

Understanding Development of African American Boys and Young Men: Moving From Risks to Positive Youth Development

Noni K. Gaylord-Harden
Loyola University Chicago

Oscar Barbarin
University of Maryland

Patrick H. Tolan
University of Virginia

Velma McBride Murry
Vanderbilt University

African American boys and young men in the United States face challenges unique to being a male and an ethnic minority in our society. Despite the marginalization of African American boys and young men, this article argues that African American boys and young men, like other individuals, are in large proportion able to overcome adversity and utilize positive youth development assets and resources, and that focusing on capabilities and strengths is worthy of primary emphasis (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; Stevenson, 2016). García Coll and colleagues' (1996) integrative model of developmental competencies in minority children lays the groundwork for conceptualizing the profound influence of racism, economic disadvantage, oppression, segregation, and other trauma-inducing experiences on the development of African American boys and young men. We extend that framework by adding notions of positive development and adaptive calibration to contextual challenges to account for prosocial development of African American boys and young men. We present descriptive and experimental research support for this approach and argue that it has the potential for increasing the validity, sophistication, and utility of developmental research on about African American boys and young men are presented.

Keywords: African American boys and young men, marginalization, positive youth development, adaptive calibration, integrative models of development

African American boys and young men (African American boys and young men) in the United States are among the most vulnerable of populations experiencing marginalization in our society (for a definition of marginalization, see Causadias & Umaña-Taylor, 2018). Specifically, African American boys and young men occupy a social niche defined by the interplay of race, gender and socioeconomic

status (SES) that carries elevated developmental risks and challenges. As a consequence of this unique social position, they are at heightened risk for stigma, blocked opportunities, and low expectations from ascriptions about male gender, a denigrated racial/ethnic group, and low SES. As young boys, they are more likely to be stereotyped as having learning deficiencies, dysregulation of attention, behavior and emotions, and low academic motivation and involvement (Ferguson, 2000; Graham, Taylor, & Hudley, 1998; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003; Noguera, 2003; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009), regardless of behavior. They are more likely to be scapegoated by educational systems as disruptive, aggressive and oppositional in primary school, and academically incompetent and antisocial by the time they reach high school (Stevenson, 2016). This perilous status extends further in life and in areas of functioning. As young men, they have shorter life spans (Arias, Heron, & Xu, 2017) and are at greater risk of incarceration (Muller & Wildeman, 2016; Travis, Western, & Redburn, 2014), underemployment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017), and sus-

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Authors' note. Noni K. Gaylord-Harden, Department of Psychology, Loyola University Chicago; Oscar Barbarin, African American Studies Department, University of Maryland; Patrick H. Tolan, Curry School of Education, University of Virginia; Velma McBride Murry, Peabody College of Education and Human Development, Vanderbilt University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Noni K. Gaylord-Harden, Department of Psychology, Loyola University Chicago, 1032 W. Sheridan Road, Chicago, IL 60660. E-mail: ngaylor@luc.edu



**Noni K.
Gaylord-Harden**

ceptibility to major health threats (Barbarin, Murry, Tolan, & Graham, 2016; Graham & Gracia, 2012).

Since 1996, two presumptive frameworks have dominated research on the marginalization of African American boys: disconnected youth and the school-to-prison pipelines (Stevenson, 2016). Both frameworks are built on the premise that African American boys and young men are marginalized and impeded from normal or typical participation in school, work, and civic life (Stevenson, 2016). Furthermore, these frameworks imply that what is most important and informative to understanding development of African American boys and young men derives from a focus on risk, problems, and elevated morbidity and mortality. Because of this risk, they are viewed as separate and apart from most segments of society, including their families (Murry, Block, & Liu, 2016). However, these emphases may overlook the predominant trajectory of African American males, which is to prevail, to sustain, and to live through these challenges and to make productive use of family and other support and opportunities.

In this article, we argue that *to understand the development of African American boys and young men it is important to consider their competencies and normative developmental experiences, rather than focusing on exclusively on risk and atypical development*. Developmental competencies, as defined by García Coll and colleagues (1996), are outcomes that reflect emerging functional capabilities and acquired in youth. This suggests the importance and relevance of the inventive, effective, and common resources, pathways, and personal agency that African American boys and young men invoke and rely on to demonstrate skilled negotiation and adaptation to the demands in their environ-

ments (Lee-Williams, Tolan, Durkee, Amir, & Anderson, 2012). Thus, the aim of the current article is to synthesize extant studies of African American boys and young men to urge a concerted shifting of the focus of research from the sequelae of developmental risks to competent functioning and positive youth development under adverse social conditions.

To organize this proposed emphasis, we extend García Coll and colleagues' (1996) integrative model of developmental competencies in minority children, and argue using empirical examples, the benefits of exploring new frameworks for African American boys and young men, namely *adaptive calibration and positive youth development*. In addition, we offer recommendations to advance the extent and quality of understanding of the development of African American boys and young men in diverse contexts. We emphasize the importance of adaptive calibration, as a key coping behavior among African American boys and young men, because it is a process that occurs when individuals modify their stress responses to adapt to adverse or auspicious conditions of the social and physical environment (Del Giudice, Ellis, & Shirtcliff, 2011). In this regard, variations in individual's stress responsivity, as reflected in the up-regulation or down regulation of emotions, are viewed as mechanisms oriented toward prevailing and succeeding, rather than dysfunctional or pathological (Del Giudice et al., 2011). Tenets of adaptive calibration, when combined with notions of positive youth development, provide a way to move our thinking beyond disordered behavior (Lerner, Phelps, Forman & Bowers, 2009; Lerner, Abo-Zena et al., 2009).

