Sociology essays - adolescence

The schooling experiences of African American girls in long term foster care and their transition into womanhood.

Adolescence is defined as the period between childhood and adulthood when personal growth takes place (Hopkins, 1983). Adolescence is also characterized as the period of experimentation, strong identification with certain people and groups, active fantasy lives, and probing into various philosophies, vocations, and the self (Liebert & Wicks-Nelson, 1981). Cobb (1995) attempts to create a cohesive definition that encompasses the biological, psychological, and sociological. Cobb's definition of adolescence is as follows: " Adolescence is a period in life that begins with biological maturation, during which individuals accomplish certain developmental tasks, and that ends when they achieve a self-sufficient state of adulthood as defied by society" (p. 27). A commonly accepted definition of adolescence created by psychologist Erik Erikson, (1968) describes the process of adolescence as a period during which young people grapple with the question of who they will become as well as who they are. While adolescence with all of its variations and applications attempts to simplify the process of youth development it is limited in the way that it addresses the constructs of race and gender (Brown and Gilligan, 1992; Buckley and Carter, 2005). This is important particularly when examining the lives of adolescent girls (Taylor, 1994).

The period of adolescence for girls places them in a complicated process of negotiating their lives, intuiting circumstances, weighing alternatives, as well as making and revising choices (Pipher, 1994; Paul, 2003; West-Stevens, 2002; Research for Action, 1996). This experience is further obscured for

African American adolescent girls, as they “ move toward adulthood in a society that continues to denigrate women, especially women of color” (Research for Action, 1996, p. 1).

Adolescence is a tumultuous period of development for African American girls as they are exposed to challenging and complex situations (Paul, 2003; Evans-Winters, 2005; West-Stevens, 2002). Stereotyping, labeling, self-image, self-esteem, teen pregnancy, and peer pressure are the primary sites of difficulty. The negotiation of African American adolescent girls within these complex locations requires her to be both attentive to and perceptive of her position within society. Hansen et al (1995) reiterates that “ girls of color face a different set of experiences and issues because of different socialization patterns and their need to deal with the multiple burdens of racism, cultural discrimination, and gender bias in society.” Contrary to Brown and Gilligan’s study (1992) that addressed mainly White American, middle-class girls between the ages of 8 and 18, these participants did not have to deal with the intersection of culture, race, and class, as they were privileged due to their race and social status (p. 5) PAGE #WHY ?? FROM WHAT SOURCE??

Competing with the socialization patterns and the various problems that African American girls face during adolescence, is the issue of identity. Goodman (1972) states that in addition to establishing her identity as a woman, a black [African-American] girl becomes even more aware of her status as black [African-American]. This double jeopardy status can be both empowering and problematic as race, class, and gender meet (West-Stevens, 2002). This awareness of her dual status constitutes growth as a

new identity is formed (Field & Hoffman, 1997). The identity that is developed from this duality creates a " vulnerable self" (p. 289). For African American adolescent girls involved with both the educational and long term foster care system, the vulnerable self interfaces with conflicting identities- African American, female, student, adolescent, young woman, and ward of the state.

Thus the African American adolescent females' perception of who she is outwardly-how society sees her and who she is inwardly-her individuality and how she makes meaning, is important in her developmental process. Emphasizing this point, Helms et al (1992) posits " women's healthy gender identity development involves movement from an externally and societally based definition of womanhood to an internal definition in which the woman's own values, beliefs, and abilities determine the quality of her womanhood." Examining the experiences of African American adolescent girls and their participation in twosocial institutions-educationand long term foster care, their conflictual and often contradictory goals of equality, care, democracy, and access-and how this population navigates these systems, provides a point of entry in understanding the meaning of their encounters as they transition into womanhood.

