about appropriate behavior for girls and seems far apart from commonly held understandings about what it means to be a good mother (Jones, 2010, p.29). Jones (2010) and Ness (2010) both discuss how mothers who live in the inner city must come to terms with the fact that they live in a violent community thus they have to prepare their daughters to face this reality.

Black mothers raising daughters in today's inner city continue to work to instill a strong sense of independence in their daughters and encourage them to recognize their own essential role in maintaining their own well-being. Ness confirms this by indicating that mothers typically play a significant role in actively encouraging their daughters to fight their own battles (2004). Part of the lesson to be learned is self-sufficiency whether they have to fight a girl in school or support themselves later on as a single mother (Ness, 2004). Mothers teach their daughters to

identify and respond to actual and potential threats, and encourage girls to realize that one of their most valuable resources is their own strength. By the time urban, adolescent girls reach their late teens they have internalized these lessons of self-reliance and independence, usually in a way that includes an acknowledgement that violence is a fact of inner-city life (Jones, 2010, Ness, 2004).

Fighting and Street Culture

Physically aggressive behavior is not only learned in families, but also from street culture. According to Ness (2004) fighting by girls is commonplace in certain neighborhoods which can only be explained by considering the social realities and local cultural norms. Children who are raised in environments where violence is the norm are taught basic survival tactics which Elijah Anderson referred to as the “Code of the Street”. These unwritten rules detail when and how to respond when faced with a challenge (Anderson, 1999).

At the heart of the code is the issue of respect—loosely defined as being treated “right” or being granted one’s “props” (or proper due) or the deference one deserves (Anderson, 1999). With the right amount of respect, individuals can avoid being bothered in public (Anderson, 1999). African American girls who are faced with a challenge from another girl, view their aggressive behaviors as survival strategies much like the code of the street (Pugh-Lilly et al., 2001). These girls often feel as though fighting back is the only action that would ensure a sense of psychological or physical safety within their environment (e.g. to show others that they are not “punks”, or to get aggressive girls off their “backs”) (Pugh-Lilly et al, 2001, pg. 150).

The code serves as a guide to behavior in communities where resources are scarce and the only means of survival is by dominance of others. The code of the street is actually a cultural

adaptation to a profound lack of faith in the police and the judicial system—and in others who would champion one’s personal security (Anderson, 1999). An example of this behavior is how participants in the study conducted by Pugh-Lilly et al., reported that they perceived assistance from other individuals (e.g. police, school officials) as unhelpful and counterproductive (Pugh-Lilly, et al., 2001, pg. 150). To that end, girls in the same predicament will find it necessary to take matters into their own hands much like the way disputes are handled within their family and neighborhood.

Families govern themselves and the way they handle disputes is in accordance with how they are settled within their community. Pugh-Lilly and her colleagues also mentioned that the parents and other family members of the girls in the study actually told some of the girls to defend themselves and not let anyone take advantage of them (2001, pg. 149). Furthermore, when a girl does not fight back and the parent is aware of a pending dispute they (the parent) will often become angry at their daughter for not fighting back (Pugh-Lilly et al, 2001). For people who are not familiar with the “code”, the perception is that parents are teaching their children to be violent, but rather they are teaching their children how to defend themselves if they are challenged by an aggressive peer.

The parents’ intention is not to condone violence but they understand that their child who is raised in a non-violent home may come in contact with other children who are trained to routinely use aggression. This in mind, parents who live and raise their family by a different creed are concerned that their children will be unprepared to handle themselves if they are confronted by a bully (Pugh-Lilly et al., 2001). Though families with a decency orientation are usually opposed to the values of the code of the street, they often reluctantly encourage their

children's familiarity with it in order to enable them to negotiate the inner-city environment (Anderson, 1999).

Moreover, weakness must never be shown. What this means is that bullying is a tactic used to incite fear in another person to prove their superiority in order to gain the respect of the community. Knowledge of the code is thus largely defensive, and it is necessary for operating in public (Anderson, 1999). Because the code is all that the person regardless of gender knows, it is used in every situation they encounter because they have never learned another way to resolve their issues. Therefore, this message is interpreted by users of the code that it should be used in every situation whether conflict is present within the community or outside.

Depending upon the culture, the person will adapt their behavior according to the expectations of their environment. The individual will develop a reputation based on how they are able to navigate the "rules" and struggle to maintain it. If she is known as a person who wins battles either verbally or physically, she will adapt this strategy and strengthen the persona to the point that it is believable to others.

Differences among African American Girls

While generational violence is only one reason why girls fight, there are multiple explanations as to why a girl would resort to violence. As stated previously, girls, like the women in past generations, may choose to use violence as a way to redefine the traditional role of a woman. The anxiety that comes with following and learning all of the rules to become a proper young lady may be a daunting task for some African American girls especially since the model of femininity is based on images in mainstream society and the media that does not look like them. Perhaps unhealthy images such as: arguing, fighting ostracizing and other messages

that they receive from society may explain the assertive direct nature in which some African American girls use physical aggression when it comes to resolving conflict with their peers (Crothers, Field & Kolbert, 2005).

For some middle class adolescent girls physical aggression is an attractive option to them because of the rebellious nature of this stage in development. Because these girls are reared in families with an orientation toward decency fighting gives them an opportunity to demonstrate to their peers that they can be tough as well as get good grades. Pattillo-McCoy addresses this issue in that in Black middle class neighborhoods there are substantial resources to present non-street alternatives for young people (2000), but many of these youth make a conscious decision to befriend aggressive youth because of the perceived excitement and in some cases popularity that the youth brings.

Therefore, Black middle class youth will often interact with friends who embrace components of both street and decent lifestyles as well as neighborhood adults who set a similar example (Pattillo-McCoy, 2000). Perhaps the appeal to the middle class African American girl could be a result of years of bullying from peers because she was not like other girls who displayed a more aggressive stance. For example, if the middle class African American girl is more likely to be studious, is well liked among boys and teachers and lives in a more affluent neighborhood than the other girls, she would be a target for those girls who had a different experience.

After multiple episodes of bullying sometimes African American girls feel that fighting is necessary because it is the last resort to stop the harassment. Contrary to popular belief, many girls state that they do not want to fight and have reported bullying incidents to school

administrators, but because the situation was not resolved the girls take matters into their own hands (Pugh-Lilly et al., 2001). Since school staff fail to intervene on bullying episodes at the girls' first report, students will not report future incidents and therefore will fight when prompted. Quite often, the girls feel that in order to stop the harassment they must stand up and fight.

What is also known is that girls who fight in school are very likely to be suspended or expelled. According to Pugh-Lilly et al. (2001), the girls who participated in her study felt that racism was involved in the reasons for the expulsion, as their complaints were never investigated by their principals. In addition, these girls observed that an unusually large number of Black students at one of the alternative high schools were expelled from a specific high school, suggesting that the principal of the school was biased against Black kids (Pugh-Lilly et al., 2001, pg. 150).

When it comes to African American girls and aggression, all too often the voices of these girls are ignored, which leaves them no choice but to fend for themselves when they are faced with a challenge much like the code of the street (Anderson, 1999; Pugh-Lilly et al., 2001; Jones, 2010). In a study conducted by Talbot and her colleagues, teachers and parents intervened when a fight or threat of a fight became physical, but girls themselves intervened in episodes of social aggression which suggest that adults were either unaware of the harassment or thought that the episodes were beyond their control (Talbot et al., 2002, pg. 214). A significant finding of the study determined that school personnel are often reactive in their approach and should pay attention to relationships and interactions that can lead to violent episodes (Talbot et al., 2002).

An understanding of the development of aggression in African American girls is further complicated because many of the theoretical models of antisocial behavior were developed based

on work with White samples (Miller-Johnson, Moore, Underwood, & Coie, 2005). While more attention is focused on other aggressive behaviors in girls such as relational and social aggression, physical aggression in girls has been neglected. Even when researchers have focused on aggression among ethnic minority youth, they have often neglected girls, which suggest that only boys use physical aggression (Miller-Johnson et al., 2005). Furthermore, youth aggression is often treated as pathology or a pathway to criminal activity and not as an age and community appropriate behavior from which one can mature out of at a later stage of development.

If aggression is socially imposed on young African American girls as a tool of survival then one should look at it as a source of strength. And if, at a certain age, fighting is a tool of strength, then fighting may be abandoned when reaching a different stage of development. In this case, fighting is an appropriate time-limited selected self-presentation. However, we have too little knowledge of what happened to girls who fought as adolescents and later became young adults and changed their behavior.

According to Jones (2010), conventional wisdom suggests that girls and women, whether prompted by nature, socialization, or a combination of the two, generally avoid physically aggressive or violent behavior because they are expected to use relational aggression and fight with words and tears, not fists or knives. Girls who use physical aggression are aware that their behavior does not meet the standard that is set for their gender, but is in line with what is esteemed in their family, peers and community (Anderson, 1999; Jones, 2010). Therefore, through their feelings of rejection by mainstream society and acceptance within their peer group, family and community, they learn to hone their skills as a fighter (Jones, 2010). Girls with reputations as fighters come to rely not on their looks but on what they can do regarding battle.

Since their everyday environment is one saturated with messages about the fragility of personal safety, girl fighters take a special sort of pride in their ability to fight and win (Jones, 2010).

But some of the African American girls who use physical aggression to win battles in their school or community, may also apply the same aggressive stance to prepare for their future. While the literature points to negative outcomes for youth who use physical aggression, these girls are resilient in that they may decide that they have matured, are tired of fighting and would like to attend college and use more normatively accepted techniques and personas. African Americans have a history of resilience, especially African American women who have survived numerous atrocities such as, racism, sexism, and domestic violence and still manage to achieve economic stability (Stevens, 2003). To that end, African American girls who use physical aggression to resolve disputes in adolescence can go on to be productive members of society. However, the literature is lacking accounts of those fighter girls who graduated to become productive and successful members of the general society.

To preliminarily test this topic, I surveyed five adult African American women in my office, four of them from middle class backgrounds. All of them are college educated and at one point in their adolescence used physical aggression to resolve disputes with other girls. One woman admitted that she was even involved in a gang while she was in high school. Today, these women hold titles as Director, First Vice President, and Program Coordinator. This supports the notion that people can change and use what was labeled as an antisocial behavior to become successful adult. Such knowledge will help us intervene with girls who are fighting and help them graduate from using aggression and becoming successful adults (West, 2011).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Adolescent Development -- Erik Erikson's 5th Stage of Development: Identity versus Identity Diffusion (Puberty and Adolescence)

In adolescence, youth become preoccupied with the way their appearance is perceived in the eyes of others in comparison to how they feel about themselves, rather than connecting what they have learned thus far in the developmental process to help them navigate through this new phase. At this stage the adolescent has developed a sense of ego identity where she has cultivated confidence in her ability to maintain individual sameness and stability of her meaning for others. Each major crisis presents an opportunity for the adolescent to strengthen self esteem which demonstrates that she is establishing her future personality (Erikson, 1959). Mastery of each experience strengthens her identity. However, failure to receive recognition from home and rejection of parents as figures of authority and knowledge can lead to the possibility of finding validation through approving peers, cliques and sometimes gangs. Therefore, if trust and fulfillment is not received from their family at an earlier stage, identity diffusion will emerge within the adolescent.

Identity diffusion occurs when the adolescent experiences doubt of their ethnic, social or sexual identity (which may have occurred prior to this stage). In girls who are prone to aggressive behavior, a major part of their confusion can stem from their living between two worlds – their community where the code of the street is the norm and society at large where the code does not apply. These girls would have to become bi-cultural or use code-switching tactics in order to survive in both worlds (Anderson, 1999; Jones, 2010; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

As a result, many adolescent girls often display behaviors such as fighting, running away, drugs and alcohol, dropping out of school, staying out all night, moodiness and psychotic episodes which could be a result of rebellion during this stage of development but may or may not lead to delinquency. According to Erikson if the adolescent is diagnosed and treated correctly, seemingly psychotic and criminal incidents do not have the same fatal significance which they have at other ages (Erikson, 1959). This may have been true when this book was written in 1959, however today depending on the crime, behavior, gender or race, the adolescent does not get a “free pass” because they are a minor, and in some instances can be treated as an adult and incarcerated even if they are a first time offender.

During identity diffusion, adolescents begin to over-identify with their cliques by taking on various persona because of a loss of identity. This is marked by behaviors of intolerance, cruelty and an ostracism of others who are “different” than the group. The exclusion can vary from race, skin color, cultural background, clothes, and other petty traits that would characterize an individual as an outsider or insider. Loyalty to the clique is also tested during this time to ensure that the adolescent is in agreement with the group’s ideals which is consistent with the current trend of relation aggression. This period of intolerance may be temporary, but a necessary defense against a sense of identity loss (Erikson, 1968).

As the youth moves into the middle to late adolescent period, they begin to experience another change while transiting from adolescence to adulthood. This often results in a period of rebellion called psychosocial moratorium where the adolescent is in a state of crisis because adulthood is quickly approaching. In other words, psychosocial moratorium is a delay of adult commitments to prevent the ending of adolescence. While some think that a moratorium is

common only among middle and upper class adolescents, other teens unknowingly also take advantage of this concept.

A period of moratorium is totally up to the individual as to how they delay their transition. Some may drop out of high school, enter the Peace Corp, stay in college an extra year, delay college entrance and fail to get a job to avoid leaving home. Experimentation can be seen in the form of abandonment of their usual activities that pleased their parents, associating with deviant peers, drug and alcohol use, running away, coming home past curfew, fighting, unprotected sexual activity, reckless driving and other behaviors. In the mind of the adolescent this phase is an opportunity for her to test limits and challenge the notion of invincibility (Erikson, 1959).

Much like identity diffusion, the individual can also experiment with deviant behaviors can lead to deleterious consequences which negatively impact her future long after the moratorium ends. However in some cases, especially with many African American adolescent girls, they are able to overcome multiple obstacles in their lives to move forward with their lives by making a decision to attend college. Despite the challenges of poverty, family and community violence, oppression, school suspensions and expulsion, these girls are resilient and like adolescent youth who have familial and community support, they mature and will seek opportunities to become a successful adult.

Physiological Development

The adolescent stage in the developmental process is the time where youth are more prone to poor decision making. Recent studies have shown that the behavior is part of the limited brain development that occurs during this stage in life. Studies of the adolescent brain through magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) revealed that the area of the brain which governs executive

function which is responsible for a number of processes such as; emotional regulation, inhibition, future planning and predicting consequences is not fully developed until the early twenties (Ortiz, 2004; Nelson, Leibenluft, McClure & Pine, 2005). “A child’s capacity to filter information and suppress inappropriate actions in favor of appropriate ones continues to develop across the first 2 decades of life, with susceptibility to interference from competing sources lessening with maturity” (Casey, Tottenham, Liston, & Durston, 2005, p. 106).

The 2005 U.S. Supreme Court decision in the case of *Roper vs. Simmons* opened doors for the consideration of neurological development in research and theory regarding juvenile justice and adolescence (Ortiz, 2004). The result produced a number of theories derived from functional magnetic resonance (fMRI) imaging that confirmed limitations in judgment and decision making but and increased sensation seeking, risk-taking which implies that anti-social behavior can be viewed as normal biologically driven behavior. This also insinuates that adolescent youth may not possess the ability to be fully accountable for their actions. Furthermore, the adolescent girl who uses aggressive behaviors may be better able to make wise choices and handle conflict positively as the brain matures.

Current Theory: Adolescent Risk Taking

Moffitt and other researchers (Blumstein & Cohen, 1988; Hirshi & Gottfredson, 1983; Gottfredson & Hirsh, 1990; Moffitt, 1993), all agree that adolescence is a time when most youth tend to test limits, display impetuous behavior, and succumb to peer pressure (Scott & Steinberg, 2008; Steinberg, 2008; Steinberg & Scott, 2003) which often leads to involvement in the juvenile justice system. The accountability that society places on adolescent youth who perpetrate crimes can have a deleterious affect on their lives well into adulthood. For instance, when an adolescent commits a crime perhaps the nature of the infraction could be due to a lack of maturity rather

than actual criminal intent. The lack of sound judgment can be the difference between serving time in a juvenile or adult facility. To that end, it is not about giving adolescent offenders a pass on their behavior, but understanding of the impediment of the adolescent brain and its inability to make responsible decisions.