Rather than focusing on deficits and risks, positive youth development emphasizes strengths, assets, and potentiality for healthy development. This framework posits that when there is alignment between youth talents, skills, interests, and resources in the social and physical environment (families, school, communities), youth are set on a course toward positive developmental outcomes, such as academic engagement and achievement, extracurricular involvement, prosocial behavior and values, family and civic engagement, self-regulation, and emotional and physical health as young boys and adolescents (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2007; Fredricks & Eccles, 2010; Irvin, Farmer, Leung, Thompson, & Hutchins, 2010). Moreover, as young men, they are likely to achieve sobriety, high school graduation, caring and stable relationships, and early adult employment (Davis, Ajzen, Saunders, & Williams, 2002; Garibaldi, 2007; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Hwang & Domina, 2017; Leventhal, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2001; Stock, Gibbons, Walsh, & Gerrard, 2011; Wallace & Fisher, 2006). By emphasizing assets and resources, the positive youth development approach can inform how to support higher



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rates of optimal outcomes among African American boys and young men.

The combination of adaptive calibration and positive youth development represents a fundamental shift away from deficit models and will, in our opinion, provide an alternative to narrow and restrictive narratives in our field. These narratives erroneously suggest that the development of most African American boys and young men is best framed in terms of the relation of social risks to inevitable failure, poor relationships, and disinterest in civic and social engagement. Our proposed shift to consider adaptive calibration and positive youth development does not minimize or overlook the disproportionate challenges and risks African American boys and young men face. In fact, these challenges are incorporated, as suggested by [García Coll and colleagues \(1996\)](#) and others (e.g., [Causadias, 2013](#)), in this contextually informed review of the literature that envisions and explores the challenges of African American boys and young men to highlight how many attain positive developmental outcomes and to provide a more sound basis for action and policies that are more enabling.

García Coll and Colleagues' Integrative Model Applied to African American Boys and Young Men

As noted by [García Coll and colleagues \(1996\)](#) and others (e.g., [McLoyd & Randolph, 1985](#); [Tucker & Herman, 2002](#)), understanding the psychosocial development in African American boys and young men requires consideration of what is unique and what is universal about the environments in which they live. These models, focusing primarily

on deficits or pathology in the youth of color, often overlook important contextual variations in resources and demands, particularly among African American youth ([Coll, Akerman, & Cicchetti, 2000](#); [McLoyd, 1990](#); [Molock, Puri, Matlin, & Barksdale, 2006](#)). In addition, while outlining how culturally specific responses to stress are labeled as non-normative or conceptualized as regressive, there is need to consider how distinct environmental demands can be understood as requiring differential adaptation and how that adaptation can be seen as positive and goal oriented ([Causadias, 2013](#)).

Utilizing the social stratification theory, [García Coll et al., \(1996\)](#) and others assert that there are critical aspects of youth of color's environments that are profoundly influenced by racism, prejudice, discrimination, oppression, and segregation and are distinct from any comparable influence for White youth. These unique and critical differentiations shape risk levels and determine which competencies are adaptive ([García Coll et al., 1996](#)). Most essentially, these models assert that the research on the development of children of color should examine the role of race, ethnicity, and social class as core phenomena, rather than as peripheral contextual processes. [García Coll and colleagues' \(1996\)](#) integrative framework highlights the role of developmental processes that are unique to youth of color (e.g., racial identity and socialization to cope with hate speech and racial microaggressions), as well as universal developmental processes that are relevant to all populations (e.g., temperament). The model marked an important turning point in the framing of developmental processes in youth of color, by underscoring the role of diverse cultural environments ([Causadias, 2013](#); [Gaylord-Harden, Burrow, & Cunningham, 2012](#)). The notion of adaptive calibration provides additional specificity by proposing ways environmental variations lead to normative adaptations that are not only social and behavioral but also biological in nature.

Recent studies on African American boys and young men have, undoubtedly been influenced by aspects of this integrative model of developmental competencies, and act as examples about how positive development can be tracked within it. For example, this model has illuminated for African American boys and young men a greater understanding of the protective role of racial socialization ([Hughes et al., 2006](#)), the direct and indirect effects of racism and discrimination on morbidity ([Gee, 2002](#); [Mays, Cochran, & Barnes, 2007](#)), and the interplay between discrimination, stress responses, and racial identity ([Seaton, Yip, & Sellers, 2009](#); [Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003](#)). Moreover, from this rendering and differentiation of multiple vectors of influence on developmental competencies, [García Coll and colleagues \(1996\)](#) delineated understanding of differences in developmental influences, course, effects of various social and political forces, and outcomes; noting how race, ethnicity, immigration status, gender, and



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other ascribed and owned identity features and social position determinants interact in affecting these aspects of development. These valuable studies form a basis for asking, how African American boys develop well within an adverse societal situation; and how they manage discrimination and attain positive identity, for example.