Social Perception, Status, and Challenges of Women in Society

" *The gender relations between men and women in any particular group are not shaped only by the men and women in that group, for those relations two are always shaped by how men and women are defined in every other race, class, or culture in the environment."- Sandra Harding (1993, p. 18)*

Women in society have long been viewed in gender stereotypes and roles. One of the accepted tales is of a young, pretty, and slender person who spends a great deal of time making or keeping herself attractive for the man or men in her life (Amundsen, 1977; Wolf, 1991). Another myth is one that she is a wife, homemaker, or mother whose life is devoted to ensuring that her home and loved ones are comfortable without any thought to her own well-being (Chodorow, 1978). A third and more widely promoted falsehood, that counteracted the sexist vision of women as feminine, docile, and in need of protection emerged in the 1960's and 1970's (Clark, 1987). During the resurgency of the Women's Liberation Movement (Carabillo et al, 1993) the view of women as manipulators, schemers, or " having it made" became the mantra that was used to discredit women's efforts at equality.

In Friedan's book, *The Feminist Mystique,* (1963) the author believes that these superficial and one-dimensional depictions of women reflect the male patricarchy prevalent in society that continue to idealize women as " sexkittens," " helpers," and " providers of care" are important in the liberation of women. The stark reality of these labels works to uphold and promote the oppression of women in an effort to maintain power within male-female relationships and society. Wolf's, *The Beauty Myth* (1991), extended the dialogue about the issues of women while exposing the stereotypes and the power relations within relationships and society. The resistance to these conventional models of thought were and still are today received with condemnation and scorn as women make moves to legitimize their place in the world.

While Friedan and Wolf may have supplied a vehicle to dialogue about the issues of women, the authors took for granted and failed to address other women's experiences. hooks (1981) maintains that authors like Friedan and Wolf failed to identify how their own desire for freedom had implications for the continuing perpetuation of African American women's oppression.

Revealing in the current literature is the notion of power (Crow, 2000). The continued presence of the feminist movement in the United States during the past 42 years has had major influences on today's society. Women currently hold electoral public offices, are represented in fields that were initially sanctioned for men, and are creating spaces of their own in the entertainment and science related fields (Kinser, 2004). The extensive individual and social changes that have resulted from these new views of the roles of women and men are evidence of the feminist influence on private lives and public structures. However for all of the accomplishments and assets, women remain in a state of subjugation when it comes to injustices and limitations. This constant struggle for power and equality affects the quality of life that a woman has both at home and in society (p. 15)

Beginning with the suffrage movement of the 1920's and continuing on with both the Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity Act of 1972, the expansion of the number of citizens, primarily women eligible to vote doubled (Corder and Wolbrecht, 2006). According to (Wolf, 1993) although women are in the working class minority: overlooked and underpaid, women possess one thing that provides them with power-political citizenship.

Recognition then of the power relations of women both in the home and in society is best examined through a political lens. An assessment of the ways in which women issues are represented in political institutions and structures highlights the parity of power among women (Taylor & Vintges, 2004).

Friedan (1992) in her observation of the Democratic convention and the attention paid to women's issues agrees: " this time we did not have to fight for more priority to be accorded women's rights, abortion, child care, parental leave–all the " women's issues" that party leaders had shunned before… it was clear that " women's issues" are now primary political issues." This analysis is necessary as the condition of women in its current state constitutes a group that is exploited and unfairly treated (Cobble, 2004).

Extending the conversation of women and power further are the life experiences of women. Consistent with Friedan's argument, Mandy Grunwald, the Democratic counterpart to Republican p. r. guru Roger Ailes, produces television spots that rely heavily on her experience as a woman. Per Grundwald: " we're the ones who bring to the table a real sense of everyday life…people sense women know what's really happening, day by day." Grundwald's statement debunks the myth of women as mere sex objects and gives power to women beyond their homelife (p. 18).

