

**STRONG BLACK GIRL:  
MESSAGES OF STRENGTH IN THE LIVES OF URBAN BLACK  
ADOLESCENT GIRLS**

by

Latiayna Tabb

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Human Development and Family Studies

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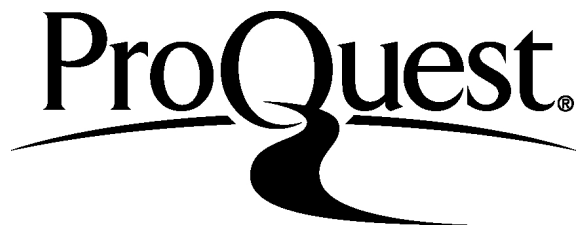
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Latiayna Tabb

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Ruth Fleury-Steiner, Ph.D.  
Professor in charge of thesis on behalf of the Advisory Committee

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Bahira Sherif-Trask, Ph.D.  
Chair of the Department of Human Development and Family Studies

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Carol Vukelich, Ph.D.  
Interim Dean of the College of Education and Human Development

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_ ...  
Ann L. Ardis, Ph.D.  
Interim Vice Provost for Graduate and Professional Education

“I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes, I do not mind at all.”

- Zora Neale Hurston

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When running a race you are told not to look back because it can slow you down. Yet, while on this three (and a half!) year journey to complete my thesis it was necessary for me to reflect, self-assess, and build from life experience – I guess this is why writing a thesis is not like running a race. By “living a little longer” I was able to produce a piece of work that I am proud of academically and culturally. I know this study has a place in academia and, more importantly, in the lives of Strong Black Girls.

I would like to thank some of my sister-friends for supporting me in a variety of ways. Thank you Portia Fullard for the empathy and encouragement; thank you Nikkia Moss for being my research assistant; and thank you Etenesh Greene for showing genuine interest and literally being there every step of the way (in person and in spirit).

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before she passed to get it done – “I’m done, baby!” And lastly, many thanks to my ultimate “just get it done!” team, Dr. Ruth Fleury-Steiner and Dr. Norma Gaines-Hanks.

As I finish writing this section I realize that writing my thesis was actually like running a race. Although this was a process resulting in personal and professional growth, I slowed down because I chose to give (back) to others instead of giving to myself. The three (and a half!) years that lapsed were rich with commitments to the community and helping others fulfill their dreams, experiences that I would not take back – I had fun! Yet when I shifted focus to me, I realized that to truly fulfill my dreams the journey would be my own and about just me. I learned that when you finish a race the finish is yours, strong Black girl, and now there is no going back!

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## **ABSTRACT**

Black adolescent girls living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods experience different socialization processes than the White American mainstream because of their race, gender, and socio-economic status. This study is an examination of how intersecting oppressions have created opportunities for resilience, risk, and protective family processes among extended kinship networks in the Black community for Black girls. Specifically, from their own words, it is an exploration of the messages that Black adolescent girls from disadvantaged urban communities receive during strength training, a salient African-American gendered racial socialization practice. Two questions guided this research: 1) What are the messages related to strength that African American adolescent girls from disadvantaged neighborhoods receive from their female kinship support networks? and 2) How do these messages affect their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors?

Ecological Systems Theory, Family Systems Theory, and Intersectionality were used as lenses to guide the research and contextualize the present study. Using a voice-centered strategy, five focus groups were conducted with 24 high-school aged participants who resided in various urban and urban-suburban communities throughout Philadelphia. The major findings include a comprehensive definition of strength, and four

salient messages present during strength training. These messages were related to adversity, success, perception management, and relationships. Practitioners will be able to apply the study's findings to creating meaningful relationships with African American adolescent girls and develop asset-based interventions centered on coping with adversity, cultivating social capital, and supporting girls in seeking out resources independently.

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

Drawing from their own words, this study is an exploration of the messages that Black adolescent girls from disadvantaged urban communities receive during strength-training, a salient African-American gendered racial socialization process responsible for the formation of the Strong Black Woman identity. Two questions guided this research: 1) What are the messages related to strength that African American adolescent girls from disadvantaged neighborhoods receive from their female kinship support networks? and 2) How do these messages affect their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors?

Several bodies of literature are central to understanding strength-training. Literature on adaptive culture explores the socio-historic and socioeconomic environment of the research population. This literature reveals how low-income African American families and kin interact with and are affected by impoverished and segregated environments. Family systems create responsive value orientations, and are dependent on individuals outside the nuclear family, therefore creating an extended family network.

In addition, literature on adolescent psycho-social development and socialization classifies the developmental state of the research population and the processes that shape individual and group characteristics, particularly looking at psychological, social, and familial factors. Adolescents are at a developmental stage where they are gaining cognitive and social independence from their parent(s) and are beginning to negotiate and form their own identity in the context of peer interactions and other ecological systems.

This socialization literature is deconstructed for readers three ways by gender, race, and then gender and race simultaneously. This places special emphasis on the impact of the intersection of these characteristics, and specifically how families use strength-training to shape the identity of African American girls.

This study has contributed to a void in scholarship as little research has been specifically conducted on the process of strength-training and the Strong Black Woman identity; what has been done focuses primarily on adults, not teenagers (Beaboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Beaboeuf-Lafontant, 2008) and offers a review of its symbolism within English literature, specifically among Black Women Writers (Harris-Lacewell, 2001).

Ecological Systems Theory, Family Systems Theory, and Intersectionality guided the research and methods of this study. These theoretical frameworks helped to create an understanding of the interactions between the physical, socioeconomic, and socio-historic environments and the research population, family, and other social systems on varying ecological levels. Intersectionality, a feminist perspective, was used to highlight how multiple oppressions, such as racism, classism, and sexism, intersect to create unique experiences within marginalized groups. The study of the content and process of the development of the Strong Black Woman identity among Black adolescent girls is consequently an examination of how intersecting oppressions have created opportunities for resilience, risk, and protective family processes within an adaptive culture.

## Chapter 2

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The following literature review clarifies the role and function the Strong Black Woman identity plays within the African-American community.

#### **Adaptive Culture**

Most research about life in impoverished urban environments tends to be fatalistic and suggests that the life chances of urban dwellers are bleak. Yet, we know that individuals, families, and communities of color living in this environment continue to exhibit resiliency. Borrowing from an asset-based community development perspective to assess the experiences of Black adolescent girls from urban disadvantaged communities, one must identify the available resources, strategies and processes (adaptive culture) that residents within these communities have adopted in order to thrive despite the limited traditional resources and inequitable social structures. The following section of the literature review briefly presents the environmental context of the adaptive culture.

#### **African American Inequitable Experience of Poverty**

The development and socialization of African American children and adolescents from disadvantaged communities differs in comparison to their White, mainstream

“peers” because of identity characteristics (which double as social hierarchical categories) and the unique ecological circumstances of living in an impoverished environment. Poverty is not just an income status, but also an environment that has varying structural impacts.

The psychosocial environment of poverty negatively impacts marriage (quality, satisfaction, and success), parenting (parent-child interaction, monitoring, and punishment), social networks (support and resources), and educational related processes & outcomes (adult speech, cognitive and mental stimulation, language acquisition, school readiness, and quality of childcare) (Evans, 2004). Poverty also affects structures of the physical environment, which in turn affects developmental outcomes, including the actual environment (toxic exposure, poor air and water quality, noise pollution), homes (crowding, high costs/low affordability, various in-home risks, limited information access), neighborhoods (high crime, exposure to violence, limited healthy food access), and schools (inadequate buildings, low-spending/child) (Evans, 2004). “Although each of these singular psychosocial and physical risk factors has adverse developmental consequences, exposure to cumulative risks accompanying poverty may be a key, unique aspect of the environment of poverty” (Evans, 2004, p.88).

In 2013, 27.2% of African Americans lived below the federal poverty level, which is almost twice the poverty rate of the United States of America (14.5%) (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014); and 39% of African American children in the U.S. live in poverty (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014). African Americans make up 13.2% of the U.S.’ population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), yet experience the nation’s systemic ills at rates much higher than their representation in the population. Approximately 58%

percent of African American families in the United States live in urban areas (Halpern, 1995). The 2010 Census also reveals that non-Hispanic Blacks are more likely than any other ethnic group to live in the nation's largest cities (Rastogi, Johnson, Hoeffel, Drewery, 2011). Moreover "the 1990 U.S. Census revealed that poverty rates were generally more than double those of their surrounding suburbs (in the nation's oldest cities)" (Tietz & Chapple, 1998, p. 35).

The higher concentration of African Americans than Whites living in impoverished urban areas suggests that African Americans are more likely than Whites to experience the risks associated with living in poverty. In effect, "Black children are more likely to live in dangerous neighborhoods and thus more likely to be exposed to violence, inadequate housing, and other environmental health risks" (Garcia Coll, Lamberty, Jenkins, Pipes McAdoo, Crnic, Wasik, & Vazquez Garcia, 1996, p. 1900).

Additionally, African Americans are more likely to experience persistent poverty and to live in areas of concentrated or cumulative poverty (Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002). Evans' (2004) findings suggest that African Americans are more likely than Whites to have limited social networks, low social support, and limited resources (instrumental, financial, and institutional). In other words, low social capital, resulting in restricted socioeconomic outcomes, increases the potential for a cycle of poverty.

