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## **Identity and Achievement: A Depth Psychology Approach to Student Development**

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# Identity and Achievement: A Depth Psychology Approach to Student Development

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## Abstract

This case study report describes a series of workshops exploring social and developmental challenges confronted by Black adolescents in the schooling process. Analysis of workshop session notes led to a community-based educational initiative aimed at promoting African heritage identity as an incentive to school achievement. Wilfred R. Bion's theory of small group behavior is used to shed light on the group process of workshop sessions and postworkshop events and activities. Case findings are discussed in terms of Janet Helms's theory of racial identity development and Perry, Steele, and Hillyard's work on promoting achievement for African American students. It is concluded that defining the culturally specific conditions for personal growth and combining professional concern with family support can be crucial to promoting developmental success for Black and African heritage youth.

## Keywords

small group dynamics, community-based education, Black student development

It was more than 50 years ago that neo-Freudian psychoanalyst Wilfred R. Bion (1961) first introduced his holographic theory of group behavior. Depth psychologists have since coined the term, *group as whole theory* to

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describe Bion's approach, which continues to be influential for professionals working in the areas of clinical and consulting practice (Armstrong, 1992, 2003; Symington & Symington, 1996) but has yet to be specifically applied to the developmental issues and concerns of African heritage communities. The theory holds that all groups will typically function in the manner of traditional tribal peoples behaving as if their purpose in coming together were to reproduce themselves. In some instances, the group's self preservative instincts are said to find expression in a fundamental concern about the dependability of the manifest leadership (*dependency group*). This basic assumption might alternately take the form of encouraging any two members to join forces in hopes of producing some new kind of messianic leadership (*pairing group*). Should the unity of the group appear to be threatened in any way, an appropriate leader, or leaders, often emerges to provide focus for underlying conflicts (*fight group*). Without such a leader, the threat can become so great that the group resorts to various behaviors of evasion (*flight group*). Each of these *basic assumptions* or shared *valences* is ultimately viewed as an irrational resistance to the designated *work* of the group. In the settings Bion first observed, this work was expected to be psychotherapeutic in nature, but group dynamics have since been recognized (Slavin, 2002) as potential obstacles to effectiveness in educational settings as well.

There has also been some re-visioning of *group as whole* theory (Rouchy, 2002; Schermer, 2002) based on observations of groups whose members share a common cultural background. Family loyalties are said to define natural or *primary* groups of belonging and to often interfere with the work of *secondary* groups of belonging that have been instituted by the wider society for educational purposes. According to Rouchy, this kind of *acting out* reflects "culturally specific preconditions for personal growth." In the early 1980s, this writer conducted a diagnostic seminar with a small group of Black adolescents living in New Haven, Connecticut. Despite demonstrated ability, these troubled and troublesome ninth graders were already failing to meet the performance standards of a specially funded after-school enrichment program, and it emerged over the course of their first year in high school that each of them was having serious difficulty handling the competing demands of her or his home and school environments. Consequently, all were acting on a common wish to escape into the culture of the peer group. On closer observation, underlying themes in group development were found to be consistent with the basic assumptions articulated in Bion's (1961) theory, and it became apparent that behavior in the diagnostic seminar indicated greater social competence than was generally being attributed to them as inner city teens.<sup>1</sup>

## Community-Based Cultural Supports and Student Development

Child development specialists concerned with the question of how best to support social learning and personal growth while also encouraging school success for Black kids may be proposing another version of the depth psychology approach. Yale psychologist James Comer (1997) has written much about Black working-class communities and their impact on childhood identity formation from a culturally affirming perspective. His observations as a mental health professional advocating for community-based school reform and his own experience of growing up among the Black working poor have inclined him to emphasize what he calls the first or *primary* network of family, neighbors and close friends. In his view, they provide a basis for the kind of success within the school or *secondary* network that eventually results in improved mental and emotional health for the community as a whole. In describing how *primary* and *secondary* networks often interact to the developmental detriment of Black children, he says,

Many children have learned to fight because they have not been taught to negotiate for what they want. Some have been told that they will get a beating at home if they don't fight when they are challenged—a catch22 that only gets them into trouble at school. Teachers too often punish them and hold expectations for them rather than help them grow along developmental pathways where most mainstream parents have led their children before school. (p. 88)

Comer then goes on to stress the importance of voluntary community organizations that can offer special programs to help bridge the gap between home and school for Blacks and other marginalized youth.