For African American women the gender stereotypes and roles assigned to them are different than those afforded White women. Harding (1993) notes: " the femininity prescribed for the plantation owner's wife was exactly what was forbidden for the Black slave woman (p. 18)." The stereotype of white

women as the epitome femininity and docility who needed and required protection continue as common practice today as it did during slavery. The notion of African American women as objects versus their clear gender of female is one that was also practiced during slavery. According to Vaz, African American women were never seen as victims or sexual commodities (p. 5). Instead African American women are viewed as lustful objects or “ mammies.” What is similar in the roles of both African American and White women are the virtues ascribed to the label of “ mammie.” The descriptions of mammy is seen as patient, caring, passive, with no needs of her own (Jewell, 1993; McElya, 2007). This safe assignment does little to move the stereotype of African American women beyond that of caretaker and continues to maintain the African American female in a subordinate role.

Another role given to African American women can be found in Mitchell’s (1936/1964) *Gone with the Wind* . In her book, the character Prissy, is portrayed as lazy, lying, and incompetent. This image is utilized largely today to describe African American females particularly with the realm of society when it comes to the usage of social services, hence the title “ welfare queens.”(Collins, p. 77). The character illustrations are pervasively used today regarding African Americans in general and contradicts the image of the African American female as intelligent, hard-working, and trustworthy.

Lastly a role allocated to African American women is that of “ strong Black woman.” This role was appointed to African American females within the African American community as a way to create a person who was nuturing and to diminish the sexual images previously ascribed (Walker, 1983).

Scott's(1991)description of the strong Black woman is one in which she uses her sassiness to defend her family, accepts her role as secondary to men, and one who pledges herself to a life of service to others. This is all accomplished, according to Scott, with the expectation of conformity to European standards of femininity. African American male/female relationships and her position in society is then challenged as she competes with the expectations of her culture and the expectations of a White dominant society.

Even with the ending of slavery African American women were not offered freedom from racism, sexism, or economic exploitation (Davis, 1983). As a result, African American women have often and continue to be stereotyped and regulated to positions of powerlessness within larger society (hooks, 1983; Evans-Winters, 2005; West-Stevens, 2002). This is based on the biased notions and depictions identified earlier, of African American women's participation within society. Collins (2000) reiterates this in her statement: " portraying African American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U. S. Black women's oppression."

The societal view of African American women is heavily influenced by the media. The delineation of African American women in various media such as movies, books, and videos works to influence current governmental policies. Geiger (1995) addresses the racial, gender, and class factors and its influence on public policy that renders African American women powerless. Policies such as The Welfare Reform Act of (Rose, 1999) work to control the behavior of African American women rather than deal with the poverty and

racism that this population encounters. African American females who traverse these territories often do so through the vehicle of education.

Historical and Contemporary Examination of Education of Girls

Touted as a gateway to a better life, schools have been the focal point of debates over the process of Americanization, the role of women in U. S. society, and the place of people of color in the United States throughout its history (Ware, 1997; Wright, 2007). During colonial times school doors were closed to girls seeking knowledge, and the home was considered the learning place for young women. The home, serving as the girls' classroom, was where young girls learned the practical domestic skills for their inevitable role as wife and mother (0wens et al, 2003).

However, in 1767 a school in Providence, Rhode Island, began advertising it would teach reading and writing to girls. At the bottom of the advertisement, in small print, was noted the inconvenient hours of instruction. The girls were being taught either before or after the boys' regular instructional time. At this time the teachers of the boys needed additional income and opted to teach girls before and after school for an awesome fee. Thus, the idea of educating girls was formulated (Sadker & Sadker, 1994).

In the 1870's, during the time of the Industrial Revolution, schooling became compulsory and state-run. With an influx of immigrants the compulsory education was created to integrate this huge influx by teaching immigrants to be proper U. S. citizens and skills necessary for factory work (Langhout, 2005). Although allowed to attend school with men, women were still discriminated against. This type of education reiterated the roles for women

in ways that went against the initial goals of education. Following a considerable amount of frustration from attempting to receive an education at male-dominated colleges, women created a bold alternative – colleges for women created by women. The colleges offered subjects that earlier educators deemed unnecessary for women (Johnson et al, 1985). Following the lead of prominent women educators, the early nineteenth century, saw many cities establishing separate high schools for girls. Thus the creation of single-sex schools began.

Towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of World War II fewer options for girls begin to exist. Some researchers believe that it may have been easier for girls to be a girl than it is in today's society (O'Reilly et al, 2001). This is supported by the notion of mothers and female teachers as strong role models for adolescent girls and the support provided regarding their acquisition of feminine behaviors as defined by society during that this period (p. 13). Domesticity was emphasized as girls learned how to manage a household, plan, and prepare meals. The acquisition of intelligence was not focused upon, rather the replication of young women as wives and mothers. Normal school, as it was called was a 2-year training program where young women were taught to teach other young women in the mastery of these skills. What should have been a form of liberation for groups, especially women, education became a place that reinforced the dominant society's race, class, and gender roles.

After World War II, women returned to their roles in the home. This appearance of domestic bliss hid a larger revolution waiting to happen. With the emergence of the women's rights movement during the 1960's there

was a boost against sexual discrimination (Butts, 1978). With the creation of Title IX of the 1972 federal Educational Amendment which prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex in educational institutions, women were now afforded true equality within schools (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). During the Reagan administration of the 1980's standardized testing became the main focus of the U. S. schooling experience. The emphasis on standardized testing is also prevalent today with The No Child Left Behind Act (McDonnell, 2004). In 1983, the U. S. Department of Education published *A Nation at Risk,* which called for school reform efforts across the country. Although the report captured needed changes in the system, it failed to define the educational issues in terms of sex or gender. Usage of universality to address the educational needs of students through the elimination of gender works to exclude the individual needs of each student.

In *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls* (1994), the Sadkers' observed girls in the classroom where they analyzed classroom instruction, looking at both racially integrated as well as those which were racially segregated (Frazier-Kouassi, 2003). Hopkins (1997) critique of the Sadkers' study, argues that the authors were not explicit about which girls were being cheated and that their study focused primarily on White girls as a representation of all girls and excluded girls of color.

In the AAUW report (1995), How Schools Shortchange Girls, traditional assumptions about the egalitarian nature of American schools are challenged. The report at the time of its study was a collection of all of the available research on the subject of girls and schools at the time. Additionally the report attempted to include as much as possible the existing

research on the differences found among girls of various racial, ethnic, and socio-economic groups. There were limitations to this research as well. Due to the overall lack of research that had been actually conducted on groups of girls that differed from the White middle class norms, the literature was dominated primarily with information on White students.

Critics would argue that even with all of the measures which include the Equal Opportunity Act and the passage of Title IX, girls still do not participate equally in the the educational system. How educators understand sex and gender issues becomes important if the quality of public education is to be addressed in the United States.

Education for African American Girls

Historically, education has long been embraced by many African Americans as the most viable means by which to mitigate the forces of oppression and to improve the individual and collective fortunes of African Americans (Ladner, 1971; Scanzoni, 1971). Likewise is the belief within the African American community that each generation should do better than the previous, both educationally and economically (Coker, 2003).

Beginning with the framing of the United States Constitution, the exclusion of African American women in obtaining equal rights which includes access to education was solidified as it did not address neither their race or gender as human beings (Smith, 1999; Ruth, 1990; Vaz, 1995). By limiting access to knowledge and education, the promotion of domination and marginalization among African American women was continued. This is continually reinforced

within educational settings as they are impacted by multiple oppressions-race, gender, and class (Paul, p. 79).

Due to the economic need, which was promoted in part by the low and unstable wages garnered by African American men, African American girls were then sent messages within their kinship care system about the value of education. Evans-Winters in *Teaching Black Girls: Resilliency in Urban Classroom* (p. 3) recalls her childhood messages: “ with a good education you won’t have to depend on no man” and “ White folks can’t deny you anything with an education.” Compelling in nature, these messages did not take into account the hegemonic forces of racism, sexism, and classism that operate within academic settings (hooks, p. 4; Evans-Winters, p. 8).