### Segregated, Disadvantaged Neighborhoods

Iceland, Sharpe, and Steinmetz (2003) cite two leading hypotheses that account for the high incidence of African Americans living in poverty. One hypothesis is Wilson's (1987) thesis that low-income Blacks are isolated within impoverished inner-

cities because of the out-migration of middle-class Blacks. The second is Massey and Denton's (1993) counter hypothesis that the concentration of poverty among minorities is related to coinciding increases in poverty rates and specific residential patterns among those same racial groups.

The residential congregation of poor African Americans in urban areas is not happenstance. There are economic and legal barriers that resulted in the clustering of the same racial/ethnic group in one area. To fully understand the experience of African Americans in those neighborhoods, one must understand the history of the residential patterns of African Americans and the causes of urban poverty (see Teitz & Chapple, 1998). "From the days of slavery to the present, (African Americans) have suffered from routine and extensive discrimination in the workplace, housing, education, healthcare, politics, and other institutional areas" (Feagin, Feagin, & Baker, 2006, p. 144). One particular alienating experience resulting from discrimination that is related to low-income neighborhoods is segregation (Teitz & Chapple, 1998). "Segregation (residential, economic, social and psychological) directly influences the various promoting and inhibiting environments that children of color experience" (Garcia Coll et al., 1996, p. 1896). Children and families in disadvantaged neighborhoods are not simply geographically isolated, but they are isolated from the social and economic experiences of the mainstream.

Residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods have limited resources, both tangible and intangible, and are restricted in their chances of upward social mobility only in part because of their limited access to jobs with adequate wages (Teitz & Chapple, 1998). The risk factors are complex and interactive, and as I explore the purpose of the Strong Black



Woman identity, I ask what are the ways that African American families and kin prepare their female children to be resilient?

### Promoting and Inhibiting Environments

One's social network, including family, influences things like identity (Kellerhals, Ferreira, & Perrenoud, 2002) and access to resources (Dominguez & Arford, 2010, Wilson, 1987). Social capital literature suggests that there is a need for the systematic development of social networks and support systems (Dominguez & Arford, 2010). This may reduce risk and encourage an understanding of the pre-existing systems to more effectively facilitate resilience. Access to resources is an important facet of a social network, which affects the relationships of those within the social network, and arguably the identity of the individual.

While a low-income environment can be inhibiting to developmental processes, these same lack of resources can be promoting under some conditions. Poor families employ adaptive socialization processes in response to the multiple, oppressive interacting ecological environments forming an adaptive culture (Garcia Coll et al., 1996). An environment can be considered promoting, "when that setting is supportive of the developmental outcome of children and prepares them to deal with the societal demands imposed by prejudice or discrimination" (Garcia Coll et al., 1996, p. 1902). The broader ecological context, beyond the neighborhood, impacts both the risks affecting the family, and the resilience responses, such as the creation of adaptive cultures, to protect and prepare family members (Garcia Coll et al., 1996).

Family resilience is slightly different than individual resilience; its focus is on the network, a feature that is especially heightened in low-income minority families. Family resilience is the ability to adapt to a changing environment and return to previous levels of functioning after exposure to adversity (Sheridan, Eagle, & Dowd, 2006). “The expanded role that family and kin networks play in developmental processes for minority children may serve to protect them from economic hardships and social and psychological sources of oppression derived from their relative position in society” (Garcia Coll et al., 1996, p.1893).

#### African American Kinship Networks

The socio-economic state of poor Black families necessitates the extended kin network, which enables families to benefit from pooled resources (Scannapieco & Jackson, 1996). Qualitative researchers have identified ways in which Black families and individuals function within economically disadvantaged environments. “Focusing on micro-level family processes and using firsthand data-collection methods, they have described the organization and coping strategies of extended-kinship networks that characterize many poor African American families” (Jarette, Jefferson, & Kelley, 2010, p. 299). Black families are embedded in a complex kinship network of blood related and close, but non-blood related kin (Gray & Nybell, 1990; Scannapieco & Jackson, 1996). “Extensive kinship networks in general are more in evidence among poor Black families and tend to diffuse with upward mobility” (Anderson, 1999, p. 209). The African American extended kin model is a family and community level response to limited resources and structural conditions that continue to place African Americans at a social,

economic, academic, and political disadvantage (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Scannapieco & Jackson, 1996).

Formal and informal kinship care is a current and historical African American response, with historical roots in West Africa, slavery, postbellum and other eras, to family endangerment and towards family preservation (Gray & Nybell, 1990; Scannapieco & Jackson, 1996). African American families routinely share the child care responsibilities of nieces, nephews, and/or grandchildren (Gray & Nybell, 1990). This notion of extended family diverges from the normalized view of the nuclear family and is underscored within the foster care system when social workers contend with kin and non-kin placement (Brown & Cohon, 2002; Gray & Nybell, 1990; Keller, Wetherbee, Le Prohn, Payne, Sim, & Lamont, 2001; Scannapieco & Jackson, 1996).

#### Low-Income African American Value Orientation

Although there is a growing body of research that supports the protective role that extended kinship networks play in impoverished environments, there is literature that diminishes the positive impact these networks have on individuals and families. Seminal work by Wilson (1987) discussed how the out-migration of middle class Blacks isolated lower class Blacks from middle class values and behaviors, the notion being that lower class Blacks are, “characterized by low-labor market attachment, low educational achievement, and a wide range of socially reprovved behaviors, including welfare dependency, drug use, single-parent households, and engagement in the underground economy” (Teitz & Chapple, 1998, p. 45). Descriptions of low-income African Americans like this do not account for the impact structural inequality, like declining job

opportunities and the neighborhood effects of poverty, has had on lives (Teitz & Chapple, 1998).

To equate the out-migration of middle-class African Americans with the exodus of mainstream or middle class values from impoverished inner-city neighborhoods both ignores the adaptive ways that African Americans in disadvantaged communities exhibit resilience with goals of educational attainment and income security, and assumes that finding value in education or employment is one that is bound by class. Anderson's (1999) ethnographic work in Philadelphia emphasizes this point when he brings attention to "street" and "decent" families. Anderson (1999) explains that most people in poor neighborhoods struggle financially and are on the margins of society, but there are varying degrees of alienation among residents based on their outlook or value orientation. "Most residents are decent or are trying to be...they share many of the middle-class values of the wider White society" (Anderson, 1999, p. 36). His reported observations do not support that middle-class or mainstream values are lost in the nation's inner cities, particularly Philadelphia neighborhoods, but that there are competing value systems.

What may be a more accurate description of the impact of the departure of middle-class families from urban neighborhoods is loss of social capital that these neighborhoods experience.

The depletion of social capital in the inner city occurs when the middle class departs for the suburbs, leaving behind few residents who can offer social resources, such as providing role models to neighborhood youth and access to social networks that transmit job information and create mutual trust between employer and employee (Teitz & Chapple, 1998, p.51).

Middle-class neighbors take with them valuable resources, information and a potential social network for community residents. Bourdieu (1971) introduced the concept of social capital and defined it as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (as cited in Dominguez & Arford, 2010, pp. 115-6). Social capital can be measured quantifiably, by the number of available and potential resources and qualitatively, by the strength of its influence and relationships within a social network. Social networks, such as African American kinship networks, provide channels for information sharing, socializing needs, and socialization.

#### African American Family Functioning and Neighborhood Context

Using data from a qualitative study on resiliency within largely female, African American kinship networks, Jarette et al. (2010) found relationships between family functioning processes and neighborhood contexts. They identified processes used by families like resource pooling and kin monitoring that were utilized by families in response to specific features of the neighborhood. Placing structure and function variables within a broader ecological framework helps to identify the relationship between contexts and agency amongst members of low-income or impoverished communities (Jarette et al., 2010). The researchers linked family processes and functioning with neighborhood features to illustrate that, “extended kin-networks help women manage neighborhood conditions that potentially undermine family functioning” (Jarette et al., 2010, p. 306.)

Jarette et al. (2010) found that: a) although large concentrations of impoverished families with limited resources live in urban neighborhoods, members of extended kin networks are able to pool tangible and non-tangible resources (resource pooling) in spite of the limited resources each family has individually; b) socialization is typically done with members of extended kin networks who tend to be family members, rather than neighbors that are generally met with distrust (family sociability); and c) low-income neighborhoods typically have low-quality or absent institutional services, so members of extended kin networks rely on each other for services like child care and transportation (service augmentation). Jarette et al. (2010) reports that while the absence of middle-class community members may have resulted in a growing street culture with deviant values, network members share a strong set of healthy values and beliefs.

Taken together, this research suggests African American adolescent girls from disadvantaged neighborhoods are developing within an environment where there are multiple threats to their positive development. Families and extended kin respond to this environment by employing adaptive socialization practices to impact individual developmental trajectories.

### **Adolescent Psychosocial Development**

Learning is influenced by environmental stimuli that can result in a change in cognitive and behavioral functioning (Lerner, 2002). Learning occurs in both formal and informal settings. Socialization is a learning process that can be informal, yet systematic and goal-oriented.

Leading theorists of adolescent psychosocial development, such as Erikson, posit that adolescence is a time of conflict between two polarities, rather than a balanced

integration of identity characteristics (Boyd & Bee, 2006). The vestiges of childhood socialization and identity development may continue to be impactful while adolescents attempt to develop a more balanced identity (Boyd & Bee, 2006). Adolescents struggle with their identity because of a growing myriad of roles, choices, and experience that come with age (Boyd & Bee, 2006) in light of emerging possibilities.