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1995) ethnographies of highly accomplished African Americans likewise attest to the critical importance of community support for successful student development. In the book's introduction, this distinguished educator recounts how her own growth years were positively influenced by a family that made mealtimes a dependable source of nurturance and support:

Early afternoon Sunday dinner—always big and festive—was a favorite time to have folks over for my parents' collaboratively cooked meals. Dressed in his long chef's apron, my father would stick the cloves of garlic into the leg of lamb and season the meat with an exotic

mix of mustard and spices. With a big knife and swift strokes he would dice the fresh vegetables for a hearty salad or chop the collards for greens. My mother would work around Dad's exuberant movements, finding counter space to punch out the biscuits with a jelly jar or roll out the dough for pie crust. As they worked, they would entertain their guests. Only a counter separated the kitchen from the dining room area, and we would all huddle around the counter, munching on cheese and crackers and sipping what my father always called our "preprandial" drinks. (pp. 3-4)

The detailed ethnographic studies included in Lawrence-Lightfoot's ground-breaking work tell of dramatic gains in professional attainment made through the combined and sustained efforts of such traditional support systems as the extended family, the community-centered church, and service-oriented benevolent orders.

## **Creating Community-Based Supports: A Retrospective Case Study**

This grassroots community-building project began with a series of workshops held in Santa Cruz, California, in the fall of 1999. It grew out of the writer's efforts in the late 1990s to design a culturally sensitive curriculum for teacher preparation at CSU Monterey Bay. This was after observations in selected local area schools had revealed that Black kids, although usually present in small numbers, were often getting into serious academic trouble by engaging in such markedly inappropriate behaviors as avoiding the designated work of the classroom and challenging the authority of school personnel. It has since been reported (Hoytt, Schiraldi, Smith, & Ziedenberg, 2005) that in the Santa Cruz area, as elsewhere in the nation, African American teens were notably over-represented in the criminal justice system. In 1997, they made up only 1.4% of the countywide youth population and accounted for 7% of the youth in detention.<sup>2</sup> Higher rates of school failure and related social difficulties were showing up as individual performance problems but, from a depth psychology perspective, could be taken as evidence of underlying dynamics in the classroom and in the community as a whole.

### *Identity and Achievement Workshop Series*

The Second Saturday Identity and Achievement Workshops were part of a community-based educational initiative developed in response to a

request from a group of parents of African American students and offered under the auspices of one of the local high schools. The four daylong Saturday sessions were aimed at promoting better communication between school personnel and families of African heritage youth and drew a total of 30 participants, including 19 family members of high school students, 6 community-based professionals, and 5 individuals employed in the schools. From the point of view of family members who attended workshop sessions, the discussions were meant to address their concerns about the relatively poor performance of Black teens enrolled in the area's schools. As the school personnel saw it, the sessions were a possible means of increasing parental involvement and improving student motivation. It also appeared that, in the absence of African American teaching staff, inviting local Black professionals into the school might provide these young people with more positive role models.

With all of these as informing intentions, the overarching goal that emerged for this initial community-based intervention was to shed light on some of the developmental challenges confronting Black and African heritage teens, in the course of their schooling. The 28-hour series of workshop sessions was offered over a 4-month period beginning in October of 1999 with the writer serving as primary facilitator and process recorder. Each session began with a brief presentation on the work of a major developmental theorist, and each included case instances from the writer's professional work and family experience. A brief summary of the issues addressed was written up at the end of each workshop session and made available to those households on a community mailing list that had initially expressed interest in participating in one or more of the workshop sessions, whether or not they actually attended.

*Session #1: Gender issues and flight behavior.* The flight group can be expected to ignore, suppress or run away from anything that may threaten the group's integrity, even though that kind of behavior may actually interfere with the designated task. Flight group behavior was particularly evident in the first workshop session on gender issues, where there were several women and only two men—one Black and one White—in attendance. After the facilitator's semiautobiographical presentation on adolescent moral and sexual development, there was much talk about the difficulties confronted by young girls who become pregnant at an early age, but when specifically asked toward the end of the session about sexual decision making as an issue for teenage males the group fell silent. One White woman, who was attending as a social service provider and seemed intent on rescuing the group, finally responded by asking pointedly if there "weren't racial differences in attitudes toward sex and sexuality" that needed to be considered first. Because

no one chose to respond or to speak on any other aspect of the question, the session came to a close without the group addressing the lack of paternal participation in the lives of many local area youth. On the surface of it, they had colluded in the avoidance of an important part of the designated task, which was to gain deeper understanding of the gender identity issues of Black teens—including males. The group may have also been avoiding a topic that could prove racially divisive for its two male members who had both indicated early on that they were parents as well as youth workers.