Recent advances in developmental neuroscience have determined that adolescent poor decision making is contributed to dramatic changes in dopaminergic activity in the limbic system and the prefrontal cortex in the brain. Within these two functions is the ability to process response and reward (limbic system) and regulate behavior (prefrontal cortex). The increased amount of dopamine that occurs in the limbic system during adolescence makes rewards more rewarding and consequences less severe (Ernst et al. 2005). To that end, the adolescent is more prone to sensation seeking and will take risks, regardless of the outcome, to obtain the reward. Steinberg, Albert, Cauffman, Banich, Graham, & Woolard (2008) define sensation seeking as “the tendency to seek novel, varied or highly stimulating experiences and the willingness to take risks in order to attain them” (pp. 1765). Therefore, adolescents’ inability to properly process consequences often produces adverse effects such as assault charges resulting from fights, drug and alcohol addition, teen pregnancy, car accidents, bodily injuries and other negative outcomes.

The prefrontal cortex houses executive cognitive functions such as response inhibition, planning ahead, weighing risk and rewards as well as considering other factors in the decision making process (Steinberg, 2008). Coordination between both the prefrontal cortex and the limbic system is essential for self-regulation but does not occur until the early 20s (Steinberg et al, 2008; Steinberg, 2009). While dopamine activity and sensation seeking behaviors increases during puberty (Steinberg, 2009), the self regulation that occurs in the prefrontal lobe has not

fully developed which explains why there tends to be more risky behavior exhibited during adolescence and less goal directed behavior.

Contributing Factors

Exposure to Violence

In the lives of some adolescent girls, violence is a regular occurrence. While most girls in the inner-city acknowledge that many of them live in violent neighborhoods, girls who live in rural and suburban areas also report regular occurrences of violence in their neighborhoods (Brown & Gourdine, 2007). It appears that violence exposure may help explain the risk for later aggression, delinquency, and violence (Gorman-Smith, Henry, & Tolan, 2004). Whether the violence occurs in her community or home, in an urban or suburban neighborhood, it is bound to have an impact on her ability to cope with the daily stressors that exist in adolescence. When the violent episodes are frequent, this becomes a part of her cultural norm which can impact how she resolves disputes and relate to others. Hence, there is a correlation between exposure to community violence and violence perpetration among adolescent youth.

In previous studies, youth who reported high rates of exposure to violence also reported a greater incidence of family violence (Gorman-Smith et al., 2004). Victims of family violence are at an increased risk for the development of problematic interpersonal relationships (Muller, Goebel-Fabbri, Diamond, & Dinklage (2000). McCloskey and Lichter (2003) indicated that youth from domestically violent homes are more likely to report physical aggression against a same-sex peer, and a parent (usually the mother). Marital violence (domestic violence) also correlates with later teenage depression (McCloskey, & Lichter, 2003). Moreover there appears to be a link between depression and the influence of domestic violence and aggression against peers and dating partners.

When an adolescent girl has been exposed to violence she is more likely to be depressed and act aggressively when faced with a peer related incident. Also her participation in the classroom and other school related activities will be minimal, especially if she is dealing with violence in her home. In the area of emotional functioning, exposure to violence has been linked with higher rates of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and depressive symptoms within the area of behavioral functioning, with antisocial behavior and decreased school performance (Overstreet, 2000). Brown & Gourdine (2007) confirmed that when neighborhood disputes “spill over” into the school environment it disrupts the learning process; the girls become distracted by the events which ultimately jeopardize their educational advancement. One promising factor is that parental support may protect girls from the effects of violence therefore reducing aggression, depression and other antisocial behaviors.

The family is seen as the most prominent, persistent, and proximal developmental influence for children and thus a likely focus for intervention (Gorman-Smith et al., 2004). In early adolescence parenting behavior has been associated with both direct protective effects against later aggressive behavior and indirect protective effects through its moderation of problem-behaving friends (Simons-Morton, Hartos, & Haynie, 2004, p. 31). Moreover, clear expectations and parental monitoring discourages association with unacceptable peers and reinforces parental expectations. But what happens in families where all of the above is true, but the message gets perverted and the children are advised to display an aggressive demeanor. No parent wants their child to be a bully, but they also do not want their child to be a victim.

Aggression among girls, whether acknowledged or not, has become increasingly violent. Chesney-Lind, Morash, & Irwin, (2007) believed that the rise in girls fighting is in response to

the changing roles of women in society, racial oppression, poverty or abuse. Despite the reason, girls are now paying a higher price for fighting resulting in school suspensions, expulsions and arrests. The consequences for physical aggression can have long term effects that can impact the girl well into adulthood.

This is consistent with earlier studies regarding physical aggression in childhood or adolescence that report outcomes of school dropout, teen parenthood and criminal behaviors (Carins, Carins, & Neckerman, 1989; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Farrington, 1986; Serbin, Peters, McAffer & Schwartzman, 1991; Stattin & Magnusson, 1989). While this may be true, then why are we not doing more to help adolescent African American girls avoid these pitfalls? Or maybe this is a developmental stage from which they will successfully graduate. If the latter is the case, then schools need to be informed that girl fighting is developmentally and environmentally appropriate and harsh responses are inappropriate.

According to Luke (2008), the increase in adolescent girl arrests rates could be the result of a change in criminal justice practices and policies, rather than in girl's behavior. This would be consistent with school policies that suspend and expel girls for physical aggression versus trying to identify the cause of the fight (Talbot et al., 2002). Conversely, incidents of social aggression often go unrecognized by school administration which in most cases would be the origin of the fight (Talbot et al., 2002). The implications of these policies can have lasting effects on girls that place them on a path to adult criminality.

Code of the Street

As stated above the code of the street was created by African Americans in inner city communities due to the lack of response from police (Anderson, 1999). The code had defined the

culture in that men and women refer to the code when they are challenged in society. In the same manner the code was created for the streets, girls refer to the code in school settings when school faculty and staff neglect to intervene in peer to peer conflict before it escalates to an altercation (Pugh-Lilly et al., 2001). A significant finding in the Hirschinger et al. study was that women—in this case ages 16 to 45—in low income communities adopted an aggressive posturing in public settings to portray their readiness to fight if necessary (2003).

Much like generational fighting the code of the street is passed down generation after generation. It is characterized by verbal confrontations, loud outbursts and arguing that often leads to fighting. The person who wins the battle develops a reputation of being tough which has to be maintained by achieving victory in subsequent brawls (Anderson, 1999).

Each time a fight is won the girl earns the much desired respect that would keep her from experiencing repeated challenges (Anderson, 1999). Because respect is such an important characteristic of the code, not only does the girls have to keep an aggressive demeanor, but she also has to maintain the persona by the way she dresses, the group of people she associates with, her family's reputation as fighters, and even the neighborhood where she lives (Anderson, 1999). The tough persona can often serve as a mode of protection especially if the girl lives in a neighborhood that is prone to violence. Although the front will deter threats, in a neighborhood where violence is the norm, girls who use physical violence must be prepared to fight at all times (Anderson, 1999; Jones, 2010).

Community Violence

Exposure to violence can be defined in many ways when it comes to community or family violence. Exposure to community violence is when there is frequent and continual

observation of the use of weapons (guns, knives, etc.), fighting, and gang related activity within a person's neighborhood. The exposure consists of knowing victims or being a witness or a victim of violence as well. The result of the exposure to violence is increased aggressive behavior, PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder), anxiety and depression. Over time, the exposure can lead to a normative belief that using aggression and violence are how disputes are resolved.

What many families do not realize is that just as traditions are past on to the next generation, so are the normative views of community violence. Like social inheritance and how generational wealth is passed down to the next generation to ensure the upward financial mobility of the family, the same ideals apply to families who continue a legacy of violence (Esping-Anderson, 2005; Shoemaker, 2005). In some families the exposure to violence becomes a "rites of passage" in that they become desensitized its harmful effects which can lead to the view that violence is a way of life. Furthermore, for some adolescent African American girls living in a community surrounded by violence, it is inevitable that they will become perpetrators of violence themselves.

There is a significant relationship between exposure to community violence and violence perpetration. It is believed that continuous exposure to violence can lead to desensitization. Although the literature suggests that girls are not as aggressive as boys, these events can have equal impact on both girls and boys. Witnessing as well as participating in shootings and violent fights can affect the judgment of the adolescent in which they will ultimately emulate the same behavior (Anderson, 1999; Hirschinger et al., 2003; Resnick, Ireland, & Borowsky, 2004).

According to Xie, Cairns and Carins (2005) the development of physically aggressive behaviors is also supported by a person's social relationships and social interactions with peer

networks. Within communities, girls learn early in their childhood that associations with certain peers can either ensure protection from violent episodes or encourage them. This thought process often promotes the befriending of girls who demonstrate delinquent and antisocial behaviors. It has been determined that physical aggression in childhood and adolescence yields robust predictions of subsequent maladjustment such as dropping out of school, teen parenthood, and criminal behaviors (Xie, Cairns and Carins, 2005). While this may be true in some cases, this study does fail to consider the resiliency of these girls despite the violence which occurs in their community, which enables them to go on to college and become productive members of society.

Family Violence

Family violence consists of domestic violence and child maltreatment which includes child abuse and sexual abuse. Family violence, especially child abuse, is a major risk factor for delinquency (Herrera & McCloskey, 2001, pg. 1038). Children who experience child abuse also experience disturbances in several domains of adaptive functioning such as the development of a secure attachment with the primary caregiver, affect and physiological self-regulation, the development of autonomy and peer relationships (Muller et al., 2000). Children who experience sexual abuse exhibit high rates of PTSD, which also have been connected to the experience of victimization (Muller et al., 2000). This leaves the abused child with the inability to positively resolve conflict in her future relationships.

Although currently little is known about the reactions of adolescents to witnessing domestic violence, Muller and colleagues (2000) suggested a link between witnessing domestic violence and an increased risk for being either a victim or perpetrator during adolescence. The witnessing of domestic violence, especially toward a parent (mother or father), demonstrates to an adolescent girl that aggression is an acceptable method to resolve issues (Moretti, Obsuth,

Odgers, & Reebye, 2006). Because relational and physical aggression— like domestic violence— is about power and control, girls may use this approach to dominate their peers. It is possible that physical abuse is a key risk factor, primarily for aggression within families, while witnessing parental intimate partner violence has a more pervasive relationship with aggression in multiple interpersonal relationships (Muller et al., 2000, pg. 461; Moretti et al., 2006, pg. 392).

The assertion of power over others could also be in response to the abuse that they receive at home. Furthermore, the witnessing and experiencing of family violence, namely domestic violence, can lead to female delinquency. According to Herrera and McCloskey girls who experience marital violence and physical abuse were more likely to commit violent offenses (2001).

Girls growing up in abusive households may develop unique tactics of self-preservation, including running away, which ultimately subject them to criminal exploitation. Their heightened delinquency, therefore becomes an indirect result of acting out against or escaping an abusive home-life (Herrera& McCloskey, 2001). The effect of abuse is believed to be lessened if the girl has at least one supportive parent.

Media Influences

Adolescent girls not only learn how to resolve disputes from watching members of their family, but also by watching women resolve conflict in the media. Today you cannot turn on the television without seeing women either arguing bitterly or physically fighting. Reality shows such as Jerry Springer, Real Housewives, Basketball Wives, Jersey Shore, The Bad Girl's Club or any other reality show where women are a part of the cast, exploit such behavior. The message that these shows send to girls is that it is acceptable to use relational and physical

aggression toward other girls (Brown, 2003). Commonly the fighting that occurs on these shows is not about social issues or women's rights, or inequality, but trivial things, such as boyfriends, personality clashes and status which is much like the fights that occur between adolescent girls (Brown, 2003).

Relationships- Intimate and Non-intimate

I have observed in group sessions with adolescent girls that their reasons for fighting were due to either one girl not liking the other girl for any apparent reason or a cheating boyfriend. In a case control study conducted by Hirschinger et al. (2003), researchers examine the extent to which intimate relationships affect women ages 16 to 45 years old. The article states that recent partner violence and a recent breakup were associated with increased risks of female-to-female non-partner violence (Hirschinger et al., 2003, pg. 1102).

What is interesting about the finding of Hirschinger and his colleagues is that physically aggressive behaviors look the same whether the participant is a girl who is 16 years old and in high school or a 45 year old woman. The findings of this study were clear in that the conflicts that occur between women may be precipitated by their male intimates or through jealousy regarding other relationships. Risk of violence between women was strongly associated with male intimates, including a recent breakup (Hirschinger et al., 2003). This supports the arguments by Stevens (2002), Ward (2003), and Jones, (2010) that girls in their teen years are in need of positive role models such as their mothers or other adult women in order to develop alternate strategies for resolving disputes lest the perpetration of violence will continue.

Adolescent African American girls not only need positive role models but protective factors that provide support and encourage them to avoid making poor decisions. Parental

support and school connectedness gives these girls the necessary accountability that can keep them focused despite their aggressive tendencies. For girls who do not have a supportive family or lack a connection to school, resilience is a source of protection that is triggered in some girls when it appears that all odds are against them.

Protective factors

Parental Support

Poor parenting is often associated with problem behavior. In youth, as an adolescent's behavior becomes increasingly threatening, parents may respond by becoming less supportive and controlling (Huh, Tristan, Wade, & Stice, 2006). In other words, when youth display anti-social behaviors, parents—in their attempt to “deal” with the situation—ignore the situation and the child in hopes that the problem will resolve itself. Antisocial and delinquent behaviors might be frequently directed toward the parents, putting more serious strain between parent and daughter (Huh et al., 2006). Youth from families who have emotional deficits and lack cohesion were more likely to be exposed to community violence than youth from other family types (Gorman-Smith et al., 2004).

In order for the girls to change their aggressive behavior, their environment has to change including more parental monitoring and support. Parental monitoring increases the likelihood that antisocial behavior would be detected and punished, discourages association with unacceptable peers, and reinforces parental expectations at home and school (Resnick et al., 2004; Simons-Morton et al., 2004). Parental involvement also diminishes the risk of involvement in interpersonal violence (Resnick et al., 2004).

Also, familial beliefs regarding violence have to change in order to see significant decreases in aggression in youth. According to Griffin, Botvin, Scheier, Diaz and Miller (2000), more parental monitoring was associated with less delinquency in adolescent youth. Moreover, eating family dinners together was associated with less aggression overall, as well as less delinquency in youth from single-parent families and in girls. While all of this seems to protect girls against acting out violently, there are many African American families who live in urban settings, eat dinner together and spend quality time together but still refer to the code of the street when necessary.

Although many girls have been exposed to violence, not all of them respond in an aggressive manner. Children who are closely supervised and have greater parental involvement in their daily activities may be less exposed to community violence (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998). Families that provide a dependable organized refuge may serve to mediate the impact of violence exposure (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998). Therefore, parental support may act as a buffer between the exposure to violence and a girl's propensity to display relational aggression hence reducing physical aggression.

School Connectedness

School connectedness is also a protective factor against violence perpetration (Resnick et al., 2004). Resnick and his colleagues demonstrated in their study that a high grade point average acted as a buffer against the participation in aggressive behavior (2004, pg.8). As stated above since adolescence is a time when youth are searching for an identity perhaps if they felt a connection with the school they may be more inclined to find other ways to resolve their disputes. The intervention of school faculty and staff could also be helpful in assisting these girls to

resolve their conflicts instead of suspending them from school (Pugh-Lilly et al., 2001; Martinez, 2009).

Martinez (2009) indicated that the same zero tolerance policies that were used to determine which behaviors warrant suspension or expulsion are not effective when it comes to correcting behavior. What she suggests is that such drastic policies are inappropriately and overly used as a punishment for students who are African American and from a low socio-economic family (Martinez, 2009). This finding is consistent with what the participants in the Pugh-Lilly et al., study reported. These students felt that African American girls were targeted for suspension and when they asked for help to resolve their dispute before the fight occurred they were ignored (2001). All things considered, how are these girls to feel a sense of connectedness with their school if they do not feel that they will be heard? What happens then is that girls will take matters into their own hands by resolving the dispute the best way they know how which is referring back to the “code of the street” (Anderson, 1999; Jones, 2010).