Parents heavily influence socialization and identity development during childhood; however during adolescence teenagers gain more independence in the cognitive and social domains (Arnett, 1999; Boyd & Bee, 2006; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006). Making inquiries about how African American adolescent girls interpret the messages they have received about womanhood and strength emphasizes this independence as girls may be negotiating between opinions of their own and peers (Boyd & Bee, 2006; Muus, 2006).

Socialization is a cultural learning process used to shape individual and group characteristics in various developmental domains including the psychosocial and cognitive domains. Child socialization practices “transmit values, beliefs, and ideas around lifestyles based on adult tasks and competencies needed for adequate functioning within society” (Jones Thomas & King, 2007, p. 137). Socialization methods and messages are context dependent and subject to change over time. They are used to promote positive self-concept and identity.

The intent of socialization practices to shape identities is sometimes undermined by features of the process and the content or inconsistencies of transmitted messages (Jones Thomas & King, 2007). Some socialization goals are problematic and have been associated with negative psychosocial and health related symptomologies. This has been

illustrated by studies on the relationship between some African American socialization processes and academic achievement (Way, 1995), domestic violence and crime (Richie, 1996), gender (Lytle, Bakken, & Romig, 1997), and depression and obesity (Beauboef-Lafontant, 2005, 2008). Experiencing socialization during adolescence may also be complicated because childhood socialization messages may vary greatly and be contradictory from those received during adolescence. For example, during childhood some children may be socialized to show respect for adults by remaining silent in their presence and then during adolescence teens may then be encouraged to find their voice and speak up in conversations with adults. Teenagers may contend with whether speaking up is disrespectful or mature.

### **Gender Socialization**

The socialization of girls differs from that of boys. Sex-typed behaviors and gender-role stereotyping are influenced by society and are arguably experienced by all women and girls, although, the stereotype that women are “weak, appropriate, soft-hearted, gentle, and meek” does not align with the African American vision of woman- (or girl-) hood (Best, 2010, p. 541). Socialization practices are deeply embedded within all ecological levels of society and perpetuated through varying contexts such as the media, one’s culture, family, and school (Best, 2010; Lorber, 2005; Lytle et al., 1997; Thomas, 2008; Thorne, 1993). One of the first places socialization occurs is within a familial environment (Best, 2010; Lorber, 2005). Children learn gender expectations from families’ reaction to their behaviors, the behaviors family members model, and family activities (Best, 2010; Ex & Janssens, 1998). While young, the polarization of males and females as different, opposite, and antagonistic can contribute towards hostility



between the sexes and encourages “psychological splitting” (Thorne, 1993, p. 256). Yet, parents or guardians generally believe that they are contributing to the positive development of their child by socializing them to adopt certain gender roles.

In seminal work by Douvan and Adelson (1966), it is stated that females are more concerned with interpersonal relationships, the self in relation to others, rather than intrapersonal relationships. The expectation of women to balance inter- and intrapersonal relationships transcends culture, yet because of identity characteristics such as race/ethnicity and class the experience is qualitatively different. The transcendence of culture is evidenced in work by Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2008) that concludes that those African American women who embrace the Strong Black Woman identity are overly concerned with their relationships with others.

Differential male and female children’s socialization play a large part in their developing identity. Because of this women tend to be more connected with others, while men are more connected with self (Lytle et al., 1997). Gender reform feminists believe that gendered socialization is exaggerated by society and used to create attitude and personality differences in boys and girls to have lasting, distinctive impacts in their adult lives. For example, men are considered to be authoritative figures and women are seen as passive (Lorber, 2005).

Some feminist literature suggests that sexism and harmful gender socialization practices can be counteracted by encouraging female sexual and gendered identities that challenge patriarchy and support empowerment (Thomas, 2008). A popular empowerment theme is Girl Power, “a youthful feminine, resistant identity” used to increase the power and agency of girls (Thomas, 2008, p. 62). This form of gendered

agency is then articulated as a rejection of traditional femininity (context dependent, but normalized qualities of being female) and a negotiation of gender; it is also a suggestion that girls are capable of changing gender identity socialization practices and outcomes of social processes that produce gender (Thomas, 2008). Thomas (2008) challenges this notion of gendered agency by questioning if and how girls are supposed to overcome forces that have already shaped them.

In eight 60-90 minute open-ended, semi-structured interviews with three lower-middle class African American teenage girls and one White upper-middle class adolescent girls, aged 14-17 Thomas (2008) explores how the mother-daughter relationship is a space of gender resistance and subjectivity. By considering girls' subjectivity, which is described as "self making, and the intersections of race/ethnicity, class, and gender", researchers are able to describe multiple interacting identity characteristics and the processes by which girls shape their own identities (Thomas, 2008, p.63). Thomas (2008) examined how the girls critiqued their mother's behaviors in relation to their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, in addition to how and when they spoke to their mothers about their social activities.

Gender agency was reflected in interview data, but was not consistent with theories that speculate that teenage girls resist traditional feminine roles. Instead Thomas (2008) concluded that a girl's negotiation of her gender identity in relation to previously experienced socialization practices and through relationships and evaluation of her mother exemplifies her agency. "The norms of femininity change over time through the decision to be different feminine subjects from those they perceive as old and traditional" (Thomas, 2008, p. 71). Therefore, teenage girls are not resisting traditional roles, but

critiquing and then adapting their own, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, in response to what is presented to them.

Teenage girls are active in their own development and socialization as they learn about gender roles (Thomas, 2008). Gathering data on the messages that disadvantaged Black, adolescent girls receive about strength and their interpretation of those messages should also reveal their agency as they negotiate their own identities independent of their mothers or other influential female kin.

Mothers, extended and fictive female kin are greatly responsible for the messages Black female adolescents receive about what it means to be a woman, and those messages are usually those of independence and strength (Packer-Williams, 2009). Although not asked directly, the participants in the Thomas (2008) study articulated that being strong meant that one is direct, able to stand up to the temptation of boys, not passive, and resistant of father-daughter relationships, which is a result of their disapproving critique and behavior that was made based on a father's caregiving style and relationship history with her mother.

Participants situated their gendered agency and definition of what it meant to be strong by comparing and contrasting their beliefs to their mother's behavior. In other words, the girls were defining themselves in relation to others, in this instance their mothers. Classic research supports this type of processing. What is staunchly absent in most empirical and theoretical claims of gender development is the critical attention to race/ethnicity and cultural experiences. Majority White samples do not allow for such an analysis.

## **Racial Socialization**

Racial socialization and racial identity development are two of the most researched topics regarding African American psychological functioning (Caldwell, Zimmerman, Hilken, Bernat, Sellers & Notaro, 2002). The goals and outcomes of racial socialization vary depending on the intent of researcher and the racial socialization model used to guide the research. However, some stated goals of socialization seem more harmful to psychological functioning than helpful.

O'Brien Caughy, Murray Nettles, O'Campo, and Lohrfink (2006) define racial socialization practices as the promotion of optimal development and adaptation to mainstream society. Though seemingly positive and comprehensive, this definition is problematic because it encourages African Americans to assimilate to the mainstream when they may not have the social or human capital to do so. Mainstream society is constructed as predominantly White, middle class, and male. Using mainstream society as a reference group could be problematic for African Americans, especially those who are female and low socioeconomic status. An "individual's expectations depends on the group that they use as a standard of comparison" (Meyer, 2010, p. 989). When features of an individual's identity or circumstance do not align with the salient features of her reference group problems can arise. Incongruent reference groups can cause an unrealistic or harmful evaluation of one's circumstance or increase one's propensity to fail (Edin, Kefalas, & Reed, 2004; Meyer, 2010).

When people on the margins subscribe to mainstream ideologies, it results in more than role strain. The sheer space that people on the margins fill disables them from completely living out an identity as those in the mainstream would, because they are

denying or ignoring key parts of their identity or environment. They do not have the privilege of material resources nor have the type of social network, which would enable those mainstream experiences.

Despite these flaws, O'Brien Caughy et al.'s (2006) definition does suggest that socialization is a process that can change over time, rather than a trait. Conceptualizing socialization as a trait or a characteristic does not acknowledge the relationship between an individual and her environment. Studies on racial identity development heavily focus on the relationship between racial identity and well-being. The idea is that, "racial identity development represents an important individual characteristic that can be enhanced in an effort to promote psychological well-being among African American adolescents" (Caldwell et al., 2002, p. 1322). A stronger identification with one's race or ethnicity should result in an individual's healthy well-being.

The Caldwell and colleagues (2002) study, explored the relationship between family support, identity development, and mental health functioning. The model they used for African American identity formation was borrowed from Cross (1971, 1991) and titled Nigrescence [see Cross (1971)]. The 5-stage model begins with pre-encounter, where an individual does not believe race is an important aspect of his/her identity and ends with internalization commitment, a translation of an internalized racial identity into action. "The Nigrescence model describes five stages of racial identity development that African Americans experience as they construct a psychologically healthy Black identity" (Caldwell et al., 2002, p. 1323). The Nigrescence model asserts that all African-Americans experience racial identity development in a certain way and order.

There are multiple models of racial socialization. Unlike the aforementioned, the following model relates racial socialization to resilience, rather than a holistic Black identity – noting two different goals. Garcia Coll et al. (1996) identify eight constructs that impact minority youth development, which Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) classify as “paths of influence” on an individual’s resilience (p. 553). These eight constructs include: social position (skin color, ethnic features), racism and discrimination, segregation, promoting/inhibiting environments, adaptive culture (tradition, legacies), child characteristics, family values and beliefs, and developmental competencies. “Through...social interactions the influence of...macrosystem factors directly affect developmental processes in children of color” (Garcia Coll et. al, 1996, p.1896). Three of the identified eight constructs of minority children and youth development are considered macrosystem factors: social position, racism *and* discrimination, and segregation. These three constructs are the most central to racial socialization (Garcia Coll et. al, 1996).