With García Coll's framework as a foundation, the current paper consolidates relevant studies to highlight a key finding that opposes traditional assumptions of the development of African American boys and young men. Specifically, the majority African American boys and young men show developmental competence, despite the challenges posed by growing up in unwelcoming, denigrating, and racist environments. Below, empirical evidence is provided to support this key assumption and it is proposed that future theory and research extend the García Coll model by incorporating (a) a positive youth development framework (Cunningham & Spencer, 2000; Lerner et al., 2003) to highlight competence as the normative experience, and (b) a calibration framework (Del Giudice et al., 2011) to understand patterns of responsivity to contextual demands and individual differences in behavior.

Challenges to Developmental Competencies in African American Boys and Young Men

As noted, the unique social niche of African American boys and young men exposes them to high levels of adversity and may lead to their being scapegoated and marginalized. For example, the U.S. Department of Education released data on school suspensions revealing that beginning in preschool (age 4), African American boys are suspended

at higher rates than other students (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Specifically, African American boys represent 19% of male preschool enrollment, but 45% of male preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Research attempting to explain this racial disparity highlights the role of implicit bias faced by African American preschool boys. For example, early childhood educators anticipate problems with African American boys more often than other children. In addition, they tend to characterize African American boys' behavior as disruptive, even when it is not very different than other children's behavior (Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, & Shic, 2016). If this greater scrutiny is combined with a biased mislabeling of behavior, the child may not receive the support needed from adults to develop self-regulatory competence. Withdrawal, resistance, or oppositions may be quite adaptive under these conditions. In addition, African American boys and young men also face stigma and discriminatory reactions from others, including being presumed to be older than their actual ages and more often ascribed malicious intentions (Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014). As they age, they are presumed to be menacing. A plausible adaptive calibration explanation is that public posturing among African American males, while perceived by others as threatening, may arise as a defense against disappointment, rejection, and minimization. Although alarming, this underscores the need to look beyond surface behavior and to adopt a more nuanced approach to understanding the behavior of African American boys and young men.

This more nuanced approach begins with understanding the role of race and gender in identity development. This identity is often influenced by external constructions and expectations of what manhood ought to look like. For African American males, these external constructions often revolve around negative stereotypes about Black males as unpredictably violent, criminal, incompetent, sexually threatening, and inherently inferior to White males (Isom, 2007; Jackson & Dangerfield, 2004; Pierre, Woodland, & Mahalik, 2001). As such, these social constructions of masculinity are projections of fears and insecurities that society has about Black males (Jackson & Dangerfield, 2004) and may overshadow the positive capabilities and connection that these young men need to build character and develop confidence and capability to lead healthy productive lives. As a consequence of these restrictive and negative views of Black masculinity, identity exploration for African American boys becomes fraught with prohibitions and constraints. For African American boys, adolescence, which is typically a time when youth have the chance to explore and develop their racial and gender identities, occurs in a context in which exploration of their identity requires facing society's fear of Black males and



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Murry**

stereotypes that views them through the lenses of criminality and animalism (Stevenson, 2004). For these young men the trial and error testing of diverse identities, typically associated with adolescence, may be weighed down by the need to sidestep or react to negative identities predetermined for them by society. How do youth negotiate these ascribed negative identities, the related alienation effects, and the prejudices foisted upon them? This is a question for which we have few answers. Although there are models of masculinity that, if adopted, might counter these negative and alienated identities, little research has focused on identifying and measuring positive models of Black masculinity that involve generosity, loyalty, dependability, ingenuity, and fortitude (Bush, 1999; Howard, 2012; Watts, 1993). Hence, the factors that contribute to developmental outcomes of African American males require more attention and are deserving of future research.

Competence as the Normative Developmental Experience for African American Boys and Young Men

Evaluations of the developmental status of African American boys and young men tend to overlook the fact that a majority of these individuals are doing well on measures of behavioral self-regulation, peer social competence, and prosocial behavior. For example, in analysis of a nationally representative sample of African American boys recruited into the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (Brown, Barberin, & Scott, 2013), three latent classes of African American boys were identified distinguished by the divergent trajectories of socioemotional functioning over the period

from kindergarten to fifth grade. Eighty-eight percent of the sample had few or no symptoms of emotional or behavioral difficulties over the entire period from kindergarten to fifth grade. Of the remaining groups, 9% were reported as having problems that increased slightly from kindergarten to the fifth grade. Only 2.7% exhibited severe behavior problems over that time. Similarly, a study tracking an epidemiological sample of African American boys in Baltimore City Schools from first to seventh grade found that only 16% of the sample could be classified with increasing or chronically high levels of aggressive behavior (Schaeffer, Petras, Ialongo, Poduska, & Kellam, 2003). When comparatively high levels of serious conduct problem are attributed to African American boys, it is erroneous to infer that these high levels are characteristic of a majority of boys when in fact it applies to a much smaller group. Furthermore, the data on school suspensions in kindergarten through twelfth grade are consistent with those reported earlier for preschool, with African American boys receiving suspensions at disproportionately higher rates than other youth (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014). While the disproportionality is alarming, within-group analyses demonstrate that 80% of African American boys enrolled in K–12 public schools have not received a school suspension (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Just as important as understanding the reason 20% were suspended is the processes that enabled the 80% to perform effectively in school.