*Session #2: Race issues and fight behavior.* The flight group also has within it the potential to become a fight group with the emergence of appropriate leadership, which is to say, someone who can mobilize the group for attack. The second workshop session began as promised by returning to the previous session's closing question about racial differences in gender socialization and sexual behavior. The group was now made up entirely of White mothers of biracial children, some of whom confronted the Black facilitator about the fact that the topic of race was being broached with the jargon of intellectual inquiry, rather than in "the language of ordinary people." Thus, a previously submerged conflict became evident, as one of the mothers went on to sharply denounce the university for its irrelevant posturing on matters of "race, class, and gender." Another followed suit by stating that she had "no interest in pushing an academic agenda for her children the way the Black mothers were doing." Everyone else remained silent, so the expressed as well as underlying intention was once again to avoid the task of reflective discussion. Still, a certain level of safety must have been reached to actually allow expression of such feelings, and what presented as personal hostility could alternately be taken as evidence of this group's movement from flight valence to fight valence.

*Session #3: Class issues and dependency pairing.* As with fight or flight, dependency and pairing are two sides of the same coin. The basic assumption of the dependency group is that the leader exists solely to provide for its security. When this does not actually appear to be the case, the group can be expected to resort to various types of pairing behavior in hopes of eventually producing a new form of leadership. Such pairings may be particularly encouraged on the part of individuals who represent potentially problematic divisions within the membership. During the third workshop session there were changes in the racial composition of the group that allowed a shift from fight to pairing. When asked at the beginning of the third session about their definitions of success, Black mothers, who were now present in some numbers, said they also favored personal fulfillment and happiness over conventional standards of achievement. When the group facilitator insisted on talking about problems associated

with Black social mobility, it was as if she were violating an implicitly shared fantasy about keeping children close to home to ensure that they lived happily ever after. No one chose at that point to speak about the challenges of raising children without adequate social supports or about living in a community with no means of preparing young men and women for full participation in the wider world. The turning point of the session—and for the workshop series as a whole—came in the afternoon, when a Black male cofacilitator was invited to lead a nonverbal problem solving exercise called TANGRAM. Six participants were paired for a hands-on activity that involved one person being blindfolded and guided by a partner in solving this ancient Chinese mathematical puzzle. Something about the facilitators as a Black male and female pair working together—within a sociopolitical context where cross-racial and same sex pairs were more often the norm—appeared to allow a shift of perspective, and it became possible for the group to engage in meaningful discussion. The concrete nature of the group activity combined with the reassuring image of a conventional leadership pair seemed to simultaneously satisfying the group's dependency and pairing needs.

*Session #4: Community building as group relations work.* Much can be said about group resistance to task, but it should also be noted that one way of reclaiming the work orientation is to effectively engage the group at the level of basic assumption. The final workshop began with a discussion of events and activities that might help African American teenagers prepare for lifelong learning and personal growth. There still seemed to be a kind of honeymoon effect left over from the previous session's successful paired activity. Now all of the participants, regardless of race, gender, or domestic status, were intent on creating a new vision of their children's potential for professional accomplishment. In the afternoon there was a lively discussion about personal choices and how individual ways of being in everyday life can shape a cultural identity, after which the facilitator introduced a journaling activity that encouraged parents to begin setting educational goals for themselves as well as for their teenaged children.

### *Postworkshop Community Building Events and Activities*

The workshop series on identity and achievement was undertaken with no real expectation that it would be an immediate remedy for pervasive social ills. Rather it was seen as one possible entry point into a highly complex problem field. Like the diagnostic seminars this writer had conducted with New Haven area teens 14 years earlier, the Fall 1999 sessions for concerned parents and educators served as a kind of needs assessment by helping to

illuminate key developmental issues. In the more recent instance, effective community engagement was apparently accomplished by attending to the basic assumptions of group life and seeking ways to accommodate the underlying emotional agendas of various social reference groups that were being asked to problem solve together about how best to support their young people for developmental success.

The decision to keep process notes and provide session summaries no doubt reflected the facilitator's implicit wish to demonstrate the usefulness of scholarly training within an educational context where such skills were less likely to be appreciated. As it turned out, the notes were quite useful for providing perspective on the unfolding group discussion and allowed it to expand beyond the confines of each session borders in ways that contributed to the overall effectiveness of the workshops. More specifically, that initial intervention demonstrated the importance of cultural identity development for promoting school achievement by pointing up the social and political context of school performance for Black teens living in predominantly White communities. The sessions also provided impetus for an ongoing program of community-building events and activities that clearly exemplified Bion's fundamental concept of "learning from experience."