Most racial identity development research is used to describe the process of the development, rather than the content of that process (Yip, Seaton, & Sellers, 2006). Although O’Brien Caughy et al. (2006) were interested in neighborhoods and racial socialization, their work primarily focused on the content and process of racial identity development. O’Brien Caughy et al.’s (2006) interest in “whether or not racial socialization practices differed based on the racial composition of the neighborhood in which the family lives” (p.1225), is not just about the impact of the concentration of racially similar families and individuals, but the impact of concentrated poverty (and racism, discrimination, segregation, and other macro-level constructs) on these practices.

From interviews with primary caregivers, O'Brien Caughy et al. (2006) found that racial socialization practices of African American families reflect cultural history and the current context of that family, which served as a reminder of the heterogeneity of the group. Differences in neighborhood contexts such as, neighborhood social capital, negative social climate, concentrated economic disadvantage, and the neighborhood racial composition accounted for the variety of results.

Researchers in this area are not attempting to assert that children of color's developmental processes are fundamentally different or that they encounter different social institutions throughout their lives, but that their experiences and interactions are qualitatively different because of their space and place. "Defining and integrating these unique ecological circumstances that are not shared by Caucasian children becomes the basis for the formulation of theories of normal development in children of color because their influences often inhibit rather than facilitate development" (Garcia Coll et al., 1996, p.1893).

### **Gendered Racial Socialization: Strength Training**

While there are growing bodies of literature on gender socialization and racial socialization, there is still very little research on their intersection - gendered racial socialization. "Crucial issues have gone unexplored, among them cultural variance in the expression of gender identity, the role of race/ethnicity and culture in the construction of gender roles and the impact of institutionalized discrimination on African American women's gendered behavior" (Richie, 1996, p.10). The socialization processes of male and female African American children vary because of their gender, partly because girls will be likely to encounter racism, as well as sexism, even within their own communities.

“Minority women are subjected to a convergence of racism and sexism in the majority society while they also experience sexism and male domination in their own community” (Adelman, Erez, & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2003).

The intersection of gender and race necessitates different socialization processes in an environment where inequalities based on identity characteristics exist. Families use specific strategies to protect and prepare its most vulnerable members. “Resistance strategies” are used by African-American families in order to develop socio-emotional protective factors that will “consciously prepar(e) for a sociopolitical environment of race, gender, and socioeconomic oppression...(it is a) tool to think critically about one’s self, the world, and one’s place in it” (Iglesias & Cormier, 2002, p.266).

Beauboef-Lafontant (2005) introduces the construct of strength training and describes it as, “a way of preparing Black girls and young women for a life filled with adversity” (p. 112). I extend her construct and situate it within the risk and resilience literature and posit that strength training is a resistance strategy African American families employ as a gendered racial socialization process. Strength training is thus a resilience process that is utilized in the presence of risk and protective biological, psychosocial and environmental factors. Messages of agency, strength and independence come from both within the family, from mothers and grandmothers, and outside the family, from other-mothers, fictive kin and peers (Armstrong & Boothroyd, 2007; Beauboef-Lafontant, 2005, 2008; Jones Thomas & King, 2007; Iglesias & Cormier, 2002; Packer-Williams, 2009; Thomas, 2005; Walley-Jean , 2009; Way, 1995).

African American families, primarily a female kinship network, utilize strength training to socialize their girl children to encourage resilience, yet elements of this



teaching strategy have both fundamental risk as well as protective qualities. Studies reveal that the tenets of the Strong Black Woman identity are destructive to the psychological and physiological well-being of African American adult women. “(It) is suggested that strength is not an objective description of Black women, but a prescriptive discourse embedded in both racist and sexist characterizations of Black women as laborers for others” (Beauboef-Lafontant, 2008, p. 395). According to prior research (Beauboef-Lafontant, 2008), this prescriptive identity leaves little room for critical thinking or a spectrum of experiences if it is forced upon African American girls. The consequences of a non-discriminant internalization of this identity and socialization process has been found to have negative developmental impact in adult women, which is demonstrated in racialized gender development works by Crenshaw (1991), Richie (1996), and Beauboef-Lafontant (2005, 2007).

The inability of individuals to separate or distinguish what may be useful from harmful has been shown to symbolically manifest into decreased wellness, psychopathologies and maladaptive behaviors in adult African-American women. “Encouraging Black women to embrace struggle as their hallmark, the script of being strong enough to deal with adversity often leads them to deny the possibility of depression and to have the reality of their depression denied by others” (Beauboef-Lafontant, 2005, pp.107-8). Depression in the African American community carries a stigma. To date, limited research has been conducted to explore the developmental impact of strength training on adolescent girls.

Beauboef-Lafontant (2005) states that the “‘strong Black woman’ is a limiting, not empowering construction of Black femininity that draws attention away from the

inequalities they face in the community and larger society” (p. 105). The *Strong Black Woman* has two distinct, sub-identities: she is the “Female Atlas” who takes pride in her capacity to endure and overcome adversity and she is “Super-Human”, focusing on relationships with others instead of her relationship or connection with herself (Beauboef-Lafontant, 2005, p.105). It is an identity that is “refreshingly unfeminine” and un-White; it is not weak, dependent or uncertain (Beauboef-Lafontant, 2005, p.108). What could be interpreted as positives aspects of the experience or cognitions can later surface as risks.

After interviews and focus groups with undergraduate women (n=12) aged 19-46, Beauboef-Lafontant (2005) concluded that some Black women’s destructive over-eating patterns are associated with this identity. This identity has “the potential to make African American women sick with unhealthy overweight, an embodied manifestation of the emotions of discontent that naturally emerge from the constant suppression of one’s desires and interests” (Beauboef-Lafontant, 2005, p.121). Silencing and self-silencing are motifs in feminist literature that transcend identity characteristics. How these experiences occur depends on one’s state and place. Research on minority adolescent girls revealed that adolescents experience silence and self-silencing, in similar and dissimilar ways than adults (Way, 1995; Iglesias & Cormier, 2002).

Despite the compelling findings that the Strong Black Woman identity and strength training may be more psychologically harmful than protective, researchers continue to claim the opposite. Gooden and Washington (1996) explain that “girls with a sense of strength are psychologically healthier than girls who do not have a sense of strength” (in Jones Thomas & King, 2007, p. 141). I am interested in how young Black women from disadvantaged urban neighborhoods navigate, integrate, internalize, and/or

reject the messages and models of strength presented to them by the women in their lives. How girls process these messages and experience this process is likely to impact their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

### **Theoretical Approaches**

Strength training is a gendered racial socialization process used to promote resilience within an adaptive culture that is responsive to a specific set of expected raced, classed, and gendered experiences. To better understand this process and the experiences of the research population, this study draws on three related theoretical perspectives: Ecological Systems Theory, Family Systems Theory, and Intersectionality.

#### Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory (EST), “is an understanding of human development...(that) requires an examination of multi-person systems of interaction (that) is not limited to a single setting” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.21), its central tenet being the inter-relation of parts. This theory concurrently positions the individual and the ecological environment – a topological arrangement of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The developing person is a dynamic entity within the environment and the interaction between the person and the environment is reciprocal. The environment that influences development is not just the immediate setting that the developing person is situated in, but a larger, more expansive *ecological environment* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For this study, an application of EST has helped to conceive the environmental impact on development and experience, mainly that of the predisposition of risk that fosters the Strong Black Woman identity within African American families and communities.

If features of the mesosystem have characteristics that are a challenge to one's positive development, such as living in a disadvantaged community, the setting itself is a risk. Specifically in cases of poverty, the economic status of the environment is not simply an attribute, but characterizes the experiences of the individuals within that environment. According to EST a person's environment influences an individual's development and experience. This relationship is reciprocal, as people also impact the environment in which they live, which is what African American women attempt to do when they strength-train, providing children and adolescents the tools to exist in an environment with limited resources and multiple risk factors.

#### Family Systems Theory

Family Systems Theory (FST) posits that families function like a system. "The family is viewed as a hierarchically organized system, comprised of smaller subsystems but also embedded within larger systems, and interactions occur within and across these levels" (Cox & Paley, 1997, p.246). The African American extended family and kinship networks may complicate understanding, but attempt to engage more members to meet the needs of the entire group. "Individual family members are necessarily interdependent, exerting a continuous and reciprocal influence on one another" (Cox & Paley, 1997). This is different than ecological systems theory, which focuses primarily on the reciprocal relationships between the developing person and the environment over time. Family systems theory is concerned about the constantly changing family environment, its interrelated parts (relationships) and the maintenance of its goal (stability).

Families are in a constant state of change; amidst this change the family's goal is to maintain a state of equilibrium or sense of stability by adapting to a changing

environment (O'Brien, 2005). Change within the family system can come from internal or external influences (the environment). The cumulative impact of living in an impoverished area affects individual and family functioning, but does not change the overall family goal of stability. In order to remain stable, low-income African American families have a specific makeup, such as an extended kinship network, or use specific strategies, such as strength training, to meet their needs.