Extending observations of normative developmental functioning to adolescence, Gaylord-Harden, Zakaryan, Bernard, and Pekoc (2015) found that in African American male adolescents residing in low-income neighborhoods with elevated crime, the majority (62%) of their sample reported low levels of aggression and of victimization. A smaller group (30%) reported low levels of community victimization, but slightly above average levels of aggression. The smallest group (8%) reported significantly higher than average levels of exposure to community victimization and higher than average levels of aggressive behavior. These data suggest that the overwhelming majority of African American youth are somehow able to avoid the expected behavioral effects of growing up in impoverished, high crime neighborhoods.

Consistent with these findings, a prospective, longitudinal study followed rural, African American males from middle childhood to early adulthood to identify developmental trajectories leading to risky sexual behavior and substance use (Murry, Berkel, Simons, Simons, & Gibbons, 2014). Findings of growth mixture modeling suggested two subgroups with distinct developmental trajectories of behavior: rural African American males who were engaging in behaviors characterized as “normative functional experimentation” and rural African American males who were considered “high-risk engagers.” Experimentation with substance use

and sexual behavior may be functional during adolescence as part of normative psychosocial development and may assist adolescents in gaining peer acceptance or establishing a sense of autonomy (Murry et al., 2014; Steptoe & Wardle, 2004). However, experimentation is no longer normative when the frequency or intensity increases the likelihood of disease or injury (Murry et al., 2014; Steptoe & Wardle, 2004). As such, the normative group comprised 87.5% of the sample, with low involvement in risk behavior across their developmental trajectories. The high-risk group, engaging in risky behaviors, contained only 12.5% of the sample. Furthermore, social class did not distinguish the two groups, suggesting that membership in the high-risk group was not a function of low SES.

These results from within-group study designs affirm that the majority of African American boys and young men are exhibiting positive outcomes and are competent to manage expectations of home, school, and community with respect to self-regulation of behavior and emotions. While not dismissing or overlooking the challenges and risks that this population faces, these findings provide empirical evidence to support a critical shift in the narrative on developmental processes in a subset of youth who have been marginalized by inequality and oppression. From the majority of boys who demonstrate competency, there is much to learn about how they develop and sustain self-regulation and prosocial behavior under circumstances that are less than optimal. These findings also provide evidence of the importance of moving beyond the absence of risk, behavioral problems, and symptomatology as benchmarks for developmental competency (Causadias, 2013). In response to this need, the next section provides an overview of a positive youth development framework and application to African American boys and young men.

A Positive Youth Development Framework for African American Boys and Young Men

Positive Youth Development is a framework that has evolved since the early 1990s into a multiconstruct model of critical components for positive youth development. The positive youth development framework rests on the assumption that each person possesses capabilities and skills that promote competency when resources are provided to actualize latent strengths (Tolan, 2014; Tolan, Ross, Arkin, Godine, & Clark, 2016). The framework defines the outcome of positive youth development as “an integrated moral and civic identity and a commitment to society beyond the limits of one’s own existence that enable youth to be agents both in their own healthy development and in the positive enhancement of other people and of society” (Lerner et al., 2003, p. 172). Critically, positive youth development does not require or imply an absence of problems. However, it does interpret problems and limitations within the context of

an overall focus on capabilities and functioning (Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2001).

It should be noted that much of the research highlighting competence in African American boys and young men, including the research reviewed earlier, highlights the absence of problems as indicators of competence. However, preventing problems or symptoms from occurring is not equivalent to promoting positive youth development, and future research on African American boys and young men must provide evidence that these youth are not only showing an absence of problems, but also showing positive outcomes and positive contributions to family, community, and society (Lerner & Benson, 2003; Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000). For example, a longitudinal study of African American and Latino male adolescents from high-risk urban communities examined how stress measured during early adolescence impacted both positive developmental outcomes (prosocial values and engagement to school) and risky development outcomes (depressive symptoms and external behavior) in late adolescence; Tolan, Lovegrove, & Clark, 2013). The results of the study demonstrated that positive and risky outcomes are not diametrically opposed, underscoring the importance of examining how African American boys and young men may exhibit both the presence of positive functioning and the absence of problem functioning to obtain a more holistic understanding of development in this population (Tolan et al., 2013).