*Building on fight needs: Zimbabwe Teach-In.* During fall of 2000, a teach-in on the Zimbabwean revolution was held at one of the local high schools, as part of establishing an African pen pal and clothing donation project. The event featured a documentary film titled *Mbira music—Spirit of the people* (Bright, 1991) that dealt with the role played by traditional popular music in a national community-building effort, and the after film discussion drew a racially and culturally diverse group of about 40 parents, students, and interested community members. At one point, similarities were pointed out between the events depicted in the film and the way rock and roll helped revolutionize the national consciousness of young people growing up in the United States, during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Some of the parents and community members talked about the challenges they brought to their high school classrooms and college campuses, when they were students "back in the day," and one or two affirmed the importance of continuing to "fight the good fight." By choosing to honor their cross-cultural alliances and other accomplishments as "a community of conscience," these discussion group participants were taking a proactive stand that made constructive use of fight valence and enabled the community conversation to move from town-and-gown conflict to an open sharing of concerns about promoting developmental success for adults as well as for teens.

*Building on flight needs: Nation's Capitol trip.* One of the activities held in spring of 2001 resulted in similar insights in terms of gender issues. A six-member delegation of local high school and college students was hosted by African American alumni from their schools on a 3-day trip to Washington, D.C. that included visits to the Smithsonian African Museum and the Library of Congress African Collection as well as student-led tours of CSPAN and Howard University. The question about young Black men's sexual decision making that the workshop group was unable to fully address the year before arose quite spontaneously, during an after-dinner rap session. Such informal conversations over meals provided a rare opportunity for Black on Black cross-generational exchange and a greatly enriched understanding of the dynamics of early paternity. In a group of five or six men and a similar number of women, the picture that emerged was of a world where mobility seemed crucial to the personal survival and professional success of young Black men. The unsolicited testimony of highly capable high school and college graduates, who were still struggling to support themselves and uncertain about future life directions made it clear that some youthful Black fathers were "doing their best to cope" with the demands of their life situations and often felt they had no choice but to "opt out of family responsibilities." Instead of writing them off as absentee community members, their actions could now be in some sense vindicated. Incorporating a valence for flight into the community's strategy for youth development may also have allowed the group to progress from the fight or flight assumptions to a more constructive focus on dependency and pairing.

*Building on dependency pairing needs: Spring youth retreat.* The potential benefit of affirming the community's valence for dependency pairing was again demonstrated a few weeks later, when parents of African American students organized a weekend gathering for about 20 local area teens. Many of the young people who attended had participated in the Zimbabwe Teach-In at the beginning of the school year, and some were just back from the Nation's Capitol trip. The 26-hour overnight was held at a nearby retreat center in early May and provided a safe and supportive context for social bonding between young people of African descent who identified as Black and those who considered themselves White, biracial, or other. The event also encouraged planning for college application and enrollment by having recent high school graduates talk about their transitional experiences and by including a session that focused the high school students on developing individual learning agendas. Most of the presenters and facilitators were African American males, which led to the idea of developing a community-based mentorship

program to match retreat participants with local area Black professionals for ongoing support. After the retreat, some single parent mothers spoke enthusiastically about the idea of their sons having such a relationship as an introduction to the world of work, and local area professionals have since expressed interest in serving in such a capacity. In fact, the concept of mentorship tended to have communitywide appeal as a means of encouraging successful and well educated individuals to directly contribute to the lives of young people who were still struggling to find their way. Although that promise has yet to be realized, such mentorship presumably offered potential for healing schisms of race, class and gender by addressing unmet dependency and pairing needs at the community level.<sup>3</sup>

## Toward a Psychology of Cultural Identity Development

Clinically based explorations of pioneers like Sigmund Freud and Wilfred Bion can provide much needed insight and inspiration for today's community-based youth workers. The apparently disruptive and unproductive behaviors noted in European treatment settings at the end of the 19th century and again in the middle of the 20th century have since been recognized as a legitimate response to the overwhelming demands of an emerging social order. By acknowledging those fundamental needs for dependable leadership and meaningful relationship that may be attributed to all human groups, today's practitioners can begin to articulate culturally specific preconditions for personal growth. This line of inquiry neatly converges with current theory building that focuses more specifically on the developmental needs and issues of culturally identified communities.