### Intersectionality

Scholars adopting an intersectional perspective for research utilize various methods that each intend to either shine light on, give voice to, or reveal ways that society has historically and systemically failed to acknowledge and/or address its marginalized members. "Intersectionality theory explores the ways in which systems of oppression such as race, class, gender, and sexuality simultaneously structure social relations" (Meyer, 2010, p.982). Much like feminist literature, the intersectional perspective reveals the ways in which traditional scholarship sustains the interest of privileged groups. Marginalizing context variables like race, class, and gender, rather than placing them at the center of analysis, with an emphasis on their intersection, prevents researchers from truly understanding individual and family development (O'Brien, 2005). Therefore, intersectionality helps to create critical understanding and legitimizes knowledge and experience by giving voice to those often overlooked and unheard.

In her book *Compelled to Crime*, Richie (1996) conducted life-history interviews with incarcerated, self-identified battered Black women to study gender entrapment. She adopted an intersectional perspective and used grounded theory, which is described by

Neumann (2006) as building “theoretical generalizations out of the process of trying to explain, interpret, and render meaning from observed data” (p.60). Richie (1996) found that the stories of the women she interviewed “illustrate how they were invisible to feminist anti-violence programs, ignored by mainstream social science, misunderstood by criminal justice policy analysts, and stigmatized by the general public because the nature of their abuse and their social position resulted in their being labeled as ‘criminals’ rather than ‘victims of crime’” (Richie, 1996, p. 5). Intersectionality created an understanding and elevated the complexities of her sample’s experiences, which had not previously been understood in a traditional systematic context.

Therefore, adopting an intersectional lens to study the content and influence of the Strong Black Woman identity, specifically the transmission of the messages related to strength, both privileges the perspective of a typically marginalized population as the experts and assumes that the interaction of keys aspects of their identity makes those perspectives unique. Two questions guided the research: 1) What are the messages related to strength that African American adolescent girls from disadvantaged neighborhoods receive from their female kinship support networks? and 2) How do these messages affect their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors?

Used together, Ecological Systems Theory (EST), Family Systems Theory (FST), and Intersectionality create a strong framework to guide the study of the content, process and development of the Strong Black Woman identity in Black adolescent girls from urban disadvantaged communities. EST helps one to understand the ecological impact of the social environment on individual development, as well as acting as a conduit for decisions made within family systems. Specifically it creates a context for the reciprocal

interaction between the developing individual and the racist, classist, sexist, impoverished environment and social structures. FST explains why families would develop and adopt a process, drawing special attention to individual's role and function within the family system. FST then becomes particularly useful to study the content and transmission of messages related to strength to understand individual's role and function within the family and extended kinship networks. Intersectionality is useful to explain themes that may go unnoticed, specifically highlighting how multiple oppressions intersect to create unique experiences for the research population. This perspective also informed the research methods and reporting of the findings, challenging me to present the authentic voice of research participants.

## Chapter 3

### **METHODS**

This study's methods were approved by the University of Delaware Institutional Review Board prior to data collection (Appendix E).

#### **Design and Approach**

When doing intersectional research one must not simply be aware of interlocking identities, but also use that understanding to advocate for change. Intersectional researchers employ similar research methods as other researchers, yet they pay special attention to intersecting categories of oppression and ensure participants have a voice. Highlighting the intersections moves subjects from the margins to the center of analysis. From this point of view certain aspects of one's experiences, which may typically be considered routine or normal, result in unique experiences. "An intersectional approach expects that such identity categories such as race, class and gender, fuse to create distinct *opportunities*, and so focusing on their intersection provides an avenue for investigating complex inequality in the United States" (Simien, 2007, p.269).

Adopting an intersectional lens for this study clarified how the Strong Black Woman identity is responsive to the lived experiences of Black adolescent girls from disadvantaged, urban neighborhoods considering the impact of socioeconomic, gendered,



and racialized experiences. Through an analysis of participant voices one can understand more clearly the complex social structures that inform identity formation. Therefore, an identification of salient themes could offer service professionals opportunities for intervention or a way to communicate effectively with this population.

In Richie's (1996) research, the decision to use the less structured life history interview method enabled participants to reveal their "background, opinions, feelings, and the meanings they give to the mundane events and the exceptional experiences in their lives" (Richie, 1996, p.17). This interview style transfers some power from the researcher to participants. The researcher's questions guide the interview, while participant's responses dictate the direction and end point. These sort of qualitative methods give participants power, voice, and agency. Drawing from a feminist, qualitative research style used to study Black girls and women (Richie, 1996; Thomas, 2008; Way, 1995), the current study uses semi-structured focus group interviews to create a space where participants could thoughtfully reflect on and share specific details about aspects of their lives.

### **Focus Groups**

To explore how the Strong Black Woman identity is formed and how it functions in the lives of Black adolescent girls from disadvantaged neighborhoods, I conducted focus groups. Focus groups were most fitting for both methodological and theoretical reasons. "The social context of the focus group provides an opportunity to examine how people engage in generating meaning, how opinions are formed, expressed and (sometimes) modified within the context of discussion and debate with others" (Wilkinson, 1999, p. 227). The focus group is a natural setting to explore the content and

context of the Strong Black Woman identity: what is the strength-training process like and what are the content of those messages.

The co-construction of meaning during the focus group is central to the study. Although these young women may be socialized to be *strong*, exploring the dynamic negotiation and exploration of this identity in this setting supports and reveals her individual agency as well. While each individual may have her own thoughts about the Strong Black Woman identity and what messages regarding strength she has received, or continue to be passed on to her, the possible consensus amongst the group draws my attention. By conducting focus groups, I was able to capture and explore dynamics that would not be present during one-on-one interviews. The focus group thus becomes a space to observe the “process through which social actors come to recognize themselves, and be recognized by others as a cohesive group” (Munday, 2006, p. 91). “Analyzing the interaction that occurs between focus group members for indicators as to how collective identity is produced and managed” and collecting the data on what is actually said will provide a wealth of information on this socialization process” (Munday, 2006, p.90).

After the first focus group I re-ordered some of the interview questions, recognizing that the design of the interview schedule was critical to elicit trust and ease from participants. It was important that participants were comfortable sharing information not only with me, but in a group setting. The opening of the focus group asked participants to describe their neighborhood, and then proceeded to ask a general question about strength and their thoughts about adolescence. After the opening questions I asked specific questions about their family and family life. The focus group closed with

several questions about strength, strength-related message, and self-reflections (see Appendix A for interview schedule).

### **Recruitment**

Participants were recruited for the study using various recruitment methods. I recruited high school *age* girls, rather than those just enrolled in high school because there may have been girls who fit my sampling criteria but may have been high school drop outs or have some other experience where they were not enrolled in school.

One of the key eligibility qualifications for this study was participant zip code and the zip code of the location of the focus group because the venue was largely local to the participants' homes. Various bodies of literature including those on, urban neighborhoods (Anderson, 1999; Wilson, 1987), social capital (Dominguez & Arford, 2010), and African American socialization (O'Brien Caughy et al., 2006; Jarett et al., 2010) state that place of residence is interactive.

Most urban neighborhoods are disadvantaged along a number of structural dimensions, including economically. A neighborhood's disadvantage can be calculated as a combination of socio-economic and income variables, including: percent of individuals employed, percent of individuals living in poverty, and percent of families with a single head of household (Evans, 2004).

Initial attempts to recruit in select Philadelphia high schools were made by reaching out to teachers to spread the word about the study with their students. Teachers were provided a script and were not encouraged to offer additional incentive (other than a gift card offered by the researcher). Classroom teachers and other education/youth development professionals were provided a script to read to potential participants to

inform them about the study. If extra-credit or community service hours were offered for participation in this study, teachers were asked to offer an alternative assignment or service opportunity for ineligible or disinterested students. No participants were obtained through this strategy.

Social media has grown to become a primary communication tool for some. I also used my personal social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and blogs) to recruit using a recruitment flyer. This digital purposive sampling method captured the attention of parents/adults in the lives of my desired sample. The recruitment flyer was shared and included brief information about the study, participant eligibility, and a request that people contact me for more information.

Through appeals to my personal/professional network for eligible participants, snowball sampling became the most effective method for recruiting participants. Through my relationships with education and youth development professionals I was able to organize five focus groups with students in a GEAR UP program at Frankford High School (located in Philadelphia zip code 19124), participants in a girls' leadership development summer program at Holy Cross Baptist Church (19131), and students at Overbrook High School (19131). I also scheduled two public focus groups in community/recreation centers – the Germantown Life Enrichment Center (19144) and the Cecil B. Moore Recreation Center (19132). Flyers were distributed and hung around the premises. Some participants in those focus groups were also garnered through snowball sampling.

## Sample

I chose participants using purposive sampling techniques to ensure the data reflected my research interest and allowed participants the reassurance that they were the experts. Purposive sampling is a nonrandom sampling technique used in exploratory research to select for unique cases that may be particularly informative (Neuman, 2006). “The purpose is to gain a deeper understanding of types” (Neuman, 2006, p.222). I also used snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants.