Lerner and colleagues (2009) proposed a six-dimensional model of positive development in which outcomes include the following: competence (ability to perform needed skill or activity), confidence (positive internal self-worth and self-efficacy), connection (positive and strong relationships with others and institutions, character (moral integrity), and caring or compassion for others; and contribution to society (Bowers et al., 2010). Out of this approach has come an Assets Model, which elaborated 40 important personal and environmental resources that provide the support and opportunities needed for adequate development (Benson, Lefkowitz, Scales, & Blyth, 1998). The Assets Model distinguishes internal and external resources and opportunities. Internal assets reflect within person characteristics or behaviors that promote personal effectiveness (Scales & Lefkowitz, 1999). Three principal internal assets are commitment to learning (e.g., bonding to school), positive values (e.g., honesty, integrity), and social competencies (e.g., cultural competence, conflict resolution). External assets are extraindividual aids to positive personal growth, including schools, families and communities. These include support (e.g., supportive community), empowerment (e.g., youth as resources), safety (e.g., at home and in community), boundaries and expectations (e.g., clear rules and expectation), and constructive use of time (e.g., engagement with youth programs). Although these assets predict functioning, the effects of assets on behavior and development differ by

race/ethnicity (Sesma & Roehlkepartain, 2003). Furthermore, the influence of assets on functioning is bidirectional or transactional; that is, access to and use of assets improves functioning and improved functioning increases access to assets which in turn provide greater support for competence and success (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

Recent studies provide strong empirical support for the utility of the positive youth development model to research on African American boys and young men (e.g., McDonald, Deatrick, Kassam-Adams, & Richmond, 2011; Tolan et al., 2013). For example, a recent prospective study examined the role of positive youth development assets in mitigating HIV-related risk behaviors in rural African American male youth from middle childhood to young adulthood (Murry et al., 2014). Vigilant parenting and racial socialization during middle childhood predicted future orientation. Future orientation was positively associated with high levels of self-regulation in early adolescence. Youth who were better regulated were more likely to affiliate with prosocial peers in late adolescence. Youth future orientation and self-regulation corresponded to the competence and confidence assets in Lerner and colleagues' six-dimensional model of positive youth development (Lerner et al., 2009; Phelps et al., 2009). Affiliation with prosocial peers led directly to positive developmental outcomes of prosocial norms and values as these African American males transitioned to young adulthood.

Still more support for the positive development model comes from a different study in which characteristics identified in the positive youth development model were associated with social and academic functioning of African American boys, while stress and risk factors predicted levels of psychopathology symptoms (Tolan et al., 2013). This study demonstrates the complexity of the relation of risk and capabilities and also suggests the attention that should be given to capabilities if we wish to understand how competence develops. Findings of these and other studies applying positive youth development to African American boys and young men demonstrate that positive growth and development over time is a normative experience in this population, and that this growth is influenced by numerous individual and ecological assets, and the relationships between individual and ecological assets are dynamic and interactive (Gaylord-Harden, Pierre, Clark, Barbarin, & Tolan, 2017). This is consistent with the pathways proposed by García Coll and colleagues.

While the assets identified in the positive youth development model can be deemed promotive of positive developmental outcomes, these assets overlap considerably with factors identified as protective for African American boys exposed to severe environmental risk. For example, the Pittsburgh Youth Study (Stouthamer-Loeber, Loeber, Wei, Farrington, & Wikström, 2002), Rochester Child Resilience Study (Cowen, Wyman, Work, & Parker, 1990), and

the Denver Youth Study (Tiet, Huizinga, & Byrnes, 2010) found that protective factors for African American boys included self-regulation, positive social orientation, social bonding to individuals and institutions, and healthy beliefs and clear standards for behavior. While it is important to distinguish between promotive factors, which increase the likelihood of positive developmental outcomes, and protective factors, which buffer the detrimental effects of adversity on outcomes (Causadias, 2013), the overlap between these factors for African American boys and young men highlight the salience of specific factors for this population.

In drawing attention to a positive youth development approach for African American males, we do not intend to gloss over the context in which these boys and young men develop. The positive youth development approach is considered to be a general index of developmental success for all youth, and is not typically discussed in the context of adversity (Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008). However, consistent with Spencer's (1995) critique of positive youth development models for not addressing explicitly or incorporating specific consideration of ethnic, gender, and class inequities, a discussion of ways to promote prosocial behaviors and positive youth development would be incomplete without acknowledging the role of contextual factors on the outcomes of African American boys and young men. For example, research with nationally representative samples of adolescents demonstrates that 85% of African American adolescents show little to no engagement in delinquent and risky behavior, with only 7% of African American adolescents classified as showing high delinquency (Childs & Ray, 2017), only 6% showing gang affiliation (McNulty & Bellair, 2003), and only 25% having ever engaged in violent behavior (Haynie & Payne, 2006). In contrast, research that focuses on African American adolescents from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods with high levels of crime and violence finds that 80% of male adolescents in these communities were involved in criminal behavior (Chaiken, 2000), 51% of had committed serious delinquent acts (Browning & Loeber, 1999) and 65% had engaged in violent behavior (DuRant, Getts, Cadenhead, & Woods, 1995), underscoring the impact of context, particularly inhibiting environments, on behavior.