Even with the positive encouragement, African American girls, are still addressed in education in substantive ways and within the broader context of white girls (Paul, 2003). This produces a direct contrast to the achievement ideology that is believed and promoted among the larger African American community. Although education is upheld as an opportunity to open doors and to battle the inequalities existent in society, for African American females they are regulated to navigating the triple oppression of race, gender, and class-at school, in their homes, communities, and in larger society (Evans-Winters, p. 3). This is a paradox for an institution that is seen as a means of liberation. Robinson and Ward (1991) draw attention to this inconsistency by highlighting the distinction between education as practice of freedom and education as a practice of domination.

Central in the lives of African-American adolescent girls is family (Jones, 1989). Familial structure is important in the identity development of African-American adolescent girls and their transition to womanhood (p. 163). Since families provide the basic socialization for children in preparation for their participation in society (Brown and Bailey, 1997), its significance in the developmental outcomes of African American adolescent females is vital. As a means of women [girls] constructing a healthy identity and sense of belonging, Josselson (1987) cites the importance of being different (self-development) yet connected to others (family development).

Family as a cultural strength can benefit African American girls as there are extended kinship systems in which girls can expand their circles of connection and influence. The relationship of mother-daugther, and that of sister-friends (Iglesias and Cormier, p. 266) can create safe spaces for girls to experience womanhood as a special time in their lives and to acquire the voice to speak up about their own realities.

On the contrary, when the familial structure of the African-American female is challenged, specifically through placement within the foster care system, their developmental transition is impacted as they compete to establish their own identity in the larger environment (p. 165). As a result, the formation of agency is stagnated (Paul, p. 54) which limits the ability of the African-American adolescent female in her navigation of race, gender, and class within academic settings.

In their study of resistance strategies, Robinson and Ward, believed that young African American women could be consciously prepared for a

sociopolitical environment of racial, gender, and economic oppression by fostering the development of a kind of resistance that would provide the necessary tools to think critically about oneself, about the world, and about one's place in it. The authors further advocated that helping professionals engage in unmasking each women's individual history of resistance against those who sought to undermine her efforts to keep her self determination and to achieve personal and racial affirmation.

The study revealed a differentiation between resistance strategies for survival and resistance strategies for liberation. In their research, when adolescent girls became engaged in resistance for survival they used short-term, sometimes injurious strategies, such as substance use and early pregnancies, which were not in their best interest physically, emotionally, or socially. The authors commented that strategies for survival may have helped teenagers cope with the situation at hand, but were not enhancing in the long-term. The data from their study suggested that resistance for survival could result in isolation and disconnectedness from the collective community. Invisibility and silencing of the true self and the lead to the acceptance of a stereotypical portrayal and to the internalization of negative images leads to the defining of self by others such as the media and educational system, in a manner that oppresses and devalues girls.

The author's found that the alternative, resistance strategies/liberation provided a sense of unity with others that transcended age, socioeconomic status, ethic origin, and sexual orientation. The belief was that his strategy involved self-determination through confrontation and repudiation of oppressive attempts to demean the self. To understand this the authors

explain the creation of models to make active decisions based upon empowerment and affirmation. When these two occurs, both the self and one's cultural group of reference is emphasized. The rejection that occurs in this process is of the oppressive societal norms that are inconsistent with one's [African American girls] cultural identity. This results in earlier resistance and responses of substance abuse and early and unplanned pregnancies which include school failure. The rejection is in favor of a more self-enhancing search for purpose in life, one that benefits the self as well as the wider cultural community.

When viewed in this context, schooling as a process does not afford African American women access to the socioeconomic opportunities and upward mobility that are privileged to white women unless they receive and are educated in counterstrategies that foster a strong sense of self and self-efficacy (Iglesias and Cormier, 2002).