I conducted five focus groups with a total purposive sample of 24 girls between the ages of 15 and 18, who identified as African-American or Black, living in urban (and urban-suburban), relatively disadvantaged communities in the Greater Philadelphia area (see Appendix G for a demographic snapshot). All focus group participants were enrolled in high school. In 2000, 42.6% of Philadelphia’s population was African American. African Americans in Philadelphia lived in neighborhoods that are mostly (78.7%) composed of other African Americans, which means those neighborhoods were practically considered concentrated Black (80% or more) (Bell, n.d.; Frey and Myers, 2000). A large majority (80%) of my sample lived in areas (determined by zip code) where there were 30% or more of individuals living in poverty, and where the unemployment rates were higher than 10% (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). In 2013, 28% of Philadelphia residents lived below poverty level (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2013). Nearly all (93%) of the sample lived in areas where over 20% of families had a single head of household (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

To substantiate strength-training as a socialization process used by families immersed in an adaptive culture living in disadvantaged communities I triangulated

quantitative government data and participant responses regarding neighborhood conditions. One focus group question asked participants to describe their neighborhood to someone who had never been there before. During the focus groups, members of the sample never explicitly described their own neighborhoods as poor, although they describe conditions that are typically indicative of disadvantaged communities such as violence, litter, and noise.

I'm not gonna say it's quiet, but like it's not like most neighborhoods in Philadelphia. It's like a different quality ---- um, and then there – I mean there are like shootings and fights, but not any like drug problems or not as much as you would see like in North Philly or like in different parts of that area, as bad – you may think it's ... it's not as rowdy and probably if you would go to like, down, like North Philadelphia or West Philadelphia.

**Researcher:** Someone else describe your neighborhood to me.

**A:** Crazy.

**Researcher:** Crazy? And what you mean, what do you mean by crazy?

**A:** Uh like, killings and gun shots, stuff like that.

**Researcher:** ok. Anyone else want to describe their neighborhood ?

**B:.** Noisy.

**Researcher:** Noisy? What makes it noisy?

**B:** There's some different music playing all the time. And people fighting and screaming.

**Researcher:** Ok

C. The “bebes”.

**Researcher:** The Bebes? What does the bebes mean?

C: Crazy kids

(laughter)

**Researcher:** Oh, crazy kids. What makes the kids crazy?

C: Well I know like normally when you younger you want to be out, you want to play, but I don’t know, they just can’t be quiet sometimes. They always outside. They don’t tell them to come in.

A: I live in the ‘hood

**Researcher:** so, you live in the hood. Talk to me. What do you mean by the hood? What makes it the ‘hood?

A: Slums, it’s the ‘hood. I live in the projects

**Researcher:** So you live near the projects?

A: Yea

**Researcher:** Ok, so what makes your neighborhood “the hood”? the slums?

B: It’s the hood, it’s just, it’s just the hood.

MULTIPLE: Violent, dirty, rundown

**Researcher:** Violent, dirty, rundown. Would everybody else describe their neighborhood like that?

UNISON: No

C: Not me. My neighborhood is clean

D: Cus you live up here

**C:** I live on the clean side of Frankford

**D:** Yea the other side...it's called the other side

**C:** Oh, ok. I live on the nice side of the ave.

**D:** It's Parkside

**B:** She live on the other side

**Researcher:** How would you describe your neighborhood?

**E:** Ummm...the same thing: dirty, not clean, violent

**F:** Yea the same, basically

**C:** We live on the nice side of the ave

**E:** We live on the same part...

**C:** We live in Frankford on the nice of the ave. where it's not dirty, it's not all violent, it's not a lot happens on the streets.

Members of the sample mostly described their neighborhoods as areas that would be considered disadvantaged, offering overall descriptions and descriptions of residents, location, activities, and physical descriptions of the neighborhood.

Three of the five focus groups were formal, or pre-existing groups, the others were public (participants with typically no prior relationship). The formal groups varied in length and type of group. One focus group contained members of a 1-2 week all girls summer program at a West Philadelphia church; a second group of participants were members of a high school's Gear Up program which is typically a cohort program with 6-year membership; and the third formal focus group included members of programs ran by a Communities in Schools' coordinator at a high school. The public focus group



participants were not members of a formal organization or program, although some members were related, either siblings or cousins.

Traditional focus groups are aggregates of strangers, because utilizing pre-existing groups means there could be established hierarchies and patterns of interaction that could be problematic (Munday, 2006). At the start of each focus group I informed the teens that although everyone did not have to respond to questions, I may ask one who is particularly quiet for their input – I expected this would address issues of dominant patterns of interaction.

### **Procedures**

Before the girls participated in the study, parental/guardian consent was obtained. Consent forms (see Appendix B) were either emailed in advance or provided at the start of the focus groups for parents/guardians to sign before departure. At the start of each focus group I reviewed the goals of the study and explained that participation was voluntary and that one could elect to quit at any time without penalty.

Each focus group was made as similar as possible. Seats or desks were arranged in a circle with numbers placed on each desk. To ensure the confidentiality of participants my research assistant and I made notes referring to their number, rather than name. Upon entry to the room or at each of the place settings participants received adolescent assent forms (see Appendix D), a pen, and notepaper. The notepaper was to be used for girls to take notes. After everyone arrived and was seated, I introduced myself, my research assistant and outlined the goals of the study. I explained what the adolescent assent form said, gave participants time to read the form independently, and then asked them to sign. After the assent forms were signed, I distributed the demographic surveys (Appendix F)

and asked the participants to complete them. The paperwork was collected after signed and completed, then I began to ask questions. My research assistant and I took notes during the focus group and digitally and analog recorded each focus group.

### **Analysis**

Each focus group was recorded during data collection and field notes were taken. I had a research assistant during the focus groups to assist with the logistics (e.g. plan, keep time, and order) and to take notes about the focus group process. My assistant has a Bachelor's of Science in Psychology and was a researcher (Program Specialist) for the University of Pennsylvania, Veteran Affairs department. She completed human subjects training through Veteran Affairs. A third party or I transcribed each focus group. Due to some technological mishaps, some focus groups were not transcribed fully. During two of the focus groups the digital recorder stopped recording part way through the focus group and I relied on the analog recorder and a cell phone as back-up recording devices; the third-party transcriber was able to salvage some of the data from both devices. After each available focus group was transcribed I coded for themes.

The analytical procedure involved several rounds of coding (Neumann, 2006). During first-order coding I did line-by-line coding, condensing the responses of participants into words or phrases that would enable the future development of analytical categories (Neumann, 2006). I was careful not to interpret their words and to maintain the voice of participants during this stage, by simply restating responses in a brief way appropriate for themes. Next I completed a second round of first-order coding where I recorded the codes from the five focus groups, re-writing some codes from the first pass-through to ensure that each code was in the voice of the participants.

Then I completed second-order coding, reviewing the responses from each question asked during the focus group interviews and grouped for themes. During this round of coding, I grouped responses thematically, placing them in analytical categories, rather than simply grouping responses based on the specific question that was asked. Although analysis was ongoing, the final coding stage involved me refining the initial analytical categories into conceptual categories that aligned specifically to the research questions. After identifying the conceptual categories, I was able to extract themes from the data.

## Chapter 4

### FINDINGS

Participants were asked questions about their neighborhoods, family and support network, womanhood and strength, and thoughts about being a woman (see Appendix A).

The richest data was pulled from several questions, including:

1. “Do you know a Black woman that people refer to as strong?”
2. “What would you say is the most important lesson you have learned so far about being a Black young woman?”
3. “Are you strong?”
4. “Do you think Black women try to appear strong or are they actually strong?”
5. “If you or your family has needed assistance or has needed something that you don’t have, who would you/they ask?”

However, responses to all questions were examined. In the presentation of the results, quotes are used to elaborate on the data and emergent themes from the focus groups. The heavy use of quotes elevates the participants’ role as expert in making meaning of strength-related messages, rather than being mostly reliant on my analysis as researcher. This voice-centered style is also critical to demonstrate how strength-related messages affect participants’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

## Refining the Research Questions

Contrary to my expectation, most participants did not identify specific instances of *formal* lessons about strength. The transmitters of strength-related messages did not sit focus group participants down and talk to them explicitly about what it means to be strong. Instead, through anecdotes and other musings, the focus groups revealed how messages related to strength were actually transmitted and the impact of these messages on the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of participants.

One assumption of the primary research question was that African American adolescent girls received messages related to strength mostly from their female kinship networks of mothers, grandmothers, and aunts. During analysis I found that female kinship networks were salient, but not singular. Therefore, a more accurate guiding question is:

1. What are the messages related to strength that African American adolescent girls from disadvantaged neighborhoods receive?

As experts on their lived experiences, it was critical for participants to have a *voice* and define strength in their own words rather than as defined by the researcher (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Richie, 1996). Participants were asked to reflect on whether they were strong and if they were taught to be strong. From the responses to this question and other related discussions during the focus groups I was able to create an operational definition of strength and gather who and what were the sources of messages related to strength. Members of the sample reported that they received messages from a diverse group, including mothers, fathers, aunts, grandmothers, cousins (non-gender specific),

female teachers, and through personal experiences and the experiences of others (vicarious learning).

For example, one participant said:

I been taught by my, well I have this one teacher, my 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher and she basically like taught that giving up is not key. If you want stuff then you gotta go get it or ummm yea basically like, everything is not handed to you and that being strong will like really build your confidence.

Other girls talked about their parents and step parents:

Because when I was – when I was young and my dad didn't have a boy, I was treated like a boy. Well he always wanted me to be the son he never had, so I was like tomboyish.

I was taught by like observation, like following my mom like how she is. And other women. I was always raised, even though I had my step dad's help, I was always raised by women like my mom, my grand mom, my aunts, so...