An Adaptive Calibration Framework for African American Boys and Young Men

The Adaptive Calibration Model (Del Giudice et al., 2011) provides additional insights about the relation of contextual factors to the behaviors of African American boys and young men, particularly those that are deemed problematic. The adaptive calibration model is at its foundation an evolutionary psychological theory that proposes a set of associations among developmental influences and individual behavior that might account for the differential

trajectories observed in longitudinal studies. Much of the research advanced to support the theory focuses on the impact of stressful environments on the stress response system, especially on neuroendocrine functioning and sensitivity to provocations and threats. It proposes that growing up in adverse or inhibiting environments shapes or recalibrates the stress response system in a way that permits optimal stress responsivity to that context (Del Giudice, Hinnant, Ellis, & El-Sheikh, 2012). According to the adaptive calibration model, individuals can show one of four stress responsivity patterns: sensitive, buffered, vigilant, and unemotional (Del Giudice et al., 2012). Sensitive patterns develop in response to safe, predictable conditions and youth may show high inhibitory control, cooperation, executive function, and self-awareness (Del Giudice et al., 2012). Buffered patterns develop in response to moderate repeated activation of the stress response system under conditions of moderate environmental stress. Youth may show less anxiety, less risky behavior, and less aggression (Del Giudice et al., 2012). Vigilant patterns develop in response to unpredictable, threatening stressful situations and youth may show reactive aggression, risk-taking, and antisocial behaviors (Ellis, Oldehinkel, & Nederhof, 2017). Unemotional patterns develop in response to a chronic history of severe and traumatic stress and youth may show low empathy and cooperation, impulsive behavior, and proactive aggression (Ellis et al., 2017). These patterns of the stress response system may explain why some African American boys refuse to comply with directions from authority figures, react to perceived threats with aggression more strongly than others, or shift attention quickly from one stimulus to another to scan environments that are experienced as potentially dangerous (Abramovitz & Mingus, 2016; Kuther & Wallace, 2003; Rich & Grey, 2005).

Current support for the adaptive calibration model relies heavily on brain and neuroendocrine studies of the stress response system (Marceau, Ruttle, Shirtcliff, Essex, & Susman, 2015; Mundy et al., 2015). Research on adaptive calibration with African American youth finds that higher levels of concentrated neighborhood disadvantage were associated with higher stress (cortisol) reactivity and recovery in African American boys, consistent with a vigilant profile (Hackman, Betancourt, Brodsky, Hurt, & Farah, 2012). In contrast, in a sample of adolescents (38% African American), a history of chronic maltreatment was associated with a blunted cortisol profile, consistent with the unemotional profile (Peckins, Susman, Negri, Noll, & Trickett, 2015). Similarly, a history of community violence exposure in the form of victimization was associated with blunted cortisol patterns in African American youth (Kliewer, 2016).

One implication of the adaptive calibration model for the developmental trajectories of African American boys and young men is that behaviors, such as noncompliance, inattention, and reactive aggression, may be conditional adap-

tation coping behaviors employed to navigate and manage challenging environments. However, if such behavior enhances safety and status, minimizes threat, or ensures security in challenging environments, youth may utilize this behavior even in environments where the behavior is not effective or acceptable (e.g., the classroom). For example, Barbarin and Crawford (2006) documented the negative experiences of African American males in school settings, where they are treated harshly and are singled out more often for bad behavior. From the perspective of the African American boys and young men, school may be an alienating or unaccepting environment that demands quite different reactions and behavior than is adaptive in other contexts, and thus heightened stress reactivity that results from adaptive calibration may increase vulnerability to behavioral problems (Hackman et al., 2012). Confronted with a sense of "otherness" from teachers and peers, African American males may cope by developing hyper-masculine attitudes (Cunningham, Swanson, & Hayes, 2013) and disengage cognitively and physically from schools to avoid negative encounters (Murry, Berkel, Brody, Miller, & Chen, 2009).

Similarly, recent qualitative findings with young adult African American men highlight that the most commonly experienced symptom of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was hypervigilance, operationalized as an alteration in physiological arousal and reaction (Rich & Grey, 2005; Smith & Patton, 2016). However, these men describe their arousal as "being on point" with the intentional state of alertness and heightened awareness of their environments in direct response to the unpredictable threat of community violence (Smith & Patton, 2016). In other words, high levels of hyperarousal and hypervigilance can be a coping strategy for African American males that allows them to adapt to contexts where threats are imminent, uncertain, and occur in many forms. However, this conditional adaptation coping behavior may extend the beyond obvious threat, such as violence victimization, to how individuals perceive and respond to insults, provocations, and frustrations. Indeed, higher levels of hyperarousal predicted more aggression over time in African American male adolescents exposed to community violence (Gaylord-Harden, So, Bai, & Tolan, 2017).

Another example of conditional adaptation coping lies in the response to racial discrimination experiences. Youth of color who report high levels of racial identity achievement are engaged in active exploration of their racial group membership (Seaton, Scottham, & Sellers, 2006). However, as the salience of race increases, youth of color may respond to racial discrimination with increases in anger. Racial socialization involves messages that prepare youth for experiences of racial bias, and parents present these messages to prepare their sons to cope effectively with mainstream culture (Neblett et al., 2008). The buffering effects of racial socialization have been demonstrated for African American

adolescents and emerging adults exposed to racial discrimination (Brown, 2008; Bynum, Burton, & Best, 2007; Neblett et al., 2008). However, when African American boys receive racial socialization messages from their parents that stress mistrust, racism, and preparation for bias, these boys are more likely to exhibit elevated rates of externalizing behaviors (Caughy, Nettles, O'Campo, & Lohrfink, 2006). Consistent with an adaptive calibration model, African American boys may develop maladaptive behaviors (e.g., anger, hostility, aggression, depressive symptoms, and irritability) that may be manifestations of their efforts to cope with increased awareness of societal barriers to their success and respond to racial socialization messages (Davis & Stevenson, 2006).