In some cases, the African American adolescent girl who uses physical aggression to resolve disputes matures and is ready to further her education beyond high school. In their maturity these young women also begin to realize that their old model for handling disagreements is no longer acceptable in the adult world so they try alternate methods of conflict resolution. Because of the resilient nature of these young women they tend to go on to complete their education, lead successful lives and become positive contributors to society.

Risk and Resilience

Stevens discussed the resilience of adolescent African American girls that exists despite the negative circumstances around them. Stevens gave her definition of resilience:

...resilience is understood to mean factors that interact with stress to moderate risk factors that ordinarily would produce negative outcomes. In the use of this definition, I infer that resilience is evolutionary, evolving over time, and a characteristic that can be promoted by stress. Thus stress encompasses “constructive confrontations” of life crises that can promote growth and development (Stevens, 2002, pg.7).

Stevens also discusses how African American adolescents of color experience social stigma resulting from their race, age, and socio economic status (Stevens, 2002, pg.7). Considering the above factors, Stevens suggests that these attributes are not only stress inducers, but also representations of a risk syndrome where a set of co-occurring factors characterize a special pattern of risk (Stevens, 2002, pg. 9). This thought is consistent with the experiences of their forefathers in that African Americans have been historically viewed as inferior, representing a tainted human condition and often depicted as sinister (Stevens, 2002, pg. 11). This in mind, Stevens states that successful management of adolescent development in at-risk environments can provide knowledge about positive effects that promote mental health (Stevens, 2002, pg.11).

Ward, in her book “The Skin We’re In”, discuss strategies for parents to help adolescent African American youth resist negative behaviors and help them become positive and productive contributors to society (2000). She talks about the negative narratives that African American youth hear continuously that can be pathologizing to them.

Ward states the following about adolescence:

...Adolescence is a period of renegotiation of social relationships and power dynamics. It is this renegotiation, which often demands a redefinition of the self, that finally allows teenagers to make independent and, we hope, healthy decisions about who they are and what they believe (Ward, 2000, pg. 92).

Stevens (2002) and Ward's (2000) work both support this study in that hearing the voices of African American women who used physical aggression as adolescents can provide insight as to how they navigated and negotiated their environments in ways that ultimately allowed them to attend college and lead successful lives. Taken together, help is needed from family, community, mental health professional and the justice system to assist these girls with what they need to positively transition into adulthood. Ward posits that African American girls look to their mothers, grandmothers and other adult women for help in shaping their personal fortitude—the independence, inner strength, and perseverance—they will need to undertake the struggle (2000). The struggle, in this case, is a result of the multiple conflicts black girls may encounter and the challenge of resolving disputes without having to use physical aggression.

What's Missing?

An understanding of the development of aggression in African American girls is further complicated because many of the theoretical models of anti-social behavior were developed based on work with White samples (Miller-Johnson et al., 2005). The lack of literature regarding the lack of cohesion in the African American family leads me to infer that there needs to be a greater understanding of the issue of African American girls and physical aggression instead of rushing to judgment on the girls so quickly by suspending or expelling them from school. These

girls should not be on the street or at home where violence is reinforced, rather they need to be in school where they can learn another way to resolve their disputes.

Most of the studies surrounding African American girls and aggression focus specifically on inner city or urban girls, but no one talks about the challenges that African American girls from suburban neighborhoods face when they are challenged by aggression. These confrontations usually occur in public schools where both urban and suburban populations of girls share a common ground. Parents who may have been reared in an urban community probably made a concerted effort not to raise their children in that same setting and opted to move to the suburbs for a better environment.

In an effort to escape the violence of the inner city, suburban parents are now faced with teaching their daughters how to defend themselves in the event of a threat. Therefore for these parents and their daughters, fighting continues to be perceived as necessary, but an option that is not tolerated by an educational system based on White middle principles. A cultural model for understanding African American girls and physical aggression needs to be developed for practitioners and school administrators to guide them in their work with this population.

Based on the literature about self-identity and presentation, this tough persona displayed by adolescent girls could be temporary. According to Stevens (2002), the emphasis on gender, racial and ethnic commitment during this period is not as secure as the process that will take place in the succeeding middle and late phases of adolescent development. This suggests that the adolescent girl at some point will mature and perhaps “outgrow” this phase and in some cases may decide to further their education by attending college. But what has not been researched is

whether the adolescent girl would continue to use physical aggression to resolve her disputes when she enters college.

The body of literature on aggression frequently discusses its negative outcomes such as, suspension, expulsion or incarceration, but the conversation around the person who turns their life around is lacking. At some point in time an adolescent girl can mature, begin to excel in school, use alternate strategies to resolve their disputes and even plan for their future by deciding to go to college. Perhaps, the perspective of adult African American women who used aggressive behaviors in adolescence to resolve conflict may provide insight into the contributing factors that helped them make a change in their life and choose a different path.

Conducting interviews with African American women who have attended college and had used physical aggression in their adolescence would give them an opportunity to describe their violent history and what it was that contributed to their life change. In order to address gaps in the body of knowledge on the issue, this study explores the question: Are African American young adult women who used physical aggression to resolve disputes during adolescence more likely to continue to use this method after entering college? Furthermore, the study will try to explore if and when aggression ceased to be the preferred reactionary option for these women and why.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The objective of this study is to capture the lived experience of women who are college graduates and had used aggressive behaviors to resolve disputes as an adolescent. Because the literature about girls and aggression speaks of the negative outcomes associated with aggressive behaviors rather than resilience, the aim of the study is to identify the contributing factors that led to her decision to go to college and after entering college what factors contributed to her either continued use or non-usage of aggressive behaviors (fighting, a slap, spitting on someone, kick, or a punch). In this study participants were given also the opportunity to define physically aggressive behavior.

In this chapter, I will discuss my study design, which will include recruitment strategy and address the different modalities used to interview (face-to-face and telephone), as well as inclusion and exclusion criteria. I will then review how I performed the analysis of the data. Finally, ethical considerations are reviewed, and a reflexivity statement is provided.

Study Design

Sample Size and Recruitment Strategy

A convenience sample was used for the qualitative study. The sample consisted of ten African American young adult women ages 24-46 who had been involved in a fight in elementary, middle school, high school or college. The sample includes participants from various socio- economic backgrounds, who either lived with their parents or a guardian when they were in high school, and were or were not exposed previously to domestic and community violence.

Participants were recruited through various social media networks such as Facebook and LinkedIn, local churches, sororities, colleges and universities and referrals from friends and

family who showed interest in the study. Potential recruits were able to contact the researcher through Facebook, email or by telephone. A total of 11 participants responded to express interest in the study and 10 met the criteria for the study. Four interviews were conducted face to face, three interviews were conducted through video chat (Skype or Face Time) and three more interviews were conducted by telephone. A \$25 Macy's gift card was given as an incentive for participation in the interview. The participants whose interviews were not conducted in person, the gift card was mailed to them.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria for participation in the study was to have been college educated, an African American and currently employed adult woman ages 22 to 32 years old who were involved in a fight during her adolescent years. Responses were received from 10 women ages 24-46 years old who met the criteria. Changing the age group did not impact the study in any way, but it was realized that women ages 32 and older provided greater insight into the reasons why they fought and how they eventually arrived at finding an alternate way of resolving conflict.

In addition to the above criteria, in order to qualify for participation in the study the candidate had to have previously demonstrated physically aggressive behaviors as an adolescent. Physically aggressive behaviors can be defined as a fight (multiple hits), a single slap, kick or punch. The frequency of physical aggression can be described as a one time event or multiple occurrences through out adolescence. The participants were expected to have had a single fight or multiple fights while they were in high school and if applicable in college. The interviewee should be aware of the policies for fighting at their high school and college. Participants who were referred to an alternative school or detention center had to describe the events that led to their referral to another school.

The participants was asked to articulate their experience as an adolescent girl, their relationship with the individual with whom they fought, the circumstances that led up to the fight, their decision to enter college, and if they continued to fight in and after college. In the event the participant had stopped fighting they were asked to describe what made them decide to stop and the alternative method that they use to resolve conflict.

The participant was expected to provide other information such as family background, mental health status, academic performance in high school and college, where and how they learned to fight and the penalty they may have received for fighting. It was also expected that the participant would be able to describe the climate of their high school and college and the relationship between the students and school officials.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and took place from November 2011- November 2012. Notes were taken during and after the interview of the researcher's initial thoughts and feelings. All recordings were downloaded on the researchers password protected computer and labeled by the participant's initial. Each file was uploaded to a transcription services that had encryption software in place to ensure confidentiality.

Each interview resulted in four separate sources of data; an audio recording; typed transcript; participant demographic data and the researcher's notes taken during and after each interview. The researcher listened to the audio recording and reviewed the transcript multiple times to ensure accuracy of the interview and made additional notes. Reviewing the data multiple times allowed the researcher to fully immerse herself with the interview so that the story of each woman would be easily recalled.

Grounded theory involved repeated comparative analysis between the recorded interview, notes and transcribed interview to ensure the accuracy of each woman's story. Initial analysis of the first two interviews allowed the researcher to hone in on specific themes where it may be necessary to modify questions based on the participants' response. This method was also helpful when it came to identifying themes in all of the interviews.

Data were analyzed using line by line coding for the first two interviews then sentence by sentence coding for the next two. The most significant themes were identified in the first four interviews then focused coding was used for the remaining six interviews. Once all of the interviews were reviewed themes placed into categories and sub categories where theoretical codes were formed.

Memo writing was employed throughout the study which was essential to this process. Memos assisted in clarifying codes, defining categories, and comparing the data. Analysis continued throughout and following the data collection process.

Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality was of the utmost importance for the participants in the study. Approval was obtained from the University of Pennsylvania's Institutional Review Board and informed consent was obtained from each participant. All paper documents for this study were kept in a secured office in the home of the researcher. As for audio recordings of interviews, they were kept in a locked safe in the researcher's office. The recordings were also kept on the researcher's password protected computer.

Reflexivity Statement

During a conflict resolution group that I facilitated, all of the girls self reported that some form of harassment almost always preceded the physical aggression discussed. Experientially, in my work with adolescent girls of color physical aggression is common because many of them have lost trust in the school's ability to intervene on their behalf. As a result, these girls feel the need to take matters into their own hands. This suggests there are additional demographic or socio-economic factors outside of female adolescent peer relations that affect the use of physical aggression.

I was drawn to this topic because I noticed that most, if not all, of the girls who were referred by school faculty to the mandatory conflict resolution group were African American. The girls were required to attend the group due to a fighting incident or a display of aggressive behavior directed against to either their peers or the adults in their lives, such as teachers or parents. The more I became interested in this topic I realized that I too was a victim of aggression. I was relationally harassed by a girl from 6th grade to 9th grade. I got fed up after one of the episodes and initiated a fight with the other girl. I never had another incident with the girl or her friends.

Semi- structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. Written informed consent was obtained from the participant prior to the start of the interview. The interviews lasted between 1 1/2 to 2-hours in length. The first question served as an icebreaker by having the participant talk about themselves providing general information (where are they from, their line of work, etc.). After the initial question, the remainder of the interview focused on their experience as an adolescent who demonstrated physically aggressive behaviors. Specifically the

interviewees were asked to describe (a) circumstances surrounding each incident, (b) decisions leading to the behavior and (c) consequences of the action. Participants were also asked if they tried to report the incident prior to the fight, the age that they decided to attend college and the age when they stopped fighting.

Additionally, participants were also asked questions about their family history, if their mother, grandmother or female guardian were fighters, and if their parent or guardian supported their decision to fight. In addition, questions about the street culture where they grew up and if it had any impact on their aggressive behavior were asked.

Interview Questions

Fighting History

1. What does physical aggression look like to you?
2. At what age did you have your first fight? Tell me about the incident
3. How did you learn to fight?
4. Why did fighting seem like a viable option to you?
5. How many fights were you involved in?
6. Was the fight one on one or in a group?
7. What types of methods were used during a fight? Were weapons involved?
8. What were the reasons that fighting was necessary?
9. Did you like to fight? Please explain.
10. Were you bullied or experienced any type of harassment prior to fighting? Please explain
11. Did you have any interaction with the juvenile justice system (probation, incarceration as a result of assault charges, etc)?

Family

12. What was your parent(s) occupation?
13. What was the socio economic status of your family when you were an adolescent?
14. Was fighting encouraged in your family?
15. Do any of your female (Mother, Grandmother, Aunt, Sister, or Cousin) relatives fight?

Please explain any incidents

16. Did you witness domestic violence in your home while growing up? Please explain
17. How were disagreements handled in your family?

Community

18. What was the neighborhood like where you grew up? Was it safe?
19. How were disputes handled in your neighborhood?
20. Was fighting the norm in your neighborhood? Please explain.
21. Were police and other emergency response team members (fire squad, etc.) called when issues occurred in your neighborhood?
22. Did the people within the neighborhood trust police and other authority figures? Why or why not?

School

23. Did you feel comfortable in your school environment? Why or why not?
24. Did you fight in high school?
25. What was the reason for the fight?
26. Were you ever injured during a fight?

27. Were weapons ever involved?
28. What were the consequences for fighting on school grounds?
29. Were you ever suspended or expelled due to fighting? Please explain
30. Were you referred to an alternative school because you were removed from the “regular” school? Please explain.
31. Were other tactics used to resolve the dispute (talk, letter, email)? Please explain.
32. Was school faculty or staff notified prior to the fight? What was their response?
33. Were your parent(s) notified of an impending fight? What was their response?
34. Was there ever a fight at begin in the neighborhood and ended in school? Please explain.

After High School

35. When did you realize that college was an option?
36. Did anyone encourage you to attend college? Who?
37. How did you resolve your disputes in your freshman and sophomore years in college? In your junior and senior years?
38. Did you continue to fight? If so, what was the consequence?
39. If you stopped fighting, when? Why?
40. How do you currently resolve disputes?
41. Do you believe that are African American women embarrassed about the need to use physically aggression? Why or why not?

Chapter 4: Findings

The themes that emerged from the data describe the development of the participant as a fighter from the age of the first fight, the realization that fighting was necessary, to when the decision was made to find alternative strategies for resolving conflict. From the data, twelve themes were identified. The themes are as follows: *age of first fight; how the girls learn to fight; the realization that fighting was an option for resolving conflict; the enjoyment of fighting; the role of bullying and harassment prior to fight; family conflict resolution style; how disputes were resolved within their community; the source of fights in high school; the decision to go to college; how conflict was resolved in college; resolving conflict after college; and the decision to change and the participants reflections on the need to use physical violence as an African American woman.*

One commonality that all 10 participants share is a pivotal moment where an incident changed their lives and enabled them to be reflective about their behavior and change their response to conflict. For one participant the transformation occurred as early as middle school and with the remaining nine participants the change transpired either in high school, after graduation from high school or during college. The shift in mindset came from a variety of sources including a personal choice based on one's family history with violence, the consequences of using physical violence and experiences in their new environment.

Age of first fight

Of the 10 participants, one woman had her first fight in nursery school; six had their first fight in elementary school and the remaining began fighting in middle school. While all of the fights were initiated by another person, five of the fights were due to harassment or multiple episodes of bullying. Two of the participants' first fight was the result of someone asking the participant if they wanted to fight. The remaining three participants' first fight was caused by a disagreement that led to an altercation. Cindy, 46, describes her first fight as an act on being perceived as being weak:

...She was a good friend, I thought, at that time. And I cannot remember to this day why we was arguing. But she told somebody else that she wanted to fight me. And I said oh, okay, even though I really didn't know why she was mad at me but the fact that she wanted to do it I had to, you know-- I didn't want to be viewed as being weak. So I agreed to do it...

Jamie, 32, also stated that her first fight was a result of a disagreement with childhood friend:

...It actually probably was a friend in the neighborhood, but it turned a little aggressive. It was probably about, if I can recall, it was like..., the person wanted to probably try to overpower me playing a game, most likely jump rope because I played a lot of jump rope growing up. And I didn't want that person to think that they could get away with it. So as a result I didn't want to back down, because if you back down, then people around you think that you're a pushover. So I had to keep standing my ground, and I had to stand my ground all the way at this point where it got aggressive and I proceeded to physically fight that person.

How did the girls learn to fight?