Messages related to strength were not always the result of intentional lessons; some messages were received vicariously or through lessons learned from lived experiences. Other messages related to strength indirectly informed understandings about what it means to be strong; these messages may have been embedded within day-to-day conversation or observations. That is why it was important for participants to define strength in their own words, that way indirect messages related to strength could be extracted.

The second research question was:

2. How do these messages (related to strength) affect their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors?

During analysis it became clear that it was difficult to separate the messages that participants received from how messages affected their thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Therefore the research questions were not discrete, but complementary. Most participant responses embodied both questions; when responding to questions they often told stories to exemplify their point of view (rather than directly answering the question) which offered a clearer indication of how strength-related messages affected their thoughts, feelings,

**Researcher:** Well think back to the original thing that you told me that you learned about being a Black woman, young Black woman. And think how, how did you learn that? Did you learn that lesson from anyone in particular?

**A:** My grandma taught me a lot of stuff like that when I was younger. Umm I learned a lot from Picture Perfect. Yea, they taught me a lot. Um like, I don't know, I just I really don't know. It just come up. I don't remember like, I remember I can't like really tell you

**Researcher:** So which ways did (your grandmother) help you learn?

**A:** Like I remember when I was little I used to have, my grandma would always buy me Black baby, Black Barbie dolls and she used to tell me that, she used to be like, it's ok to be Black you don't have to...she was like, umm. And then in school we learned about, like I guess in school when you learn about slavery and where ya race come from, it kinda make you look at it in a different way and you kinda feel...I guess you feel more I don't know how to say it, like...you feel, I

think she feel in your race because you see how far you've come as a Black person.

### **Themes**

Several themes emerged from the data; messages related to strength fell into four categories. One of these categories had two subthemes; another category had three subthemes. The first prominent thematic category was *adversity*. The data revealed three subthemes related to adversity, *result of challenging life experiences*; *preparation for challenging experiences*; *ability to learn from the challenging experiences of others*. The next dominant themes were *success* and *perception management*. The final thematic category that emerged from the data was *relationships*, which had two subthemes, *external (relationships with others)* and *internal (relationship with self)*.

It may seem counter-intuitive that the identified themes within “messages related to strength” include both *adversity messages* and *success messages*. *Success messages* were often embedded within *adversity messages* as the lesson or positive outcome. Some *success messages* demonstrate resilience or more specifically, serve as an artifact of adversity exemplifying what happens once one overcomes. Other *success messages* were less situational and more motivational, serving as a guiding light. Creating two discrete categories of these related messages was important to fully demonstrate the complexity of messages related to strength. *Adversity messages* were also mostly oriented in the present and past (this is what happened; this is what is happening now), while *success messages* were more frequently future oriented (this is what happens; this is what could happen).



## Theme: Adversity

During each focus group there seemed to be an expectation of adverse life experiences amongst participants. Often, participants generalized their personal experiences by calling them “obstacles” or referring to difficult experiences as “what we been through.” Consequently, most participants, even during the public focus groups, expected other members to have shared experiences so they would not explain what they were referencing. Therefore, I encouraged participants to elaborate, if they were comfortable, so that I could note what specific adversities they endured. This then enabled me to better contextualize their experiences within previous research and the guiding theoretical frameworks.

Examples of adverse life experiences that participants endured include:

- Loss of a parent
- Family drug addiction
- Murder of a family member
- Insecure housing
- Parental job loss
- Mental illness

According to participants, adversity affected the development of strength in a few ways, including how strength develops after specific turning points, or challenging experiences, within one’s life. This revealed how participants consider strength a demonstration of their resilience.

“Some people – some people get tough, because they just be like structured - strong like, like the stuff that they go through like to make them strong, if they overcome it – try to overcome it.”

**Researcher:** What makes you strong?

**A:** what...like everything I been through, like with my dad passing I was able to move forward, especially being that age when I lost him. I never gave up or anything. Like I always had motivation and determination

**B:** Yea, and what she said – the obstacles we’ve faced make us stronger.

**C:** Yea, especially if you can move forward and the mistakes you can learn from them and be more better.

When describing the death of her mother, one participant explained how she did not cry, because “maybe” she was strong. This sort of coping strategy (self-silencing and suppression of emotion) is a demonstration of how the Strong Black Woman identity is expressed behaviorally. In this context, strength as an exemplification of resilience, seems to place value on the experience of adversity, specifically how it contributes to the development of strength. Consequently, research by Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2008) posits that this mind-set is a contributor to depression among adult Black women.

The next subtheme is messages related to strength regarding adversity and *preparation for life’s challenges*. Strength-training equips girls to prepare for risk factors within their ecological context, such as promiscuity or teen pregnancy.

**Researcher:** ...So how did your mom teach you those lessons?

**A:** My mom always taught me respect myself, even as a child, by talking to me ‘bout like stuff that you usually don’t to your kids about ‘til like 11. She started talking to me about when I was like 7.

([laughter])

**A:** It's not funny, shut up. She just. She just always brought me up right because she didn't want me to come out with, like messed up head or not like respecting myself and walking around being nasty.

**Researcher:** So what might have been those things that as a 7 year old that you learned that you're like: Mmmm I shouldn't of, maybe I shouldn't have known that early?

**A:** My mom taught me about, she told me about sex when I was 7.

The mother of this participant shared an adversity message intending to impact or more specifically, restrict risky behavior from her daughter in the future.

The final subtheme within the adversity theme, is the assertion from the girls of *ability to learn from challenging experiences*, or adversities, including from the experiences of others. The specific messages or lessons that girls receive reveal how features of the neighborhood environment inform socialization. Girls receive specific messages from people within their extended kinship network, internalize them, and then apply where appropriate. Girls then synthesize these messages through their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as they interact and assess the environment. Interpretation is important as girls decipher lessons they learn through personal experience and the challenging experiences of others.

I would agree and also like, pretty much every experience that I go thru I just take it as a lesson and I make sure I like get something from it, whether it's a positive thing or a negative thing. I just make sure I learn from it, so I won't make the same mistakes over.

Well, people who I would see in my neighborhood. Like you see people who started off good like when they were growing up and always in school and then they let whatever environment they were around get the best of them, it was like downhill. And I never wanted to be that way

#### Theme: Success

Success served as a major indicator of strength for participants. When asked, “Do you know a Black woman that people refer to as strong?” most of the initial responses included historical figures or celebrities, such as Beyoncé, Maya Angelou, Michelle Obama, and Rosa Parks. The most popular celebrity response was Oprah. Participants shared that people think Oprah is strong because she’s, “independent; has money; is powerful; encouraging; charitable; Black; ‘went through the struggle’”. The initial response to list celebrities and historical figures reveal that girls believe that strength and success are closely intertwined.

Only after being asked to speak about a woman that they knew directly who is referred to as strong did participants offer responses such as mothers or sisters. Girls’ responses became less trait-driven and more anecdotal, sharing short stories that illustrated women’s outcomes or varying measures of success.

**Researcher:** Do you know a Black woman that people refer to as being strong?

**A:** My mom had two drug addict parents that died young, when she was still young. She had two kids, me and my brother, and she went back to school and her and my dad not together anymore. My dad still there, but he just, they not together.

**Researcher:** So that makes her strong having...

**A:** Growing up with two drug addict parents she coulda come out way different than what she does.

**Researcher:** Ok

**A:** She coulda come out drugged up too

For some, the successes of one's children were attributed to a mother's success (or strength).

**Researcher:** Ok, well your mom...what makes people say that she is strong?

**A:** About how she carry herself. Like even though, you know, my mom, she's a single mom. She don't let that hold her back, even though she might feel overwhelmed sometimes she still show – like she gets this done, cuz obviously she's doing a good job because both me and my brother – well he's already in college – but I'm 'bout to go to college, so at least she got two kids in college already.

At least two participants identified female teachers that they considered strong. In the quote below the participant believes that a teacher's commitment to student success is a demonstration of the teacher's strength.

I think she shows good leadership. She don't take no for an answer. She always wants her students to always strive for like the best. She don't want them to always hold back. So if she comes off aggressive, it's cuz she care.

The success of those whom one is responsible for seems to reflect on the teacher's own success and strength.

### Theme: Relationships

After success, the management of relationships dominated the descriptions of messages related to strength. Below, I describe initially categorized the themes ecologically, separating by macro- and micro- level relationships and then made the distinction between relationships with others and relationships with the self.

When asked the most important lessons they have learned so far about being a young Black woman, messages of self-esteem, self-awareness, and self-efficacy were shared. These lessons were reflections of their environments, exposing what participants were dealing with internally, what they find most significant, and aligned with what is typical of this stage of adolescent development.

Stay true. It means like umm, just stay true to who you are. Know the type of person that you wanna be first and then stay true to that. Like don't let anything or anybody change it unless it's like for the better; but other than that, don't change who you are.

**A:** Don't let your neighborhood reflect where, like your values or your beliefs.

**Researcher:** How did you learn that?

**A:** Because they was, well how they was saying like some people's neighborhoods might be boring or crazy. Just because you come from a

neighborhood you shouldn't let, you shouldn't let that reflect who you are as a person, not even as a Black woman, but as a person.

When trying to make sense of her behavior after her mother died, one participant bemused that maybe it is a demonstration of her personal strength.

**A:** I think like four...yeah, four years ago...my mom died and like – so I don't know, I think, like I said probably because I, when I talk about it, I don't cry. The funeral, still didn't. I just, I don't know, I don't know how I got over it. I don't know, I just did.