Boston College educator Janet Helms (1990) has articulated a five-stage theory of racial identity development beginning with the denial of racial differences (*preencounter*), which is typically displaced by a dawning awareness of racial injustice (*encounter*). Next comes the desire for positive cultural identity (*immersion*), and this can be an important step toward realizing the personal relevance of cultural experience (*internalization*), which ideally leads to pluralistic engagement in social activism (*commitment*). What Bion termed the *flight* group finds its leadership among members who are at the *preencounter* stage of seeking to avoid conflict, whereas the *fight* group will be led by those who have progressed to the *encounter* stage. Individuals at the *immersion* stage will serve as *dependency* leaders, whereas those with a personally *internalized* cultural identity are more likely to provide messianic leadership as the *pairing* group. This is what ultimately

allows for a *commitment* to pluralistic social engagement that may signify emergence of the *work* group.

Perry, Steele, and Hillyard (2003) have likewise proposed a theory of student achievement based on a traditional African American philosophy of schooling defined as "literacy for freedom and freedom for literacy." They also emphasize the importance of creating various social contexts "where being African American is coincident with doing intellectual work and being an achiever." The DuBois Society where Black Boston area high school students participate in a self-styled honors program is offered as case in point. Perry's coauthor, Claude Steele has done extensive experimental research on *stereotype threat* that provides valuable insight into the psychological challenges confronting today's Black students. He also writes about the importance of creating "niches where negative stereotypes do not apply," such as the living learning community he helped design for entering students at University of Michigan.

The community-based intervention on which the present article reports was exploratory in nature but yielded findings that are quite consistent with those reported by Perry and Steele. Asa Hillyard, III (Perry et al., 2001) also offers detailed accounts of educational strategies that have historically resulted in school success for African American students and suggest many points of commonality with the program of activities reported here. Those extramural events resonated with the wider community's longstanding political agenda for social transformation by fostering experiential learning and promoting social solidarity. What's more, such experiences facilitate movement toward positive cultural identity that may be particularly important for Black children growing up in predominantly White areas.

As grassroots activism, this undertaking reflected support for Black students that also acknowledged the cultural strengths of African heritage people. The idea of school and community leaders working together to provide for the developmental enrichment of their young people is certainly in keeping with the conventional wisdom that it takes a village to raise a child. Although the workshop series served an important diagnostic function, it must certainly be noted that the postworkshop events and activities were far more successful than the initial school-based sessions in eliciting the participation of Black parents and community members. This was due in part to a greater emphasis on the celebration of cultural forms such as music and dance combined with opportunities for cross-generational exchange and the sharing of traditionally prepared food. The collaborative leadership of African American women and men was another important factor in the overall effectiveness of these gatherings. When a local community comes

together in a manner that combines professional concern with family support, young people are sent a clear signal about not only the value of education but also the power of authentic social engagement. By choosing to meet such challenges head on, parents and educators can hope to harness the tumultuous energies of primary process for the righteous work of building humanly viable communities.

### **Author's Note**

The Zimbabwe Teach-In was inspired by the writer's participation as a California delegate to the February 2000 National Summit on Africa held in Washington, D.C. A version of this report was presented in October 2003 at the Boston College Diversity Challenge Conference. Useful perspectives on revision have since been provided by John M. Hartley, Michael C. Podorson, Carolyn M. Shaw, and George C. Stone.

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### **Notes**

1. Diane Simmons (1993) noted similar dynamics in more racially diverse groups of students enrolled in her college writing courses and likewise posited the need to make common cause with apparently disruptive individuals for the overall good of the learning group.
2. Current U.S. Census Bureau (2004) reports show African Americans representing 1.7% of the 54,593 Santa Cruz City residents and 1% of the approximately 260,000 people residing in Santa Cruz County. Combined Santa Cruz City figures for Blacks and Mixed Race Blacks came to 1,282 (2.5%) but may not adequately

reflect the fact that families raising children of African descent may self identify in other ways. Earlier analysis (Park, Myers, & Wei, 2001) showed 3,771 or 1.48% of Santa Cruz county's 225,602 residents identifying as Black with 34.31% of those Blacks also multiracially identified, as compared with 26.24% of Asians and 4.88% of Whites.

3. In later writings, Bion (1967/1984) said the work group showed a capacity for abstraction that was crucial to reality-based functioning. Perhaps the pairing group failed to recognize that real mentorship cannot be solely based on cultural group identity. What has so far proved more workable are efforts to align community-based educational activities with university outreach programs thereby conveying a clearer message about the value of academic attainment.

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## Bio

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