In addition, African American males may engage in hypermasculine activities (i.e., being aggressive, engaging in dangerous behavior) as a reactive coping strategy to deal with the racially charged experiences in their communities (Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005; Cunningham et al., 2013). For example, Cunningham and colleagues found that when African American adolescent males experienced mistreatment (e.g., by police officers, sales people, neighbors) as Black males within their communities, they were more likely to employ hypermasculine attitudes as a reaction to the stressors (Cunningham et al., 2013). However, self-regulation of attention, behavior and emotions in African American boys may not align with behavioral expectations for self-regulation developed for White boys who experience less exposure to threats, less rejection, less alienation, or less dehumanization than African American boys (Stevenson, 2016).

Adaptive calibration also can be seen in methods parents of African American boys and young men utilize to protect, support, and promote positive developmental outcomes. These include strategies and approaches to prevent or abate potential and actual threats to their child's well-being, such as situations where hate, discrimination, or other forms of victimization (Berkel et al., 2009). For example, effective strategies for parenting in such environments were found to be those characterized as more restrictive behavioral control, including punitive punishment, when compared with White families. Notably, this approach in this environment facilitated fewer academic and behavioral problems among African American males (Roche, Ensminger, & Cherlin, 2007). Others suggest that precision parenting, meaning a careful balance of more opportunity for self-responsibility while vigilantly watching over, is more effective than approaches often considered adaptive from studies of other populations (Mason, Cauce, Gonzales, & Hiraga, 1996).

It may also be that what is considered the optimal type of family environment is differentiated by context. For example, it may be that parents being involved, vigilant, and disciplinarians with high monitoring, but also promoting and maintain emotional closeness and warmth among fam-

ily members are most useful for the threats to African American boys. Whereas high levels of vigilance, discipline, and monitoring may seem limiting to adolescents' need for autonomy, this combination of parenting may affect risk protection sustainability in African American boys and young men's families, even when African American boys and young men are exposed to elevated rates of violence, loss, blocked opportunity, and limited access to educational and economic resources (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2015). As such, these challenges associated with raising African American boys and young men in a racialized society seems to be adapted in families that exercise high vigilance, sensitive and sophisticated awareness of and explanation about inequities, and racial and ethnic pride, to enable most African American boys and young men to overcome the odds, similar to the alignment of developmental needs and resources in a positive youth development approach (Lerner et al., 2003; Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997). In this way, the adaptive calibration model advances our understanding of the social and political factors affecting development highlighted by García Coll and colleagues (1996) and connects these factors to the positive youth development framework and findings.

Integrating Positive Youth Development and Adaptive Calibration for African American Boys and Young Men

Notions of adaptive calibration complement the positive youth development approach as providing a way to account for contextual risk, which is a well-documented aspect of the lives of African American boys and young men (Gaylord-Harden, Pierre, et al., 2017). It may help explain findings that many boys are able to adapt to and mitigate the strains of growing up in low-income, high crime neighborhoods. While the components of the García Coll and colleagues' (1996) model provide important considerations for sound scientific developmental science about African American boys and young men, we suggest a model of adaptive functioning that emphasizes ways in which inhibiting and promoting environments impact development. We view this framework as a starting point to advancing theoretical models to guide strength-based studies of African American boys and young men, emphasizing ways in which they adapt their behavior and responses to threat and obstacles to evidence developmental competencies (Tolan et al., 2013, 2016).

In that regard, we contend that such a consideration would build on the García Coll and colleagues' (1996) model by integrating and incorporating two additional pathways toward developmental competencies: a conditional adaptation pathway, which is influenced by an adaptive calibration framework and includes concepts of adversity, risk, and stress responsivity; and a promoting pathway,

which is influenced by positive youth development research and includes the concept of developmental assets (Kia-Keating, Dowdy, Morgan, & Noam, 2011). Both pathways would lead to developmental competencies, but the conditional adaptation pathway, we hypothesize would lead to developmental competencies, when adaptive calibration processes buffer risk factors, whereas the promoting pathway would lead to competencies, directly from positive youth development assets. In regards to the role of context, the conditional adaptation pathway and the promoting pathway are both influenced by individual, family, school, community, and cultural factors (Kia-Keating et al., 2011). We argue that both pathways are active in the lives of African American boys and young men, but the relative influence of each pathway on their developmental competency outcomes, we contend, will depend on variations in exposure to inhibiting environments and the levels of adversity in the contexts of family, school, and community. Consistent with the findings of Tolan et al. (2013), the inclusion of these two pathways in developmental research may allow for the delineation of trajectories to both positive youth development and stress responsivity for African American boys and young men in various contexts and inform preventive intervention efforts.

We emphasize the need to include positive youth development and adaptive calibration in the expansion of García Coll's model because doing so advances our understanding of *how* behaviors, historically interpreted as deviance or pathology, can be viewed as agentic and predictable responses to inhibiting the negative consequences of growing up and living in hostile environments. Accompanying this view of development is an emphasis on youth agency in directing and determining their own development through choices in relationships, goals, roles in settings and groups, and utilization of resources (Larson, 2000). Personal agency links adaptive calibration to positive youth development by acknowledging ways in which African American boys and young men organize, seek out, and connect with significant individuals in their lives, including family and other role models to find meaningful and fulfilling roles, despite constrained opportunity.