Three participants learned how to fight by viewing images in the media. Three other participants learned to fight by observing how people fought within their neighborhood or in their family. Shannon, 31, recalls observing fights among her family members as well as in her community. She also talks about developing her fighting style by watching her male family members:

...Mainly by seeing aggression around me so from adults and children. I think I learned how to fight well by a lot of boys. I grew up with a couple of nephews who were younger than me but also older cousins and boy cousins. So mainly from them in terms of fighting style. But the frequency of fighting I just learned by watching adults fight in my home. Or just by people being battered because I grew up in a domestic violence situation.

Sometimes on the street, you know, you just kind of pay attention to it so I know it was all around me since birth...

Out of the 10 participants, seven were taught how to fight by a male family member. Four were taught by their older brothers and the others were taught to fight by another family member such as a father, grandfather or cousins. Linda, 32, spoke of how her father taught her how to fight in response to an episode of bullying by one of her classmates when she was in 3rd grade:

...My dad taught me. With that same situation with her, he was, you know, when I told him what she was doing, he was teaching me how to fight, how to box. And so he taught me how to fight, and, you know, you don't want to hurt anybody; however, you don't want anybody to get over on you and you don't want to get beat up either. So my dad taught me how to fight. Also, my parents took me into karate, as well...

Like Linda, Danielle, 36, recalled her brother teaching her how to fight as a means of self defense because of her appearance:

I don't remember how old I was but I remember my brother saying because I was a pretty girl people were going to want to fight me and I remember him showing me like some basics.... Seriously, he did, like you need to learn how to hold your hands up, you know this is how you punch, and things like that.

The realization that fighting became an option for resolving conflict

Among the participants the general reasons why the use of physical violence became an option to resolving conflict are survival, self defense or to gain the respect of their peers. For eight of the 10 participants, survival, self defense and respect were all synonymous with living in a neighborhood where physical violence was the way to resolve conflict. Linda, 32, tells how moving to a new neighborhood dictated her need to use physical violence:

...When I was 10, we had moved to the neighborhood that I basically grew up in for the rest of my-- 'til I left for college. And what happened, we're there for about maybe a week or two and we lived around the corner from a park and I went to the park and on my way home, I was walking with a friend, a girl I thought was my friend, and I got jumped by about seven or eight teenage boys as a 10-year-old girl, and they jumped me because I didn't want to give one of the boys my phone number. And so from that point forward, when I recognized what kind of neighborhood I was living in, I realized I had to do what I had to do...

Tracy, 28, similarly:

Well, like growing up, probably until like middle school, like my family is originally from Patterson, New Jersey, so if you know like anything about Jersey that's like the hood, like project housing. It is exactly like how you see it on TV like rough. So it was kind of like a way of like surviving, honestly, like you had to know how to fight to like defend yourself

to make it to school every day. Like if anybody said something to you, you needed to be ready to fight; you needed to be-- so that was just it, like the way of life for me.

Some also felt that physical violence was a good option to vent their frustrations, be taken seriously or obtain a quicker response. Andrea, 25, described her reasons why she felt as though fighting was a viable option to resolving conflict:

I guess it's more of defending, rather it be my honor, my mom's honor, my family's honor or something. I just felt as though that's the only way you can really get your point across is you physically have to do something in order for somebody to say, okay, she's not playing anymore because sometimes words are just not enough.

Shannon, 31, had the same feelings about the need to use physical violence instead of resolving disagreements verbally:

I think it [fighting] seemed like the only option in some cases. It seemed like talking was soft. Talking didn't get you anywhere. Talking kind of made you look weak. And also fighting, I saw adults doing it so I thought well they can do it. And I know even being hit when my grandmother might be frustrated. So I was like well people hit you if they want to get their way or get their point of across. And I usually saw it as a way of defending myself so I was just like there's only one way to do that and that's physically. And so I felt like I had to be aggressive or be really defensive and physically defensive at all times even if that meant going on the offense with people if they said something to me. So I didn't always have to be hit to hit someone.

Being bullied or harassed prior to fight

While all of the participants experienced some form of bullying or harassment prior to their fight, there were two participants who had to defend themselves because they were studious. Tanya, 41, tearfully explained how fighting was necessary as she had to be “on guard” at all times due to harassment that she endured. Tanya stated that she felt as if she was living a dual life:

...It was kind of like a survival tactic. You couldn't be the smart girl, and then it was all was to be the smart girl...So you had to kind of always kind of had to be the smart girl who could fight, or people would try to take advantage of the fact that you were a smart girl. Because I always was the smart girl... there was no fighting going on in my house. There wasn't no-- my parents didn't even argue. It was just when I was out in the street it was different. I was a different person...

Shannon, 31, had a similar experience with being bullied because she was a good student academically:

...Being picked on, being a girl, being picked on by boys who like you but you don't know that at that age. Or by girls for the same reason. Or girls testing you and thinking that you're not from the same neighborhood or you sound like a smart kid. So thinking that because I sound a certain way or I use certain words that I might be a nerd. And so really a lot of self-defense...

Two participants also revealed that they were bullied because of their physical appearance. Jamie, 32, mentioned that she was bullied because of the thickness of her hair and Cindy, 46, was harassed not only because of the length of her hair but also her skin color and thin frame:

Oh God, yeah, oh yeah. Like I said, skin color, hair because my hair was real short in the back, and so I got teased about that. And I used to be really, really skinny I mean like really...So I got teased about everything. And the majority of the things that we were teased about was really the physical. It was all of the things that people could see on the outside. Nobody knew anything about who you were as a person or you're a good kid or a bad kid. It wasn't about that. It was about how you looked...

Like Cindy, Erica, 24, was teased because of her stature as well as her style of dress.

While Erica grew up in the Caribbean her experiences were quite similar to the other participants who grew up in the United States:

...The kids would tease me because I used to dress old for my classmates. I didn't know how special I was. My grandparents would just order clothes for me from magazines when the kids will have what's in the mall and stuff. So the island is small, so everyone gets their clothes the same place. My grandma used to get the clothes from all over the States, because she used to travel. So, I didn't like that. I wanted to be fit in with the other kids, so I had old clothes, old shoes and it looked like-- but it was really the fashion. If it wasn't pretty enough, they wouldn't really accept me. But I was teased and I was chubby too. I was fat. They used to call me turkey and other stuff until I pushed that girl over the wall, and then it stopped...

The enjoyment of fighting

Out of the 10 participants, eight of them did not enjoy fighting however two did. Of the eight participants who did not enjoyed fighting, two admitted that while they did not enjoy fighting they enjoyed the victory of defeating their opponent. Danielle, 36, shares her experience:

...I enjoyed winning. I liked the fact that I didn't get beat up but no, the physical fighting no. Like I can remember my head hurting because you know girls, they pull your hair and I had a whole long hair and all of that but I just remember the body anguish that went along with it. And that wasn't fun but the fun part was the whole yeah, I whipped her butt, the joking with your friends afterward...

Shannon, 31, stated that she enjoyed fighting because she was effective. Here she shares her experience:

...Yeah, I was good at it. I mean I didn't enjoy it in terms of-- I hated fighting. I was really effective in it, I thought. You know, I could see if someone was bloody I knew that I hurt somebody pretty bad or I scared them so they wouldn't hit me again. But I didn't enjoy it because my body would usually hurt after. Or I'd be so out of sorts my hair would get messed up or something. I had some remnants of having this crazy thing happen. And then I didn't like it because I felt embarrassed if an adult who I respected saw me do that. But that would come later. In the beginning years I didn't really process it too much but I knew I didn't love it but I would do it so quickly that I didn't have time. It would happen once every couple of days. So I didn't have time to really just have another strategy. It took some time to get to that point...

Tracy, 28, describes her enjoyment of winning the fight was a result of getting her point across so that the person would not harass her in the future:

I think I do, honest, I think a part of me did. Just something about like just knowing that you got the best of somebody who might have, you know, made you mad and they thought they were going to win and you just dominate the whole fight. Like "Okay, so you get my

point now. We're not gonna have any more problems." Like that was my way of settling everything.

Of the participants who did not like to fight, some of their reasons were fear of their parents because fighting was not encouraged or the realization that the fight did not resolve the issue. While Jamie, 32, stated early in her interview that she felt that fighting was necessary, she had come to the realization after the fight had ended that she would still be frustrated:

...I mean, at the end of it I would still be upset. I would still be frustrated. Sometimes to get the emotion out was a bit of a relief, but the actual act of fighting was not what caused the relief...

How family resolved conflicts?

In the families of seven of the 10 participants disagreements were resolved without physical violence. While four participants stated that disputes were resolved with arguments or just talking, two participants stated that their fathers had the final say in all disagreements. One participant stated that she did not recall seeing any disagreements in her home while growing up.

However in the families of the three remaining participants domestic violence was the norm in their household during their childhood. Two of the participants explained that the regular occurrence had a significant impact on their use of physical violence. Here, Shannon, 31 shares her story:

...my mother was beaten and battered her entire life, really, which is pretty sad when you think about it. But even with that she didn't hit me too much. So she was very gentle with me, usually let me get my way. I was kind of spoiled. Even though we didn't have money she kind of had a lot of privileges...

My first memory unfortunately is when I would hear my mother screaming and crying because she had been struck or something. And so the guy we lived with in Bedford Stuyvesant, this guy Ford, he was the first person I remember hitting my mother...

...But we lived from place to place usually with some man that she was dating. Or at this one woman that she was with and all of them hit her...

...Yeah, so self-defense was the main thing. But the other thing which I would come to find out later it was a response that I was having to having domestic violence in my home. So I didn't really fight at home. I usually fought in school or around school grounds. So at home I was this angelic child but at school it was my only way to vent and I didn't know that until I was probably ten, eleven, maybe even a little older...

Shannon goes on to mention how disagreements were handled in her extended family:

...So [when] we had a conflict and it usually meant that she would get loud and slam the door and I would slam the door or I'd throw something, not at her but I would throw something in my room because I was so frustrated. But between her and the rest of the family or these guys it was always a kicking screaming fighting match. You know, I remember my grandmother being out of control and hitting my mother and my mother was 40 by that point and I'm just like oh wow. And there was no reason for her to do it because her situation really wasn't what bad. My mother wasn't being disrespectful. She was actually crying and saying something loving. But my mother grandmother was just mad at her for whatever reason. So people were loud. People were just, you know, threatening and violent. If there was alcohol it was worse. But also the flip side is when there was no conflict people were extremely loving and Christian. And there was a lot of

mixed messages. But violence was the way that I saw people do things. My grandmother she hit you first and asked you questions later...

Danielle also recalls witnessing domestic violence with her parents fighting when she was a child.

Danielle also saw her mother beaten by other men whom she dated:

...my dad and mom got divorced when I was two. Two or three. And I don't remember a lot from my childhood but I remember them fighting all the time, like I can remember my dad and my mom fighting at the top of the steps and somehow my mom pushing my dad down the steps, like I can remember it and their fights were like physically altering fights, like punching blows, all of that...

...my parents were always fighting for the time that they were married and then even after they weren't married, every time they saw each other it was a fight...

... my mom never had as I was growing up never had a real occupation hence she went to jail when I was eight... once my mom got out of jail, we visited her, saw her, any man that was in her life was beating her.

How were disputes resolved within their communities?

Four of the 10 participants grew up in communities where they absolutely felt safe.

While six of the participants did not feel safe in the neighborhoods, two of them stated that there were times when they did feel safe. Shannon, 31, shares her story:

...I felt safe because I knew what to expect, but I also felt unsafe because I knew what to expect. So I knew that just any day it could be somebody trying to rob me, rape me or shoot me, and I had friends where that happened to them... that's what I mean by a mix-yes, mix-no. I was one of those kids who would walk through one of the most dangerous

parks to go to the other side because I'm like "Look, it's a shortcut, I'm going" but also carried a weapon because I knew something could happen.

Shannon also describes how disputes were settled in her neighborhood:

...Oh, please. Yeah, we fought. We fought, or you cursed somebody out and embarrassed them. I was the person who used my mouth by the time I was a teenager, but there were a lot of people who just-- you know, you got jumped a lot, so I had to fight one time, and then you go get your people, because if you lost a fight or you didn't, you want to prove that you're tough or that you shouldn't be messed with. And I'm guilty of doing something like that, not jumping but getting people to jump someone, another time just being the one who gets jumped. So it was solved a lot by violence....

Tanya, 41, similarly stated:

...Sometimes I felt completely safe because I felt like I could walk anywhere. And then there was a couple of incidents where that kind of changed my perspective. I got robbed a couple of times. One time was a point over some earrings, and it was funny, because the guy who robbed me I knew, because I had a cousin who was all caught up in that, and I knew this guy from my cousin...

Tanya, like many of the participants grew up in a neighborhood where disagreements were resolved through violence:

...People fought. I mean, there were people who would come out there, "Ya'll gotta beef...I mean like grown folks...y'all gotta squash it." So they would fight... if there was something with your son and my son, then, "Okay, let's-- we're going to have them squash it right here, right now." And the mamas or the daddies or whoever would come outside,

their sons would fight in the street. And then after it was over with, they would make them shake hands, and it was over with. But they fought...

Tracy, 28, also describes that violence was the way to resolve disputes in her neighborhood:

...You would see like the Alabama Project Housing ... where we lived it was kind of like four buildings, like two towers. So it was like one, two, three, four and they called it like a quad in the middle which was, I guess, like at the courtyard type thing but I mean, you could look out your window and you could see people fighting, you could see people rolling dice, you could see even drug transactions going on like you could see all of that...You would see them fight if it was daytime. If it was late enough at night and something was going on you would hear gunshots ring out. So yeah, I'd say violence is the way that-- and I think that's true for like most, you know, black inner city areas anyway...

The six participants who did not feel safe in their neighborhoods also talked about the lack of police presence or the distrust of the police among their community members. According to the participants, the police were called if someone had gotten shot, but conflict was resolved among community members. Linda, 32, shares the experience of her community:

...Well, you know the song, "911 Is a Joke?" That was a sentiment that you heard a lot. I mean, people would call the police-- I mean, like when our house was broken into and the police came, you know, you had that feeling of like, okay, the police are going to do something, not realizing that after the fact, what were they really going to do, outside of making a report? But you feel like, well, they didn't do anything and so then you don't trust the police. When you see all of the, just the open-air drug market, basically that was

going on, and it was still, it continued to go on. Why would you trust the police, because they're not stopping that. So, no, I don't think people really trusted the police. Now, they would call the police if there was something really, really bad, like a shooting...

Tracy, 28, alluded to the fact that her community did not trust police because they were afraid of the residents who lived in her building. Therefore the members of her community felt as if they had to fend for themselves:

I would say that they would patrol this around in areas but the police in Jersey were not coming in them buildings and people knew that... They had all like the, you know, police are your friends school programs and stuff like that come to school. We were elementary school but it was like "Yo, we don't see you all in our neighborhood." So, like no, everybody pretty much felt like-- I would say they probably felt like they had to fend for themselves.

Shannon, 31, describes the lack of trust in police in her neighborhood was due to their [police] reputation of being dishonest:

...Well, let me say this, they wouldn't respond when somebody was in real danger but they were always around kind of rustling through people's pockets and kind of making their presence known and having their own share of violence perpetrated. So it was hard when they would try and say oh you can't be violent when they were doing the same thing when people were just walking down the street... The cops no one trusted them. My mother I think called them as a formality because she didn't know what else to do... So it was always like a short term hopeless kind of I don't know what else to do kind of response, but not oh an active we believe the police are here to protect us... We had two precincts. We had housing police in one section, which was like a walking distance of two

minutes, and then we had the regular police, and they would come 20, 30, 40 minutes after the fact. Somebody would be dead by then, you know?

So no one trusted them. We knew who the undercover were, and so we were just like "Well, they're committing the same crimes to bust us on crimes." "Us" meaning the people I knew. So there were individual cops that people respected, and usually those were the black officers and black male officers, because at the time there weren't too many female...

Erica, 24, tells a slightly different story where the culture of her community dictated the rules for when the police should be called. While the people in her community trusted the police disagreements were resolved among the community and the only time police were called was in response to home invasions if the family was not home:

...There was two kind of police. You had the police 911 and then you had the "neighbors police". That means your neighbors, if you have a friend living around there, your neighbor, he had your back. That's your police, too. But that's how we live...