In the AAUW study, " *Girls in the Middle Working to Succeed in School,* (Cohen et al, 1996)," the authors identified strategies that middle-school girls used as part of the process of forming identities and negotiating school challenges. The strategies included speaking out and being heard, doing well without hiding competence, and moving beyond cliques. How well the girls did depended in part on how well their identities and approaches matched the mainstream culture of the school, especially race, ethnicity, and class. This is a contrast for African American girls who find themselves in the struggle and navigation of identity. School settings for African American girls then become sites of confliction as the issues of race, ethnicity, and class converge within their learning environments.

Orenstein (1994) supports the overall findings of the AAUW study, but she defers in the area of self-esteem. The author believes that African American [girls] students are often stigmatized at school and that their worth is determined by low expectations. In turn this leads to a rejection of academic achievement, a source of self esteem for African American students. The final outcome is a high dropout rate among this population. Knowledge of the impact of self-esteem and its relation to education is important for African American girls, specifically those involved with systems of care.

Historical and Contemporary Examination of Foster Care and Children

Historically, family foster care has been in existence in the African culture for centuries (Kadushin and Martin 1988; Pecora et al, 1992; Everett, 1995). Different families, clan, and tribes were organized around the belief of extended family. (Sudarkasa, 1988). During slavery, informal substitute care was often provided by other slaves to children whose parents were either sold to other plantations or who had died. After emancipation, the rescue of thousands of related and non-related orphaned black who had no means of support were rescued by the extended black family (Logan et al, 1990).

With the evolution of formal systems of child welfare, African American families and their children were initially excluded. Social welfare services, including child welfare services, were provided by the establishment of mutual aid groups and the self help efforts of churches, women’s clubs, benevolent societies, and fraternal organizations (Ross, 1978; Giddings 1984; Wesley, 1984; Leashore et al, 1991). This included the establishment of The Freedman’s Bureau where ex-slaves where provided assistance in their time of transition.

Access to these services however has persisted through both racism and segregation through the form of differential treatment (Close, 1983; Stehno 1982; Albers et al. 1983). Foster care has long been viewed as a temporary service pending a more desirable, permanent arrangement for the child (Pardeck, 1982; Smireman, 2003; Golden, 1997; Krebbs and Pitcoff, 2006).

Family

According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services (2003), nearly half a million children were in foster care. Seven per cent of these children were emancipated and five per cent had other outcomes, which included homelessness and self selected placements with relatives. Thirty-eight per cent of the children in foster care were identified as Black/Non-Hispanic and 8 per cent were identified as other races and ethnic origins. Eight per cent of 42, 000 of the children in foster care were identified as adolescent African American females age twelve and older (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2003).

Upon entrance into foster care, African American adolescent females face many challenges. These include poor performance in school, multiple placements, social-emotional/mental health issues-separation from their families, loss/abandonment, and other related traumas. Central to these challenges, are models of practice that do not adequately address the developmental needs of African American adolescent females.

With the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (AFSA), goals of safety, permanency, and well-being for children in the child welfare system were established (The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997). One

of the main guiding principles states “ foster care is a temporary setting and not a place for children to grow up” (Administration for Children, Youth and Families, 1998, p. 2). An additional aim of AFSA is to encourage child welfare systems to “ respect a child’s developmental needs.

Although AFSA was designed to guide the temporary placement of children in foster care, this has not been the case, particularly for African American females. African American girls are entering foster care and maintaining longer stays in a system that was not intended to raise adolescents into adulthood. For African American adolescent girls many remain in care indefinitely and move from one temporary foster home, group home and institution to another, with little stability or preparation for the future (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2006).

As youth are prepared for eventual emancipation, the final care for adolescents is provided in the form of placement in independent or transitional living facilities. These long term foster care facilities act as a surrogate parent to provide their children with the basic skills needed to transition as adult