A major consideration is emphasizing how African American boys understand their circumstance, self-appraisal, and expectations, and how processes of positive identity development are aligned with their capabilities. Examples of this approach can be found in reviews that examine the empirical support for coping methods, social competencies, developmental supports, and sustaining identities related to accomplishment, connection, caring, and contribution of African American boys and young men (Stevenson, 2016). Similarly, Hughes et al. (2006) formulated the important role that racial socialization can provide in promoting positive developmental outcomes, including racial identity, self-esteem, academic outcomes, and prosocial behavior, in

children of color. Furthermore, Sánchez, Hurd, Neblett, and Vaclavik (2017) demonstrated the importance of natural mentoring relationships that develop organically between African American boys and adults in their social network (Sánchez et al., 2017), consistent with positive youth development indicators of connection and support. Gaylord-Harden and colleagues (2008, 2010, 2011) demonstrated how adaptive coping behaviors of boys of color, or coping that improves behavioral or emotional outcomes in response to stress (Lazarus, 1993), varied as a function of extent and type of stress, but also that adaptive coping and psychopathology symptoms are not simply antitheses (Gaylord-Harden, Cunningham, Grant & Holmbeck, 2010; Gaylord-Harden, Elmore, Campbell & Wethington, 2011; Gaylord-Harden, Gipson, Mance & Grant, 2008). This and other empirical findings demonstrate that for African American boys and young men, capabilities and positive youth development assets explain development and functioning as well as risk factors (Tolan et al., 2013). Furthermore, consistent with a positive youth development approach, the range of factors that promote and maintain positive youth development are firmly rooted in the communities and families that socialize African American boys and young men (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2012).

Conclusions and Future Directions

The development of competencies in African American boys and young men is understudied, often eclipsed by documenting elevated risk and disregard, decontextualized to focus on individual differences, or oversimplified comparisons to other segments of the population. It is suggested that developmental science would be better served by focusing on the unique and diverse range of developmental circumstances experienced by African American boys and young men. Furthermore, there is a need for research to understand how these circumstances are influenced by a myriad of often overlooked historical, political, and social factors, as well as the complex interplay of contextual factors in the community, family, and individual that apply to them. As a consequence, actions to support and aid these males can build on that understanding to demonstrate how African American boys and young men can and do succeed. Building on García Coll's integrative model, the incorporation of positive youth development and adaptive calibration approaches can be synthesized to provide that framework, to not only improve the balance of emphasis on risk versus success, but also to serve as a more sensitive and sophisticated characterization of development in African American boys and young men. For example, Stevenson (2016) identified multiple areas of competency that could be important constructs for shifting understanding of young men of color from risk predominance to one of positive youth develop-

ment and rehumanize developmental study of African American males (Tolan, 2016). Future research that builds on these considerations must examine the developmental trajectory, antecedents, correlates, and consequences of development in African American males with a consideration for competency as the normative experience. Only then will research begin to minimize the gap in knowledge on variability in the functioning of African American boys and young men.

Some African American boys and young men respond to their adverse circumstances with behaviors that are identified as problematic, deviant or maladaptive. If we come to view these responses as adaptations to adversity, we can see them through a more empathic lens and interrupt the impact of stigma and social disparagement of the development of African American boys and young men. In turn, we make it possible to envision and formulate approaches to dealing with them that are more appropriate and helpful in mitigating the negative effects of risky and externalizing behaviors for African American boys and young men. In this way, the adaptive calibration model can be seen as complementary of García Coll and colleagues, as it has implications for programs policies and other interventions. We can also begin to imagine ways to assist African American boys and young men to benefit from their experiences at school and other activities designed to promote prosocial adaptations. However, with this paradigm emerges a fresh set of challenges to be tackled by researchers, including expanding our understanding of the complex individual-context relations that are most adaptive across risk levels among African American boys and young men. An expansion of knowledge warrants the acknowledgment and examination of within-group variability for African American boys and young men, including a critical need for more positive youth development research with African American boys and young men across different communities, sociocultural backgrounds, risk experiences, SESs, family structures, and psychosocial problem histories. Furthermore, our understanding of how the interplay of various identities (age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, SES, ability status, religion) impacts the trajectory of development for African American boys and young men is lacking.

In a current political climate that has heightened negative perceptions of African American boys and young men, it becomes necessary to acknowledge and incorporate the cultural, political, economic, and sociological circumstances that have fundamental and pervasive influence on the development of African American boys and young men, but with attention to these challenges not simply as risk factors. Instead, as García Coll, Spencer, and others have articulated and emphasized, it is to view these challenges as developmental influences against which positive outcomes can better be understood. By integrating research on how marginalization and oppression can impede growth and

opportunities with research on how African American boys and young men cope with, adapt to, and prevail in spite of these challenges to fulfill their potential for personal success, social connection and contributions to society, developmental science can be more accurate, more sophisticated, and more useful (Hughes et al., 2006; Stevenson, 2016).

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