The neighbors... [If] they feel like it's getting crazy, they'll call, but you don't call 911. But if the neighbors call, fine. We just dispute it out then and there and leave it or carry it on, but the police aren't called, because we know our temper might end up killing you. So, it wasn't no calling the police...Because if you know that person, you are not going to rat them out, because probably if they end up killing the person and disposing of their body or whatever, you know that probably you'll be next, because you close to them and that you're the only person that could know that information. You saw them. It is a small community. Everybody knows everyone. They're going to call names and gossip, so if you don't want them coming to you, everyone mind their business...

Source of fights in high school

Of the 10 participants six of them actually fought on school grounds. Four of the participants did not fight in high school. Of the four participants two of them were reluctant to fight because of the consequences for fighting on school grounds. Jamie, 32, and Tammy, 24, both attended private schools where the consequence for fighting was expulsion. However Jamie and her friends resorted to settling disputes with their peers off school grounds:

...If you fought in high school, that was an interesting dynamic. I went to a Catholic high school and they already had-- basically the word was out, because they made examples of a lot of people. Like, if you fight, you're going to pretty much get kicked out of school. So because of that, like I didn't actually physically fight in school, or like if people fought, people fought around the neighborhood, things like that, literally, like among the kids. So most of my school, like, it was crazy, we had an unwritten rule, don't fight in high school, because if you fight in high school, I mean, if you fought in that school, you would get kicked out. Like, it's one thing to have a fight, but to explain to your parents why you got expelled is a totally different thing. Everybody was just like, you know, and it would even get to a point where people would start to escalate and we would say, stop, just deal with it when we get home, just deal with it when you get home, because nobody wanted to get totally put out of school, so that was it...

The participants who fought in high school all indicated that fights often began for a number of reasons. Outside of the typical reasons girls fought such as boys, dislike of another girl, etc., fighting episodes mostly began due to disrespect or to simply test the limit of the other girl. Tanya, Shannon and Linda all share similar experiences in high school because they all were outstanding students academically.

Shannon, 31, recalls experiences where fights would occur because she was teased because she was a good student:

...Usually the source of my fight was somebody would either insult me and call me white, and I got that all through childhood, so I was just over it by high school, or make a reference to me being a geek or something. And it was growing very uncool to be smart, because there was a time when that was a big thing and we were all proud of our little stupid sweaters and National Honor Society, this and that. But at some point you got labeled as that kid who would get robbed or something, and I knew where I was from, but I didn't try to show that at school...

Linda, 32, describes her experience of being challenged during her high school years and even college:

...So I wouldn't say it was-- I think it was just because people challenged me...You've challenged me and so I don't want you to challenge me and so in my experience, when somebody comes to challenge you, it's going to end in a fight and I don't want you to hit me first. So, yeah, they challenged me. And even once I got to college and some of the incidents I got in, it was because I was challenged...

For Tanya, 41, her experience was that she was constantly tested by her peers in high school because the culture dictated that once you earned the reputation as a “fighter” you had to maintain that status:

...[I]never had a fight over, "You like my boyfriend." Never had none of those type fights. Usually it was kind of like people just want to “test your metal”. Either they were trying to establish themselves as something, or they didn't like you for some reason, either because you were involved in so many things and because you did do X, Y, Z, those type

of things. Because in school, I didn't have issues really in school. I played sports, I was in various clubs, I was elected to various offices. And so I didn't have problems in school. So it was just basically because somebody just didn't like you for probably jealousy reasons, more so than anything else...

Regarding reputation, Tanya states that there were consequences for not fighting:

...Well, you got labeled a punk, and then that brought on a whole lot of other things, because then even your so-called friends kind of really didn't trust you, or they always wanted to test you. So they may, "Oh, when you see her, just slap her, see what she do." It was always these kinds of test things that were going on...

The decision to go to college

Seven of the participants received encouragement to go to college from their family while three participants were encouraged by a neighbor, the media or school officials. The similarity shared by the three participants is that they all lived in homes where domestic violence was prevalent. Danielle, 36, Shannon, 31, and Tracy, 28 share their stories.

Danielle:

...I always knew it, even before, like ten. I knew that if I wanted not to be in the environment that I came from, I had to have an education. I mean I was very, very intelligent, I mean I got good grades, honor roll, distinguished honor roll most of my academic career and I always joked, used to joke about when I went to college. Yeah I was a cool nerd because I was out at the parties but my grades did not suffer, like I was not playing because I knew that was the only way I wasn't going to end up like my parents and my brother and sisters, and that was the most important thing to me. I always knew that, and of course I had counselors once I got to the seventh grade. I got into Fame

[an academic program], or the summer after sixth grade was when I got into Fame because of my teachers were like she has so much potential, she's really good, we should really hone this. You know what I mean, cultivate this. Then my high school, my guidance counselors made sure that I knew about the PSATS and college applications and all that kind of stuff so they really kind of continued to pour into my desire to go because my parents didn't have any money and I ended up going on a full scholarship....

For Shannon, while her initial encouragement came from television and her school she did receive some support from her mother:

...TV. <laughs> "A Different World" and pop culture from very early. Also I went to a really good elementary school and junior high school, so it was the thing to do to say you're going to college and to say what you're going to practice or be or study. And so my graduation from sixth grade, the same graduation where I didn't get that special medal, a group of my teachers did something very special for me, and they took me out to dinner. And so all of the black women, gym teachers, science teachers, homeroom teachers, anybody I had over those years all got together. And I still know these women today. Some of them I have keys to their home and stuff, like they're really good friends of mine. They took me out and they said "What do you want to be?" And I'm like "I want to be a doctor," and that was the first moment anybody said "What do you want to do after school?" and obviously after high school, because that's what that meant to me. And then my mom didn't have much of an education. I would help her with her GED prep, and so I was just like "Well, I got to do something, because I'm good in school, and I'm not going to work at McDonald's or I'm not going to work at Macy's. I don't think that's actually going to be the kind of life with the kind of mind I think I have or what people say I have.

People say I'm a good writer, so I need to be a teacher or something like that." So I knew that college had to be a part of the plan, even if it was a local college or something far away. And then once I went to high school-- junior high school was kind of a blur academically, so I did well enough, but I was more of a B, B-plus student. But high school I had As the whole way through, and so it was mainly because the work wasn't hard enough, and I didn't know how to study, because it wasn't like I was like this brainiac, but I was really ahead of my time for the kind of teaching they were doing, and so I was in honors classes mostly. AP classes is what they called them. And it kind of clicked. Everybody there was talking-- we were all geek squad talking about what school and what we wanted to pursue. And the other thing is it came from my mother. So no one else in my family would say too much. They would just say "She's really smart. That girl's going places" or something, but my mom was the one who said "You have to do better than I did, and for you not just high school. You have to go to college." And so that was always the conversation we had...

Tracy, 28, has a different experience where her high school guidance counselor tried to discourage her from attending college prior to her being encouraged by her neighbor:

...I had a guidance counselor in 11th grade when I started trying to get ready for college and stuff, and he was just like "I don't know why you're going to waste your time trying to do these college things when you're going to end up in jail," because he was like "You have so much rage inside of you that you can kill somebody."... He was like "You're so angry at everything," and I'm like "I ain't going to jail. You're going to jail." <laughs> But, yeah, he told me that. And the funny thing is I run into this guy at the Y now,

whatever, and he's like "You know, oh, I just loved you." "Shut up. You told me I'm going to jail. What do you mean?" "I always knew you would do good." "No, you didn't."...

Tracy also decided to attend college because of conflict with her home:

...College originally started as me just wanting to leave home. Probably 10th and 11th grade me and my mom were bumping heads a lot, because I had pretty much felt like I was grown, and I already know everything there is to know about life and the world, and I always had older friends and older brothers... So I had reached a point with my mom where I was like "Whatever. You can't tell me nothing. I got this. I'm good." So originally the idea of college was like "All right, I've got to go to college so I can leave here," so that's really what it was. I was like "I want to go far away, and I'm not coming back." And that's how the idea of college really entered my mind...

Though Tracy had the desire to leave home, the inspiration to attend college came from a neighbor who lived next door to her grandparents' home in Delaware. Tracy was sent to live with her grandparents because she was about to be placed in a detention center after being apprehended for stealing a vehicle. Here Tracy tells her story:

There was this cop that I met when I first moved down there, and actually now I call him my uncle, and I talk to him all the time. And he went to North Carolina Central, which is the college that I went to, and he was actually our neighbor when I lived with my grandparents, so that's how I kind of met him. And I remember just one random day I was walking home, and he was outside with his dogs, and he had this pretty pitbull. And I was like "I want to pet your dog," whatever. We started talking, and he was like "I know some things about you." And I was like "What are you talking about? You don't know me." He never had spoke to me. We never exchanged-- who do you know? And he had kind of like

broke it down to me about the fights and the bully and I'm aggressive and duh-duh-duh-duh-duh, like he had been watching me. And I was like "What are you, some kind of weirdo?" I remember for the longest time I used to be like "You're a weirdo." I used to just tell him that at random, like "You're a weirdo." But then he had explained to me that he was a cop, because I never knew what he did, because he wouldn't come home in uniform and stuff. He was actually like a detective. And he kind of just kind of told me he did his research or whatever, found out about me. But, yeah, it was seeing him, and he was an Alpha, and seeing him with all his NCCU shirts on and all that other stuff, and he actually took me to homecoming one year, me and his daughter... And when I seen that I was like "Yo, I'm here. Where do I sign-up at?" <laughs>...I was in high school, probably around 11th grade, I think, because I was just like "Really? You could get to go here and be independent? And, yeah, I'm going." I'm like "All right, done deal."...

How conflict was resolved in college?

Of the 10 participants, five had altercations after leaving high school. The five participants who chose not to fight after high school made a conscious decision to leave that part of their lives behind after graduation. The other five participants were slowly coming to the decision to stop fighting, but were triggered by situations where they felt as though they had to defend themselves. All five participants experienced some form of harassment prior to the incident. Two of the participants received consequences for fighting which resulted in a “wake up call” about using physical violence to resolve conflict. Here are their stories.

Andrea, 25, was harassed by another female student since her freshmen year in college because of her relationship with a male classmate. By Andrea’s junior year she had endured multiple episodes of relational aggression and two verbal altercations with the female student.

While the situation was the typical girlfriend/boyfriend drama, Andrea did not want to fight the female student but got tired of the harassment and decided to fight as she felt she had no other choice. Because the incident was premeditated, the consequence Andrea received was expulsion from the university. Here is a segment of the events that led to the altercation:

...So this was September of my junior year, it was around my birthday weekend, it was my birthday weekend. I had friends come up from Delaware, around this time at the school, it wasn't a pep rally we had some type of function. I can't remember exactly what it was but a lot of people were there so you could have your off campus people come in or whatever the case may be. As I'm walking, after the party is over, as I'm walking back to one of my friends' dorm rooms, she's walking behind me like, swinging behind my head as if she's going to hit me. What she didn't know was I had two of my friends behind her, and they didn't say anything because they wanted to see what exactly it was she was going to do. So that was my breaking point at that time because now, I don't know what you're thinking and in my mind I'm thinking eventually you're going to get me, so before you get me, now I'm saying to myself I have to get you first. So we actually were on our way to get something to eat and one of her friends said oh is the party going to be in room 207, so I said okay great, I think that's where she lives at. Mind you by this point in time, I'm not living on campus I'm commuting back and forth between Lincoln University and Delaware. So I said when we come back, I got something for her. We came back from getting something to eat, changed my clothes

and everything and this was where I got myself in trouble because by this time everything that I'm doing is premeditated, changed my clothes and everything. I say I'm going to go to room 207 and I'm going to see if she's there, knock on the door, she opened it, my friend hit her first, and we just started fighting and that's how the fight happened...With that I ended up getting assault charges, battery charges, so I ended up with one count of, one misdemeanor for assault, they tried to add on some robbing, some robbing, I had to ask my friends, did y'all steal something? Because I didn't understand you see, that's the thing, not being knowledgeable I didn't know that it was going to be to that magnitude of us getting in trouble, but because we entered into their room they automatically put that down...

After the incident Andrea spoke to one of the school officials and here is his response:

...I actually did talk to one of the administrative officers, somebody that my mom knew and he told me Andrea, he was like, I wish you would have come to me at the beginning when this first was an issue so then that way we could have been able to resolve [this]. Because now you are telling me all these things she's done to you from your freshmen year until now, it's not going to matter because you look like the bad guy because you approached her. You went to her dorm room...and it didn't help that all my friends were there, not to jump her, they were there to celebrate my birthday but because they were there, it looked like I called them up to say

hey listen, we need to go jump this girl and it wasn't worth it, I ended up getting kicked out of school...

Tammy, 25, also was involved in a fight in her junior year of college where the outcome was involvement with the local police. In Tammy's case she and her roommate allowed two co-workers to move into their off campus apartment. The relationship began to deteriorate when the co-workers allowed random guys to spend the night and smoke marijuana in the living quarters. Feeling that their safety was in jeopardy, Tammy and her initial roommate reached out to the managers of the apartment complex and after several complaints a mediator was sent to the apartment. During the mediation, Tammy attacks one of the co-workers because she would not take responsibility for the drug usage or the random visitors. Here Tammy shares her story:

... Junior year, that's when I got into the fight...it, was two of my co-workers. They needed a place to stay and we hung out several times so I was like, okay, they were cool. I was like, okay, you can live with me and my roommate. Me and my roommate had been friends since freshman year and this was like somebody else who I knew. So I invited them to move in with us, but eventually that turned sour. They were very trifling. They would have guys come in. They would smoke weed in the house. It would be stank. I would wake up and then there's a random guy on our couch. I just didn't feel safe. Me and my friend, we didn't feel safe in the apartment. I complained several times to management and they didn't do anything about it... So we had a peer mediation. Supposedly, that's what

it's supposed to be. One of the managers came in to try to resolve the conflict and the girl basically just sat there and she just was lying, wasn't owning up to the weed, wasn't owning up to the random guys coming in. She wasn't owning up to anything. That just really-- that really just pissed me off and I was like I had enough and that's when I jumped on her and started punching her and the guy, he pulled me off of her and that's when she ran and was like to go and call the cops, so that's how that happened. That was something that brewed over months and it escalated so I couldn't just take it anymore because I couldn't-- it was beyond my control. Management wasn't fixing it so I just figured if I just let my frustration out, I would feel better...

Here Tammy talks about the consequences of her actions:

...It was misdemeanor battery charges, but the court ended up having adjudication withheld or something so I wasn't charged or convicted, but that's what she was trying to do. And one of my friends was like, "Why don't you press chargers so it looked like it was both [of you fighting]?" But I didn't want to go through the hassle. I was like whatever. I did it. I took the first lick so I had to suffer the consequences...

The decision to change

Each of the 10 participants had a defining moment where they had to take a look at themselves and make a choice not to use physical violence to resolve conflict. For Tammy, 25, and Andrea, 25 their epiphanies occurred after the consequences that they received during their

college altercation. Andrea describes the moment that she realized that she should have made a different choice:

...I look back at it now, it's all so stupid. It's ridiculous when I look back at it now, because I'm looking at the root of what the problem was. Had I just gone to a counselor, had I just said something to my mom, or had I just said something to one of my professors, maybe somebody as an adult could have stepped in and said hey listen, this is ridiculous, you ladies need to sit down and get together and have some type of understanding of what's going on and I didn't do that, [until] after the fight was over... I think once I came home and I was by myself and now I'm jobless and now I'm not in school and it's just me and my thoughts and its like, okay what did you really get yourself into? I think at that point is when I said, enough is enough, I can't fight somebody just to prove a point, unless I have some kids and somebody is trying to harm them, that's when it's going to be other than that it's worthless. Because I already have a record for that so if I was to do it all over again, it's only going to be worse. And now I'm standing with this label as a girl who likes to fight when that's not even the case, it's not even who I am but because of my actions and what I chose to do, that's how society will look at me as that's who I am...

For Tammy, as part of her consequence for fighting she also had to attend anger management, which was helpful to her. For another participant Tanya, 41, her decision to change came after being injured in a fight in high school. Here is Tanya's story:

...There was some little confrontation between one of the girls on my block and one of the girls on that block, and some kind of way they-- it was like they kind of would come around here or something-- it was literally around the corner. And so we went around

the corner, and we went around the corner and somebody's mother came outside and was like, "Y'all ain't going to be coming here to jump my daughter." And it wasn't even about jumping her daughter. It was she was going around the corner because she was going to fight the girls, and the mother took it as something else, and then all these people, like the whole block, just jumped on us-- like the whole block. So I got hit with a bat, like across my back. I got hit with a bat... We were in high school, so this was somewhere between maybe tenth and eleventh grade. But it was like a straight brawl. And I mean, around the corner from my house.

Here is where Tanya's transformation occurred:

...It was crazy, but it was kind of messed up because I played sports, so-- and I played-- I ran track, which I couldn't do, because I couldn't pump my-- I couldn't really-- it was kind of hard trying to run without moving your arms. So I couldn't participate in the relay, because I did the 4x100, so I couldn't participate because I couldn't do anything. I played tennis, and I played first doubles, and my team was the only African-American high school team ranked in the city-- couldn't play, because I couldn't throw the ball up to serve. So couldn't play. And what else? Oh, and then I was a cheerleader, and then I was a flag girl in the band. Couldn't hold the-- couldn't do nothing. So I was out for three weeks, till my-- because I had to let the shoulder heal... And then-- but it kind of became that whole-- that was kind of like some of the wakeup, I think-- the wakeup for me, the wakeup for them. Like that could have been so much more... And then he [my dad] was like, "Look at how that one decision impacted, influenced all these other things."...

Tracy, 28, describes the moment when she began to think differently about her actions. Because Tracy was well known as a fighter in high school, but was a good student academically she was unable to receive one of the highest honors that a high school graduate could receive:

...I've been suspended from school countless times. I was suspended from school. I didn't even get caught all the time. We would do the parking-lot fights, and we didn't have a security guard in the parking lot or on the buses or at the bus stops in the afternoon, like "I'm going to ride her bus home, because I'm going to get her" and stuff like that.

<laughs> So, yeah, there was a few impulsive moments like in the school building where I just was like "I'm over this thing." Yeah, I definitely got suspended then. It actually messed me up in high school, because I think at the time I graduated you needed to have like 30 credits, and I ended up having like 38 with a 4.0, and I couldn't get my diploma of distinction because I had suspensions for fighting on my school record... Senior year of high school...It broke my heart. I did schoolwork. I just got caught up in all the other nonsense. But I remember a senior workshop or something, and we had to do an exit exam they called it. You had to fill this whole big packet, and I was so hyped, because I got all these credits and whatever. And I had checked the box for diploma of distinction, and I remember senior night when they handed out our robes and everything I was like "Wait, where's my other"-- and they was like "Nah, you don't get that." I was just like "Are you kidding me?" That day I probably wanted to fight everybody...

Though this was the beginning of Tracy's transformation, her real moment of change did not occur until after her freshman year of college. Tracy had a disagreement with her roommate which resulted in a fight due to a lack of respect for her property. However, after that incident

she decided that she no longer wanted to fight due to the consequences as an adult. In her sophomore year Tracy decided to live on her own so she got her own apartment:

...I kind of feel like I just kind of grew up. I really think that's what it was, like I just grew up. I'm like grown now. And that's what the guy that I call my uncle, who was the cop, he was like "You know you're grown now, so"-- he was like "You're somebody now, and you can get five years for that, just for hitting somebody. That's an assault charge." He used to always drill that stuff in my head. And I was just like "Yeah, I'm not going to go to jail. I'm never going to make it to jail." Because I'll go to jail for something like assault, and then you pick up a murder because I'm going to have to take somebody out. So, yeah, I really feel like I just grew up, and I just realized I got to do so much better and I wanted so much more that I was just like "What's the point?"...

While Shannon, 31, continued to fight in high school, her turning point also came about when she was denied an athletic award in 6th grade. Shannon shares her story below:

...So I tested into this school, so I had some friends test into it, so it was a big deal, and I was also very athletic in the current school I was in and, well, actually the whole way through. I was on teams the whole time. But I was supposed to get this award that I knew was mine, which was Most Athletic Female or something like that or Most Athletic Girl at graduation, and I had this gym teacher who I had since first grade at that school, all the way through sixth, and he gave it to the second-best girl in the school. And so this is the most embarrassing thing. I'm in the band in the front of the school playing in front of the auditorium about to stand up when I hear that award, because they did the boys and then they did the girls, and he calls this other girl, Tracy, and I'm just blown away and so hurt by it. And so after the graduation-- I got some other awards for things that I did revolving

around academics or social, what is it, service and things like that, but I go to him. I'm like "How come I didn't get that medal, Mr. C?" And he said it. He was like "Your temper." And I just remember being so dumbfounded by that and so embarrassed and so upset, because even though it wasn't a educational award it was in a educational setting, and I was 12 years old and just kind of like "Wow, my past is the reason I can't on graduation day get a certain award? I have to change something. My teachers are right. I have to stop this. Even though sixth grade I probably had no fights, he remembers all those other years." And so it was a big lesson for me, and that's when the split happens in adolescence where you start to see how certain behaviors get attention and get negative attention... And by the time I got to high school I was just like "It's not worth it. I'm college-bound. I got to get out of the hood." So it was really about wanting access to things, and I knew that I had to at least portray the image of somebody who wanted to have better things for myself...

While in college Shannon had another epiphany about using violence to resolve conflict.

Coming from a home where domestic violence was the norm, Shannon realized that the more she used violence that she was no different than the men who abused her mother. Here is Shannon's reflection:

... Is it really worth it, because at that point I was really trying to embody an anti-violence approach to things, because I knew that I didn't like it. There became a point for me, where I knew I didn't want to be like the men who my mother dated, you know and so that was the main thing. By college it was very clear to me. I was just like, I'm no different than them. I mean I hit my partner; I mean I hit my children but I don't want to hit other people as a way of expressing myself, like I think that's an act of powerlessness,

even though it seems like it's the most powerful thing to do. So, you know, even the most egregious acts, you know or disrespectful acts didn't warrant that from me, even if I felt it and knew that it was not my nature but my socialization...

Linda, 32, shares a different story about her transformation. Linda's college experience was filled with multiple racial episodes as she attended a school where African Americans were the minority. Racial epithets were used toward her on numerous occasions, and she had bottles thrown at her during one incident. While this was not the violence that Linda endured in her neighborhood she still perceived this as being disrespect. As much as she wanted to fight everyone, her roommate who was also from her neighborhood, explained to her that she could not fight because she was in a new environment and risk being kicked out of college. Linda describes her experience:

... [The] RA ... had been at me and my roommate all night. "Y'all bitches and, you know, you don't belong here and why did they let you in?" And her father had donated money to the college and I mean she was just nasty towards us. And I was going to the computer lab and she was following me calling me bitches and, "You bitch, you nigger." And when she said it at that point, it was the third week of school and at that point, I'd had it. And I was like, "Obviously they don't want me here at UD. Let me go out with a bang." And so in my mind, I'm going out with a bang. And I went running after that girl. And she was coming towards me and I turned around and I just started charging towards her and out of nowhere my roommate came and tackled me like a football play. And she was just like crying. We just like cried in the hallway. And she was like, "It's gonna get better. I know. I know we hate this place." And luckily they had the whole thing on camera. But I still

wanted to fight when I got to college. When I realized that I couldn't was when- I guess it was the end of my freshman year when I realized I couldn't and then my freshman year...

Linda then shares an experience where she befriended another girl who was Caucasian and how that relationship was short lived because she was shoplifting while they were visiting a shopping mall. Though the girl did not get caught, Linda explained to the girl how she put her (Linda) at risk of being arrested which resulted in the dissolving of the relationship. After the incident, the girl began to harass Linda:

...And I had applied to be an RA and this girl that I had become friendly with, she and I went shopping at the mall. And she was a white girl, came from an affluent family, and when we got back to the dorm, I probably maybe only had 30 dollars or something. You know, I don't even think I bought anything from the mall that day, but she came back and I thought that she was buying stuff. I saw her at the register buying sunglasses or whatever, but I didn't know that she was stealing the whole time we were at the mall. And we got back to the dorm and she came in my room and she was like, "Okay, what do you want?" "I don't want anything from you. I don't steal. I don't want anything." And then I got angry. Like, "You're in the mall stealing with me? You're white. I'm black. If you get caught, they're gonna to think I was a part of it." And I remember just becoming very angry with her. "Stay out of my life. Don't talk to me. Don't look my way. I don't want nothing to do with thieves." And then she began to harass me and they started to bring up those same feelings of she's crossing me, she's challenging me, she's disrespecting me...

Here Linda speaks of an incident in her sophomore year that changed her perspective:

...And this one day I had come home from class, usually I would stay out for a little while, and I had come home, come back to the dorm and said, "Oh, I'm going to get some

studying done,” and I had my door open and a little bit of music playing and I was sitting on my bed studying and she came in my room and gave me the middle finger and called me a bitch. And I tried to fight that girl. But what it was I was fed up because when she came in my room and did that, our RA, our new RA was in the hallway at the time and so the appearance was that this angry black girl was trying to beat up this rich white girl and the same thing she tried to do at the beginning of the school year. And I had applied to be an RA and so then they began to question my character and would I be able to do the job and everything. And so that night we were supposed to find out if we had been accepted and because of that incident, they told me that I wasn’t going to be considered anymore. And so I appealed it and everything. But it was eye-opening for me because it made me really take a good look at number one to look at, you know, in ’97 and ’98 what the dynamics were between race relations at that time and number two, it made me really assess myself and really determine what kind of life that I wanted because obviously what I’ve learned all these years through my environment is not getting me anywhere in the environment I’m trying to go to. And so that’s what really started a turn in me...

After this incident Linda continued to endure bouts with racism in her dorm. As a means to handle the pressure, Linda would return to the neighborhood where she grew up and would indulge in fighting on the weekend. It was not until Linda’s junior year in college when she learned that she was expecting her first child that she decided she could not fight any longer:

...I still lived what I would consider a double life up until I got pregnant with my son which was the end of my junior year. I still- you know, I’m down in Newark in this nice area and learning all of these eloquent, you know, ideas and on the weekends I was going- now when I lived in that area, I wouldn’t dare go inside of Riverside. Then I

moved to Newark in college, on the weekends I'm going home, now I'm real bad ass. I'm hanging out in Riverside. <laughs>. And so I still on the weekends was getting involved in the confrontations and it had just become a part of me. And I really was living like a true, true double life that people when I was hanging out on the weekends would have never believed that I was, you know, this intelligent person in Newark and people in Newark would have never believed that I was this hood chick that'll fight you, cut you, hit you with a bat, you know, they would never believe it... I could go all week long and the only other black face you see is a custodian, that's like- that does horrible things to your self-esteem and it really just kind of reinforces that you don't belong here at our institution and the only place for you here is to clean our bathrooms and to serve us our food. And so for me to still feel connected to what my culture was and to still maintain a sense of sanity, I was going back to the environment that I was familiar with... But I tell everybody like my son saved my life because at that time, I was just living so reckless it was unbelievable. When I look back on that time in my life, it was just- I was just doing things that I had no business doing and hanging out with people that I definitely had no business hanging out with. And so when I found out I was pregnant, I wasn't seen in Riverside no more. <laughs>... For me at that time being young, you don't have any cares and no responsibilities, it was just fun because I still had my brain and my academics to fall back on, but now I got somebody else that I have to care for. And so that's what made me really get serious about life and so I stopped hanging out in that environment period. I didn't go back...

Resolving conflict after college

Though the participants have come to terms with their decision not to use physical violence to resolve conflict, they often struggle with their decision to use non violent strategies. Out of the 10 participants two of them had used physical violence to resolve conflict with great regret. The other eight while still struggling to maintain a non violent stance have been successful but have to be mindful about being verbally aggressive.

Cindy, 46, describes her daily struggle with responding in a non threatening manner when she experiences conflict:

...I just had a conversation with one of my employees today and I would say it's two of me. I say it's Cindy and then there's Charlie. She has a name. And I work in Philadelphia and there's a Temple sign. And I always say that's where I'm from see where that Temple sign is. That's where Temple is in North Philadelphia. I work really hard to keep Charlie at bay, but I say every now and then she wants to come up because my natural reaction is to defend myself through my mouth, not by my hands. And I said, you know, I'm a college-educated 40-something year old woman I know that that is not the way. And I have to find another way to better communicate whatever it is that I need to say. So it's still a daily struggle because I think my natural tendency coming from that environment is I have to defend myself. I have to show that I'm not weak. But I think I do a pretty good job at keeping at bay. If I get to know somebody then I'll say okay this is how I really am. But I think the influences that you have when you're young still stay with you. It's just that you've got to have different skill sets to kind of keep it at bay, you know what I mean, minimize it as much as possible. But it's always there...

Jamie, 32, also speaks of her struggles and the strategies that she uses to minimize the need to respond aggressively in the workplace:

... I've tried my best not to let it show in the workplace. I really try hard, just because there's a spotlight on you for any different number of reasons. I try not to let it be-- get, like, obvious that I have an issue. I try not to-- obviously it can't become physical in the workplace, not in my workplace. I would be terminated immediately.... I try to follow up in a calm fashion. I've been told that I have a condescending tone when I try to follow up with people sometimes, and then I try to explain to those people that I'm not trying to be condescending, I'm just trying to-- sometimes when I get that way, I try to-- that's another thing I try to do, I either try to one, take notes when I have conflict, or two, speak slowly, because I feel like when I start getting to that point where my mind is racing, my heart is racing, and I just feel like I'm about to set it off, I try to slow down, because I feel like everything is going to combine, and I'm just going to flip out completely, and then some people take that as being condescending, and I'm like, I'm not trying to be condescending, or another thing I might do is I turn on my professional voice, for people that I may be having conflict with. I operate in my professional role if they think I'm being condescending. And I just tell them, that I'm not trying to be condescending, I just slow down and not flip out, and explain what's going on.

Jamie also shares another strategy that has been helpful to her during conflict:

...Also, what I do often on a serious conflict is, I will write letters to people, just because writing has always been a refuge for me, so just to get it out, and then just so that person hears-- when the time comes, that person hears what I have to say...Get out how I feel about the situation and how best we can resolve it...If they don't want to read it then, they don't have to, but like, when you send somebody a letter, potentially they will read it, you know...

Tracy, 28, describes her new response to conflict. Tracy decided to adopt the strategy of walking away after the fight with her roommate in her freshman year of college. What Tracy realized was that arguing was a trigger for her and to avoid a fight it is best for her to walk away regardless if it is with family or in the workplace:

...I'll just leave any kind of situation that is going to make me feel like some kind of way. I hang up on people on the phone. If the conversation isn't going to where I'm trying-- yeah, I'll hang up in the drop of a dime. I'm going to hang up. If we're together, I'll pack up and leave mid-whatever, because I can't argue, and I know that, so... I know that I'm real short with words, so if we are going to have it out, I'll sit back and be quiet for a minute and fold my arms, and then if you want to keep going, I got to go. And I do that a lot. And my husband's like "You're always running." "I'm not running. I'm going to save you right now." Yeah... a lot of people will take that for weakness, because even my brothers will say like "Oh, you can't handle no kind of conflict. What's wrong with you? You're always running scared." "No. No, I'm not scared at all. You probably should be scared if I sit here any longer and just take it." And I've never argued. That back and forth thing, I can't do it...

Like Tracy, other participants manage conflict in the same fashion by removing themselves from hostile situations or removing negative people from their lives. Taking this strategy a step further, both Danielle, 36 and Shannon 31 made a conscious decision to live in peace as a result of the violence that they experienced in their home. Danielle shares her story below:

...I'm very clear that I need positive energy surrounding me at all times and anything that disrupts my level of positivity is a problem. And therefore, the way I've resolved problems is to extinguish them until I just don't deal with those people anymore and I'm

really clear about that. And I don't have a problem telling people that they're no longer welcome in my life. And they might continue to go on calling me this name or that name but I'll leave because once I've made the decision I'm really done with it because it's much more important to me to always be residing in a state of peace. I don't want stress. I don't want strife. I don't want contention. I mean outside, of course, the normal stress that goes along with being alive. But I don't want conflict in my life. I can't think of anything that is that important that I want to be in conflict over...

Danielle also speaks of a contentious situation that occurred with two clients which resulted in the severing of their working relationship because she felt that the stress was not worth it:

...I fired two clients earlier this year because they looked like they were going to present me with challenges. Or they were questioning the way that I was suggesting that they look to grow their business in a confrontational manner which was not producing positive energy in me. And there's no amount of money that's worth that. And it was getting to the point where-- and it didn't last very long because I nixed it quickly but it was getting to the point where it was time to have a call with them I was like <sighs> something please come up, I don't want to get on the phone with them. And I love my work and I love my clients. So if I ever feel like that we got a problem. And so in both of the scenarios on that very call I was like I know that our work together is non-cancelable but I'm thinking that we need to look at the possibility of severing our relationship. I think it would be better for both of us if that's what we do. You know, I'm talking through, you know, normally, you can't get out of my contract. Well, here's what I'm going to do. Not a discussion, not no you want to keep working with me. Like I've decided I don't want to work with you anymore and so I'm not going to charge you anymore. And we're

going to respect and separate and I won't have anything to say about you and you don't say anything about me. Deal? That type of thing because it's just not worth it...

Reflections on the need to use physical violence as an African American woman

Each participant was asked if they felt African American women would be embarrassed about the need to use physical violence. The responses were varied. Half of the participants felt that the need to physical violence was just a phase and the other half believed that African American women would be embarrassed about their incidents.

Of the five participants who believe that African American women would be embarrassed about the incidents, their reasons were; African American women are expected to live up to a variety of standards and have so much to prove to society, being perceived as having a negative attitude, acting masculine or simply because African American women tend put pressure on themselves to appear as if they have it altogether. Below Shannon, 31, shares her response:

...I think definitely. I think if you ask our mothers, our grandmothers, do you beat your children or... Depending on what company or people what people might be perceived as yeah, to be violent is to be two things. To be negative and to be acting like a man, which is a whole other can of worms. I think if you ask today's young woman or today's African American woman who, I guess young, there's a different story given the rates at which young woman are committing violence and are doing it at a rate that lands them in jail quicker... But I think, there was a time when my mother would be embarrassed by that and I was at some point. It took me becoming a young adult almost for me to stop. But, I think, for the average 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 year old, no. I think it's extremely a badge of honor given what I see in my field because of how times have changed... I guess the answer is that now kids aren't... African women or girls are not embarrassed, but I think

it depends on the generation. And I think it also depends on the type of violence we're discussing. If it's violence against somebody who's been harming you and hurting your maybe it might be accepted or not seen as an embarrassing thing. But if it's against your children or something it depends...

Tammy, 25, shares her reflection:

...I think some women possibly could be embarrassed about it because there's-- we have to live up to so many different standards. We have to prove to society a lot of things because we're black women, so I think to say, oh, I use to fight, I use to beat up people, I think people would be embarrassed about it, especially if you're trying to move forward and establish yourself and become a better person. You don't already want to make it seem like you're this crazy black women even as a child, so I think they would be embarrassed to talk about it...

Three of five participants who felt that African American women would not be embarrassed to use physically aggressive behaviors share their reflections below.

Tanya, 41, describes her response:

...I don't think it's necessarily an embarrassment, unless they've done some other stuff. Like I never have pulled a knife on some man, or went after some dude, or something of that nature. I think those types of situations make you look at yourself a little bit different, that you let somebody get you to that point. So I don't think it's an embarrassment, I just think that for most of us it's just a product of the environment, and then when you're out of that environment, you're a product of something else. That's just how I kind of look at it. I don't think it's something that can stamp you for life, or should stamp you for life...

Tracy, 28, has a similar response:

...I wouldn't say embarrassed. I kind of laugh at it now, like my past. I just laugh at it now. And I think that it's the past for a reason. You know, everybody has some kind of growing pains, and by whatever means that's how you got through. So I fought to no end growing up, but I'm sitting here today two master's degrees in, so you can't hold that over me. I'm not embarrassed about it, ashamed about it. I mean, it is what it is. Everybody has a story. So that's why, I mean, I offered to help for situations like these, because this kind of stuff interests me, and I'm not going to cover it up. That's me...

Cindy, 46, views her experience as “badge of honor”:

...Embarrassed? No. I don't think they are embarrassed. I think we use it like-- I'll speak for myself and some people who I hang around with that come from a similar background, I think we use it was a badge of honor to say we're not weak. Don't mess with me because I'm from this. And people say oh yeah, she's from North Philadelphia. Like if you're from Philadelphia and somebody says that you know what that means. And what comes with that is that even though you may not have had a fight at all, if you say I'm from North Philadelphia people are going to assume that you have and that you did come from an aggressive background and that you probably have used violence to resolve conflict... so I don't think I get embarrassed. I think that I modify myself depending on what environment we're in. But like I said, I don't even know what you call it. It's always there. It's how sometimes you demand respect from folks by saying that, like I said, well I'm from North Philly so I just say it and there's a certain amount of respect that goes along with that, even though they may not know what North Philadelphia means, but I guess the way that I say it it sort of kind of means something...

Summary

For college educated African American women who used physical violence as an adolescent, the journey toward living a non violent life is a challenge, but they eventually make the decision to change. As the participants matured they all realized that the consequences for using physical violence as an adult could be devastating personally and professionally. In the end, the women identified their triggers and found alternative strategies for handling conflict whether it is removing negative people from their lives or just walking away from contentious situations.

The next chapter will discuss these findings from a clinical and theoretical perspective. The culture of violence in ones neighborhood along with the need to use physical violence as a means of self defense or a survival tactic, and the role it plays in future relationships will be discussed. Also addressed will be the relationship between domestic violence and aggressive behavior in adolescent girls, and duality of being smart and adopting an aggressive persona to deter negative interactions with peers. This will be followed by a discussion on brain development and how it plays a role in maturity and decision making, especially when it comes to resolving conflict. Finally, implications for social work practice, limitations and recommendations for future research will also be covered in chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how African American women who used physical aggression as adolescents were able to navigate and negotiate their social environments (neighborhoods, family and school) to attend college and lead successful lives post graduation. It was hoped that this study would contribute to a greater understanding of the impact of the zero tolerance policy in schools and how it often reinforces the use of physically aggressive behaviors in girls that are learned and reinforced either in their community or home. Because the literature about girls and aggression tends to emphasize the negative outcomes associated with physical aggression rather than imagine possibilities for resilience that may emerge from these behaviors. This study also hoped to demonstrate that the aggressive behavior does not necessarily prohibit the adolescent African American girl from going to college and leading a successful life (Herrera & McCloskey, 2001; Gorman-Smith, Henry, & Tolan, 2004; Xie, Cairns & Cairns, 2005).

There are multiple gaps that exist in the research literature that fail to consider the resilience of adolescent African American girls who use physically aggressive behaviors to resolve disputes with their peers today (Carins, Carins, & Neckerman, 1989; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Farrington, 1986; Serbin, Peters, McAffer & Schwartzman, 1991; Stattin & Magnusson, 1989; Herrera & McCloskey, 2001; Gorman-Smith, Henry, & Tolan, 2004; Xie, Cairns & Cairns, 2005). The current literature places limitations on these girls when it comes to furthering their education in pursuit of financial stability based on their delinquent history and family's social status (Esping-Anderson, 2005; Shoemaker, 2005; Brown & Gourdine, 2007). Furthermore, the literature does not address the possibility that the use of physically aggressive behaviors could be nothing more than a developmental phase in the life of the African American adolescent girl in which they may eventually outgrow possibly in early adulthood (Overstreet,

2000; Gorman-Smith, Henry, & Tolan, 2004). In this chapter significant findings from this data set will be elaborated on and compared to the existing literature cited in chapter 2. Implications for social work practice will then be addressed followed by recommendations for future research.

Community Violence and Code of the Street

Consistent with the literature reviewed in chapter 2, the participants all described their adolescent experience as a time when identity was a factor in the need to obtain the approval and acceptance of peers rather than their parents (Erikson, 1959). In the lives of some of these women, maintaining their individuality was not an option because of the culture of their community. Some of the women in this study indicated that they would have preferred not to have used physical violence if given a choice, but felt that they had no other alternative. For these women using physical aggression to resolve conflict was the only choice due to the culture of violence that pervaded their neighborhoods. For the women who lived in violent communities, their survival was based on their ability to defend themselves if challenged (Hirschinger et al., 2003).

Anderson (1999); Hirschinger et al. (2003); Resnick, Ireland, and Borowsky (2004) stated that witnessing as well as participating in violent fights can affect the judgment of the adolescent witness, in which they may ultimately emulate the same behavior. Many of the participants in this study mentioned in their interviews that they would not start a fight, but if challenged they would finish it. This behavior is congruent with Anderson's (1999) code of the street in that the culture of the community dictates the response of an individual when provoked. Of the participants in this study who lived in communities where violence was prevalent, they identified with the code of the street and how conflict was often resolved among the members of the neighborhood because of the lack of response from or trust in the police (Anderson, 1999).

The participants in this study were well versed in the unwritten rules of the street code in that their aggressive demeanor had to be consistent each time they were challenged in order to maintain their reputation of being known as someone who should not be messed with (Anderson, 1999). Each of the participants defined physical aggression as not only being physical contact but also using both verbal and non verbal communication such as spitting, throwing objects, loud talking and cursing as tactics to instill fear in their challenger. However according to Anderson (1999) and Jones (2010), the tough persona may deter threats, but in a neighborhood where violence is the norm, the person who initiates the exchange must be prepared to fight at all times. Tanya, 41 states that she was never the person who started a fight, but would fight if pushed and arguing was her breaking point. Here Tanya describes this type of dialog:

...When I got older I just kind of-- and I'm saying older, junior high, high school, you couldn't-- I just didn't like all that arguing. So a lot of times I would just make them stop arguing. It was just, "Okay, you're talking good, let's see if you really want to do something." Or-- so a lot of times it could have been walking up to somebody because they're arguing with me and just slapping up, or punching up. And then a lot of times they do nothing because all they were was talk. And then it was, "Okay, that's the end of that..."

According to Anderson (1999) each time a fight is won the girl earns the much desired respect that would keep her from experiencing repeated challenges. For the women in this study this sentence was consistent with what their past neighborhood experiences. Linda, 32, describes her environment as one where fights were never resolved because if someone lost, the fighting continued:

...See, in the environment where I grew up, if you lose a fight, you have to go back until you win. And so they kept doing this, that they keep coming back because they didn't want the reputation of being beat up. And so I knew that. I knew I had to be good at fighting so that people would leave me alone, but I also knew that they would be coming back to fight me again...

In the case of Linda, being a good student presented other problems in that the girl was perceived as being “weak” and an easy target especially if she were smart. For the girl who is successful academically, self defense is paramount when it comes to navigating her community and educational opportunity.

Intelligence and the Need to Use Physical Aggression

While 4 of the 10 women in this study lived in poverty, their parents made education a priority. A common theme that was consistently presented was the difficulty of being successful academically and live in an environment where education was not the priority. In the words of Tanya, 41, *“You could not be the smart girl... So you had to kind of always kind of had to be the smart girl who could fight, or people would try to take advantage of the fact that you were a smart girl.”* Tanya goes on to share that she grew up in a non violent home where her parents did not argue however she felt that as if she had to live a “double life” in order to survive within her community. The living a double life is an example of what Anderson, Jones and Shorter-Gooden call code switching, or shifting where survival is predicated on the person’s ability to change their behavior in response to the environment (Anderson, 1999; Jones, 2010 & Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

Anderson (1999) addresses this type of duality by stating that children who grow up with a decency orientation often experience certain tension between what they learn at home and what

they find in the streets (pg. 98). Tanya, grew up in a two parent household where both of her parents were gainfully employed and lived in a home that her father received as an inheritance from his parents. While Tanya lived in an environment filled with chaos her family was middle class and she was raised with those values. Tanya's experience is consistent with Anderson's (1999) comment that even the most decent child in the neighborhood must at some point display a commitment to the street (pg. 99).

Linda, 32, shares an almost identical story of how she had to navigate her violent community where she was perceived as the smart girl. Like Tanya, she too grew up in a home where both parents worked and lived in a house that was a result of an inheritance and was challenged often because she was smart:

...Now, in school, my saving grace was always I got good grades, for the most part. Once I was in high school, I was on Honor Roll all the time and I was involved in Student Council and class office and cheerleading and band and all these things that you wouldn't associate with somebody that came from my neighborhood or that learned how to be physically aggressive. And so I would watch bullies at school that they didn't know me because I didn't live in their neighborhood either, and I would watch them at school, and with bullies, you know at some point you're going to become their target because you're not like them, you don't hang out with their friends. And so I would just sit and watch them and watch them when they picked on people, watch the things that they said, watch their demeanor and study them because I knew that whenever they-- if the opportunity turned towards me, I wasn't going to become their target of bullying. I was going to beat them up first. And so that's what I would do.

In both Tanya and Linda's case it would be assumed that such outstanding students would contact school officials to report episodes of harassment or bullying. Instead, both women stated that they chose to handle their school conflict in the same manner it is handled within their community. This is consistent with Pugh-Lilly et al.'s 2001 study where youth often view help from school officials as being counterproductive. In the case of Linda, Tanya and other women in this study, conflict is conflict regardless of the setting and it should be resolved in the same manner. Furthermore, the women's response to conflict resolution was based on their experiences with how disputes were resolved in their home or community.

School Connectedness

Contrary to Overstreet's (2000) finding that exposure to violence was linked to decreased school performance; the women in this study were all academically strong students. In fact, at this point in their lives, all of the women have earned at least a bachelors degree four of them have masters degrees (one participant has two), two participants are currently working on obtaining their masters degree and one participant is working on her doctoral degree. To further dispel the notion that exposure to violence is synonymous with decreased school performance, three of the women who have earned advanced level degrees grew up in homes where domestic violence was the norm.

While exposure to violence may be a path to antisocial behavior and decreased school performance in some youth, this is not the case for the women in this study. In fact, many of them were involved in various extra curricular activities and members of academic associations at the height of their use of physical violence as an adolescent. This finding is consistent with a study conducted by Resnick and his colleagues' (2004) that a high grade point average acted as a buffer against the participation in aggressive behavior. With this in mind, two of the participants

in this study stopped fighting in school because they were involved in an academic or in sports program. While both of these participants were exposed to violence in their neighborhoods, their connection to school became more important than their need to be known as a “fighter”.

Overstreet (2000) also stated that exposure to violence was associated with higher rates of PTSD and depressive symptoms in behavioral functioning. While this may be evident for some of the women in this study due to the violent neighborhoods and households that they grew up in, this particular topic was not explored in this research project as it was not its central focus. However, many of the women spoke of their struggle with anger issues and identified triggers that would prompt them to use physically aggressive behaviors. This in mind, perhaps PTSD may be a factor in the participants’ continued need to demonstrate aggressive behaviors when challenged now as an adult, however this was neither confirmed nor disproved in the study.

Domestic Violence

Regarding domestic violence, three of the ten participants grew up in homes where it was the norm. While two of the three participants stated that witnessing domestic violence in their home did not contribute to their use of physically aggressive behaviors, one of the participants indicated that she learned how to fight by watching the adults fight in her home. This finding is consistent with Moretti, Obsuth, Odgers, & Reebye’s, (2006) study that states the witnessing of domestic violence especially toward a parent (mother or father), demonstrates to an adolescent girl that aggression is an acceptable method to resolve issues. Among three of the women who witnessed domestic violence in their home two of them were more likely to use weapons during a fight than the participants who did not witness family violence.

There was a direct correlation between sibling rivalry and use of physically aggressive behaviors among the participants. Four participants stated that they learned how to fight by being

beaten by their brothers. These women reported that they experienced harassment from their brothers prior to fighting episodes. The women also stated that these fights helped to develop their fighting skills. While sibling rivalry was not a variable in this study, further research should be undertaken to determine the impact of aggressive behaviors among siblings and the use of physical violence with their peers.

Herrera & McCloskey (2001) stated that girls who live with domestic violence tend to display additional delinquency behaviors such as running away or other means of acting out in an effort to escape their abusive home-life. This was not a factor among the women in this study who witnessed domestic violence. There were no reports of running away and other acting out behaviors as a means to escape their abusive homes, however two of the participants stated that they actively defended the parent who was on the receiving end of the abuse on more than one occasion.

The Decision to Change

Growing up in a community or home where violence occurred frequently seems to have had a long-term impact on how the participants handled conflict after high school. All of the women in this study either experienced a consequence for their aggressive behavior or realized that they wanted a different social outcome than was achieved by their family or their peers. To that end, the participants made a conscious decision to further their education by attending college. In this instance it can be assumed that these women channeled their aggression in a different manner by ensuring that they fulfilled their educational goals in an effort to secure a different set of future prospects than that of their neighborhood as well as their family.

College represented a new beginning for all of the women. Four of the participants were successful in making a conscious effort to avoid using physical violence to resolve conflict.

These four participants decided either in middle school or high school that fighting was no longer an option for them. One of the four participants decided to stop fighting after being injured during a fight. As a way of coping with racial frustrations on campus, another participant returned to her community every weekend to fight.

The remaining six participants continued to use physical violence in their college years. While five of the participants had one incident in college, one participant connected with other aggressive peers and continued to resolve conflict by using physical aggression. This particular woman continued to fight until she graduated from college. Two of the six participants had altercations that resulted in assault and battery charges and indeed one of the participants was expelled from the university. In every situation involving the six women who fought in college, they realized that they needed to make a change by finding other strategies for resolving conflict.

Many still struggle with the need to use physically aggressive behavior to resolve conflict. While the stakes are higher as an adult they still are conflicted when faced with a situation where they feel challenged or disrespected in the workplace. All of the women have chosen a variety of strategies for handling work place conflict such as writing letters or emails, choosing different words so as to de-escalate a situation or just walking away. For the participants in this study, the change in the decision making process for the participants is consistent with Steinberg et al (2008) and Steinberg's (2009) studies that indicates the adolescent brain does not fully develop until the early 20's.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Current social work practice incorporates themes of strength, cultural competence and empowerment in both theory and practice. That said, the current literature has little to say about the aforementioned themes with it comes to the matter of African American girls and physically

aggressive behaviors (Carins, Carins, & Neckerman, 1989; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Farrington, 1986; Serbin, Peters, McAffer & Schwartzman, 1991; Stattin & Magnusson, 1989; Herrera & McCloskey, 2001; Gorman-Smith, Henry, & Tolan, 2004; Xie, Cairns & Cairns, 2005). In education and practice, there needs to be a greater understanding of African American girls who display physically aggressive behaviors. There is a need for a shift in thinking when it comes to the way practitioners and school officials view girls and who use physically aggressive behaviors. Rushing to judgment and condemning girls who fight does not allow the girl room to recover from the error of their decision making.

A key outcome of this study is that the zero tolerance policy for fighting in the public school setting does not work. Instead of the policy changing student behavior, it reinforces negative behavior by removing students from the learning environment and not teaching them another way to resolve conflict. While some of the women in this study learned their lesson through having to suffer the consequences for using physically aggressive behaviors in the college setting, being suspended from high school was not a deterrent to their behavior. Though they may have been suspended for fighting on school grounds, they will often return to school and use other physically aggressive tactics to get their point across. Rather than suspending or expelling the student and sending them back into their violent communities and homes where violence is championed, perhaps an alternative is an all day mandatory conflict resolution training session where girls can be taught other ways to resolve conflict.

What is dangerous about the zero tolerance policy is that there is no allowance for the adolescent to make a mistake and recover. If a girl is a good student and gets into a fight with another peer because she has been harassed, the girl automatically gets suspended or expelled.

The policy does not take into account the circumstances surrounding the incident or the culture of the girl relative to her community or atmosphere of her home. Additionally, when students are caught fighting, the dispute is often not settled and continues long after the consequence. This in mind, intervention is still needed to resolve the matter, which is often a missed opportunity for most schools. Based on the findings of this study, a conflict resolution program with a pre and post intervention strategy would be beneficial in the school setting. Such a program might actually prevent a fight and possibly resolve the conflict in some other way.

On the other hand, the zero tolerance policy in private or parochial schools is mildly effective because parents pay tuition for the child to attend the school but it still does not teach the girls how to amicably resolve conflict. Although the policy does keep students from fighting on school grounds, they find other places to settle their disagreements off campus. Even in the setting of the parochial or private school, the message that is sent by the zero tolerance policy is that you do not belong in this environment, especially if you are a minority student of color which was the experience of one of the study participants. Whether it is the public, private or parochial school setting, the discipline policy needs to be changed to a policy that does not profile students according to their race, gender or class.

A cultural model for understanding African American girls and physical aggression needs to be developed for practitioners and school administrators to guide them in their work with this population. Since the participants in this study received the message that using physical violence is way to resolve conflict, practitioners and school administrators need to get to know the students in their schools and to gain a greater perspective of why physical aggression is their method for resolving conflict. Furthermore, school administrators could do a better job of

listening to students, responding and intervening in episodes of relational aggression which ultimately results in a fight. Based on the responses of the participants in this study, episodes of bullying, harassment or relational aggression often occurred prior to their fight. Moreover, for girls who live in neighborhoods where the attitude toward police is negative, when school officials fail to intervene in the dispute, the girl may feel that she has no other alternative but to handle the conflict the way that it is resolved in her community.

Limitations

Like all qualitative studies the results are not generalizable to all women who fit the eligibility criteria for participants, but only apply to the women in this specific sample. Limitations of this study include variables that were not fully assessed including the mental health, marital status and geographic location of the participants and their families, the school culture they experienced, the intellectual ability of their parents and other strengths and weaknesses less amenable to categorization.

Because of the lack of research on the resiliency of girls who use physically aggressive behaviors, this study consisted of African American college educated, employed women between the ages of 24-46. Transferability of this study is not possible to women of other racial backgrounds, less educated and currently incarcerated due to the use of physical violence.

An additional limitation to this study is self selection bias which tends to be a characteristic of qualitative research. It is possible that those who chose to participate in the study felt that they were resilient despite the culture of their community, the violence they experienced in their family and their own bouts with physically aggressive behaviors. Perhaps the willingness of the women to participate in this study was to share their story and to be a source of inspiration for someone else who shares a similar experience.

Future Research

A consistent theme that was identified in the study was the impact of male family members (i.e., brothers, grandfathers or fathers) on the participant. Six of the participants identified that they were either taught to fight by a male family member or learned to fight by observing a male family member. That said further research needs to be done to determine the level of influence of the male family member and a girl's willingness to emulate her violent behaviors.

As stated previously sibling rivalry and aggressive behaviors is also a topic that deserves further research. Three of the participants stated that they learned to fight from repeatedly being beaten by their brothers. The women reported that the frequency of the fighting with their brothers helped them to hone their fighting skills. Additionally, the rivalry may have contributed to the girls' inability to cope with being taunted and teased by their peers which resulted in fighting to resolve the issue.

Racism on college campuses and the harassment of African American students was an issue that was exposed in the interview of one of the participants. Based on the participant's story, she was harassed racially for most of her time in college. Further research should be done to determine support systems for students transitioning from violent, poverty stricken neighborhoods into college communities and the university's commitment to ensure the success of these students.

What all of the women had in common is their struggle to not use physically aggressive behaviors when challenged or bullied in the workplace. While many of the women had adopted nonviolent strategies, regrettably, at least two of them used either verbally or physically aggressive behaviors to resolve conflict in the workplace. To gain a greater understanding of

how African American women with a physically aggressive adolescent history now manage workplace conflict, additional research should be conducted to determine how these women successfully maintain a nonviolent stance when faced with conflict in the workplace.

Appendix A: Recruitment Script

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Social Work Program at the University of Pennsylvania. My dissertation topic is "*African American Girls and Physical Aggression: A resilience study on how adult African American women overcame physically aggressive behavior post adolescence*". My study hopes to research the backgrounds of approximately 12 college educated women who used physical aggression (fighting) to resolve conflict as an adolescent. For this study, research will be conducted with African American women ages 22-49.

I choose this topic because African American girls who use physically aggressive behaviors to resolve conflict are perceived to be a menace to society with a bleak future. However, in my experience, the physically aggressive behaviors are a phase, much like other adolescent behaviors in which the African American girl eventually outgrows. Some girls go on to graduate from college and often become positive contributors to society. My goal is to conduct research that will demonstrate the resilience of these girls despite the negative messages that many of them receive as an adolescent.

I am in need of your help. I am soliciting your assistance in identifying participants willing to participate in the study. The study is voluntary and there are no negative consequences for declining participation in the study. For those who agree to participate they will receive a \$25 gift card.

Again, it is important to state that participation is voluntary and participants can withdraw at any point without consequences. To participate in the study, participants must be willing to complete a short informational questionnaire and sit down for an audio taped one on one interview for research purposes. Both components combined should not exceed 2 hours.

If you have any additional questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to email or call me.

Sincerely,

Kietra Winn
Cell: (302) 494-9019
Email: kietrawinn@verizon.net

Appendix B: Consent Form

Informed Consent Form for Interview

Dissertation Project: **African American Girls and Physical Aggression: A resilience study on how adult African American women overcame physically aggressive behavior post adolescence.**

Introduction and Purpose of Study

I am a graduate student in the DSW program at the School of Social Policy and Practice at the University of Pennsylvania. The purpose of this study is to capture the lived experience of African American women who are college graduates and used aggressive behaviors to resolve disputes as an adolescent. Because the literature about girls and aggression speaks about of the negative outcomes rather than resilience, the aim of the study is to identify the contributing factors that led to her decision to go to college and after entering college what factors contributed to her either continued use or non-usage of aggressive behaviors (fighting, a slap, spitting on someone, kick, or a punch). I am inviting you to participate in this interview.

What is involved?

The interview will last about two hours. I will make an audio recording of the interview and may take written notes.

I will ask you questions about the aggressive behaviors that you used as an adolescent to resolve disputes, the factors led to your decision to college and how you handled disputes after graduating from high school. I will also inquire if socio-economic and demographic factors determined the type of aggressive behavior. I will also explore the role you feel demographic and family structure factors play in aggression. Your role would be to provide insight based on your experience with physical aggression.

Confidentiality:

The information you share will be kept strictly confidential. I will not share information about whether or not you participate in this project with anyone. I will never use your name, personal information or information about where you live or work in my write-up of the interview.

Nothing with your name or other identifying information (names and places mentioned in the interview) will be turned into my committee chair. I will blot out your name on this consent form. The only people who will be able to listen to the audiotape will be me and a transcription service. Once I have analyzed the interview and written my final class paper for this project, I will destroy the audio recording, interview notes, and interview transcript. I will remove anything that might serve to identify you, including geographic locations and names of particular individuals you might mention in the interview, in the final paper, which will only be read by my committee chair Dr. Ram Cnaan.

Risks of participating: The risks of participating are minimal. The ways that confidentiality will be protected have already been described. In the unlikely event that you find that what you discussed in the interview is upsetting to you after the interview is over, please be in touch with me. I will provide you with some names and numbers of individuals or agencies that can provide further assistance.

Benefits of participating:

Although being interviewed will not help you directly, it is also possible that having a chance to share your story will be an interesting and possibly even a rewarding experience for you.

Payment

If you decide to participate you will be given a \$25 Macy gift card when the interview is completed. You will also be reimbursed for any money you spend to travel to the interview site.

If you have questions about the project after the interview is over, please feel free to contact me:

Kietra Winn

302-494-9019

kietrawinn@verizon.net

If after talking with me you still have concerns, you can contact the professor who is supervising this work:

Ram Cnaan, Ph.D., Professor

cnaan@sp2.upenn.edu

215-898-5523

Your participation is completely voluntary:

You do not have to participate in this project. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to participate. Any program or agency that you work with will not know whether you participate or not. If you don't participate, it will not affect your job or anything else.

If you do decide to be interviewed today, you can stop the interview at any time. You can also refuse to answer any questions that you don't want to answer.

Appendix C: Informational Questionnaire

Please complete the informational questionnaire prior to participating in the interview.

1. Name: _____
2. Race: _____
3. Age: _____
4. Gender: _____
5. Occupation: _____
6. Family socioeconomic status (as a child): _____
7. Family socioeconomic status (as an adult): _____
8. Residence (as a child): urban ____ suburban ____ rural ____
9. Residence (as an adult): urban ____ suburban ____ rural ____
10. High school type: private ____ public ____ parochial ____
11. If you attended boarding school, did you:
live on campus ____ commute ____
12. If you attended a public school, were you in a magnet program? Yes ____ No ____
13. What year did you graduate from high school? _____
14. What college did you attend? _____
15. When did you graduate from college? _____
16. Parent's marital status: single ____ married ____ divorced ____
partnered ____
17. Parent 1: mother/father (circle one) highest educational degree. _____
18. Parent 2: mother/father (circle one) highest educational degree. _____
19. Parent 1: mother/father (circle one) profession _____
20. Parent 2: mother/father (circle one) profession _____

21. The people who are generally influential in your life: mother _____ father _____
siblings _____ friends _____ grandparents _____ church _____
neighbors _____ teachers _____ high school counselors _____
other _____

22. People who influenced you to attend college: mother _____ father _____ siblings _____
friends _____ grandparents _____ church _____ neighbors _____ teachers _____ high
school counselors _____ other _____

23. Events (if any) that influenced you to attend college:

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Adolescent Girls and Aggression
Initial Guide for Intensive Interview
November 8, 2011

African American Girls and Physical Aggression: A resilience study on how adult African American women overcame physically aggressive behavior post adolescence.

Ages 22 - 49

Interview Discussion Guide

Opening- 5 minutes

- Introduction
- Read consent form
- Face sheet data
- Ask permission to begin interview

Positioning- 5 minutes

This study seeks to gather information that will provide greater understanding of when women 22 -32 who used physically aggressive behaviors as an adolescent learned another way of handling disputes. Specifically, I will ask you some questions about your perceptions as to why girls fight, how long after graduating from high school did you continue to fight and when or if you decided to use another method to resolve your dispute.

Questions

I. Fighting History- 30 minutes

- What does physical aggression look like to you?
- At what age did you have your first fight? Tell me about the incident.
- How did you learn to fight?
- Why did fighting seem like a viable option to you?
- What were the reasons that fighting became necessary?
- What methods were used before (i.e. harassment, a slap or bumping) and during the fight (i.e. weapons, etc.).
- Did you enjoy fighting?
- Were you bullied or harassed prior to fighting?
- Did you have any interaction with the juvenile justice system (probation, detention or incarceration) as a result of fighting?

II. Influences (family and community)- 20 minutes

Family

- What was your parent(s) occupation?
- What was the socio economic status of your family when you were an adolescent?
- Did you witness domestic violence in your home while growing up? Please explain
- How were disagreements on conflicts resolved in your family?
- Was fighting encouraged in your family?
- Do or did any of your female (Mother, Grandmother, Aunt, Sister, or Cousin) family members fight?
(Probe: Reason why they fought)
- Do or did your male relatives fight?
(Probe: Reason why they fought)

Community

- What was the neighborhood like where you grew up? Did you feel safe?
- How were disputes settled in your neighborhood?
- Was fighting the norm in your neighborhood? Please explain.
- Were police and other emergency response team members (fire squad, etc.) called when issues occurred in your neighborhood?
- Did the people within the neighborhood trust police and other authority figures? Why or why not?

III. Education (before and after college)- 30 minutes

High School

- What was the source of your fights in high school (i.e. romantic relationship, difference of opinion or a disagreement or dislike of another girl)?
 - Were weapons involved?
 - Were you ever injured during a fight?
- What were the consequences for fighting?
 - Were you ever suspended or expelled?
 - Were you ever sent to alternative school because you were expelled from school?
 - Was school faculty, staff or your parents ever notified of an impending fight?
(Probe: Adults reaction to notification)
- Was there ever a dispute that began in your neighborhood, but ultimately resulted in a fight that occurred on school grounds?

College

- When did you realize that college was an option?
(Probe: Source of encouragement, school, friend or family member)
- How did you resolve conflict while in college?
(Probe: If methods of aggressive behavior differed each year and what contributed to the difference. Also, was there a consequence to the behavior?)

IV. After College-20 minutes

- How do you currently resolve conflicts with others?
If the participant has stopped fighting:
- How did you arrive at the decision to stop fighting?
(Probe: What or who influenced you to stop fighting?)

IV. Debriefing- 10 minutes

- Do you believe that are African American women embarrassed about the need to use physical aggression? Why or why not?
- What advice would you give to social workers, teachers and other staff members who work with girls ages 14 -18 who display aggressive behaviors?
- Is there anything I didn't ask that I should have asked to help better understand your experience?

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