**Researcher:** What do you think it is about you?

**A:** I don't know, maybe I'm strong, probably.

The importance of independence was consistent throughout each focus group and also seemed to shape participants' relationships with others. Independence in the context of relationships, was stressed as independence from others.

I might say that I wouldn't – I wouldn't need anybody – like I know certain things that I have to do on my own. And I know I'm not ---- like I'm not – when in doubt, but like stuff that I know I could do on my own and I do it. Like I don't rely on anybody to do anything for me. And I know my education depends on me, some working hard is me being strong for me to have the best education I could get and the best job that I can get.

For some, not being strong was a liability that shaped relationships with others. Strength is therefore conceptualized as a tool that shapes the quality of relationships.

I mean (you don't) want to walk around and people see you as being a weak person, like I don't – I don't know how to say why is it important to be strong. But I mean I wouldn't want to go around not being characterized as a strong person because you can make fun of me. If somebody sees you as being as a weak person, you're an easy target to be picked on. And I wouldn't wanna be an easy target to be picked on or somebody who wants to challenge me because I'm weak, knowing that I can do what I can do.

How outsiders perceive adolescents has a significant impact on how they function in the world. The next section discusses how participants control the growing identity or image.

#### Theme: Perception Management

Intersectionality may be best illustrated by messages related to strength categorized as *perception management*. These messages demonstrate how the experiences and interactions of African American adolescent girls from urban, disadvantaged communities' developmental (socialization) processes are qualitatively different than mainstream adolescents; not because of access to unique social institutions, but because of their space and place within this specific ecological context. Aspects of the girls' identity, such as race, class, and gender intersect and create unique interactions, expectations and assumptions.



Say if one of us were applying to a job and a Caucasian female or a male was applying for the same job, and they got it before us. My grandmother would get offended because, here, she's already assuming that the people would pick a White person before they pick a Black person because she's White. And she doesn't like things like that because most likely, you probably have the same education, we grew up around the same way, she just don't – she don't – she doesn't like things like that. She gets really offended.

It was in this category where I grouped strength related messages that were related to the impact of macro-level social forces, such as racism, discrimination, sexism, and poverty on identity development. All of these messages were related to stereotypes and developing a strong sense of self within such a landscape. Participants in the focus group demonstrated agency by intentionally rejecting society's perception of them as members of large homogenous group.

**Researcher:** Ok, so if yes, tell me what types of things are said about sexism.

**A:** Like my stepfather tells my brothers that they always have to look out for me, like even though I'm their older sister. In the future it's going to be like I'm their younger sister cuz they have to look out for me.

**Researcher:** And what do you think he means by look out for you?

**A:** I mean, I think he's trying to say that women are weaker than men. That's how I took it.

**Researcher:** Ok, anyone else had similar experiences?

**B:** My stepdad always tells me ‘no boys, no boys’ – but I think he, like how she said, I think he wants to look out for me, but in a way that I know to respect myself, that I won’t let someone just take advantage of me.

Interestingly, when asked if their families discussed racism or sexism, most participants reported that they did not. Some participants shared experiences of microaggressions. One participant in the focus group shared that she believes that she and her friends have more racialized experiences than her family members. She attended a high school that was more ethnically and racially diverse than her neighborhood of residence.

**A:** When like situations happen. I think me and my friends talk about it more, than like my family talk about it, my household. Just because I feel like we go through it more...racial things.

**Researcher:** What types of things are said about racism?

**A:** Like in school I guess, I go to a school with a lot of Asians. So it’s always like people is like or like my friends or something be like ‘the Asian girls are smarter’. I mean, I don’t think that’s the case.

After analyzing each theme, I developed an operational definition of strength.

### ***Strong Black Woman and strength training as Defined by Participants***

In defining strength in the context of their own lives, participants gave diverse answers. Participant reflections on strength were illustrated through multiple interview

questions, such as: “Do you know a Black woman that people refer to as strong?”; “What does it mean when people refer to women as being strong?”; “Are you strong?” They defined strength by providing character traits and offering anecdotal stories demonstrating examples. The diversity of the answers created an understanding of the strength-training process. The following definition is derived from participant responses, my contextual analysis of their responses, and theory.

*The Strong Black Woman is commonly perceived as a confident woman who possesses the traits critical for success – determination, motivation, and independence. She primarily relies on her own faculties for her life’s outcomes and the outcomes of those whom she considers dependent (children or other family members). This identity is relationship-centric. While confident in her abilities, the Strong Black Woman spends a lot of time attempting to manage perceptions and expectations; she is meticulous about the way she is perceived by the world around her.*

*Central to the formation of the Strong Black Woman identity is the exposure, expectation, and experience of adversity. The Strong Black Woman identity is developed through socialization processes and is not a naturally occurring trait. Strength-training occurs within an ecological context of families, peers, neighborhoods, and society. Unlike a rite-of-passage, which has a defined endpoint, strength-training is an ongoing negotiation between an adolescent, her environment, and those within her social network. This environment has a strong impact on the developing individual, creating the context for specific messages, which are taught or learned during identity formation.*

Although some participants believed that strength is a naturally occurring characteristic of being a Black woman, the general consensus was that women “become” strong because of their experiences.

Some appear strong and there are some that are strong, but I think that ones that appear to be strong it’s because they probably don’t deal with, like the obstacles we been through. Like we probably can overcome them with like help from family, but they probably like bottle everything in so they just try to show – ‘I’m strong, I can handle everything’ – but they really can’t.

Most reported experiences were micro-level, directly occurring or considered within the familial and school contexts. The few macro-level experiences that were shared centered on participants’ interaction with stereotypes and how those experiences contribute and necessitate the development of strength.

When asked of the most important lesson they have learned thus far about being a Black young woman, two participants offered a sophisticated observation on how mainstream culture and stereotypes intersect to influence their own socialization.

**A:** And probably how people look at us already. You don’t want to give them like no idea, if like everybody is like that, like how people think.

**B:** Like how we’re judged already, so like we’re raised to like not do anything because of the way people are looking at [us].

**Researcher:** How do people look at you?

**A:** Probably like people looking at like young Black girls today as being ghetto, or not like not White or proper or whatever you want, or however you want to say it

**B:** Because like if they're not Black, the other [person], if they're not Black, they normally think that all Black girls are ghetto. And all Black girls are not ghetto!

**A:** Or like, they think, people think [that Black girls] are fresh, but like, or don't want to go to school...

**B:** And not all Black girls are like that...and I think it's also Black girls, Black people already pre-judged so they automatically think that's how we are, like all Black people are.

It appears that girls have developed a double-consciousness or an awareness of how society views them as a homogenous group and that impacts how they behave or present themselves. In the same focus group as the above exchange, one participant explained how existing stereotypes requires one to be strong.

...all the stereotypes that we have to accept, because I mean you're not just gonna ask everybody to stop talking about me if they say something about me that way. Because the whole world is not gonna come and be like, 'Oh, you're not this, so we're not gonna say you're not'. I mean its stereotypes of Black women, so I mean we have to be strong for a reason.

In her discussion about race, gender, and depression Beauboef-Lafontant (2007) found that African American women also have, "a double awareness...especially in terms

of their recognition of an inner world at odds with their self-presentations” (p. 401). In this context the double awareness is in regards to how women feel about themselves in comparison to how they present themselves to the world.

In the current study, the girls defend the presentation of strength as protection from how society negatively sees Black women and girls. The coping and protective strategies associated with the Strong Black Women identity are developed during childhood and adolescence and continue to be used throughout life, but seem to be applied differently depending on the circumstance.

## **Chapter 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

As a person who previously belonged to this demographic (no longer an adolescent) it is important that I presented the Strong Black Woman identity and strength-training process, as defined strictly by my sample. Reflections on my experiences growing up in a moderately disadvantaged neighborhood, with strong female influences could have likely impacted how I approached this research, specifically how I analyzed the data that affirmed (or disaffirmed) my own experiences. Throughout the analytical process it was critical that I was mindful and reflective of my own biases, assumptions, and expectations so not to dismiss data that did not align with my personal experiences.

Most empirical research centered on the identity of strength in Black women focuses on outcomes and does not offer an in-depth exploration of the content of transmitted messages (Beauboef-Lafontant, 2005 & 2008; Way, 1995). Although there has been a dearth of examination from academia, strength has been a popular topic in feminist literature.

Over the last 30 years, Black feminists have scrutinized not simply the material but the ideological aspects of Black women's subordination... Largely based on personal accounts and observations, their critiques have suggested that strength is not an objective description of Black women, but a prescriptive discourse embedded in both racist and sexist characterizations of Black women as laborers for others. (Beauboef-Lafontant, 2008, pp. 394-395)

In the last few years I have also noticed that a critique and examination of strength has emerged in various pop culture and artistic mediums such as, web articles, blogs, tv shows, and movies. Additionally, there is little to no empirical research that explores or defines the process in which these messages related to strength are transmitted. The description of the process is limited to sharing that strength messages are passed down from female family members. This current study fills the gaps by identifying specific messages and intentionally exploring the transmission process.

Introducing these details about the process of strength training and the content of strength-related messages to the professional literature creates a more comprehensive understanding of the role and function of the Strong Black Woman identity and the strength training process in the African American community. While I found Beauboef-Lafontant's (2005; 2007; 2008) prior work that states that a woman's adherence to the Strong Black Woman identity can be harmful to her psychological and physical well-being compelling; it was important for me to understand how such a potentially harmful identity schema could also be so prevalent and revered within the Black community.



Beabeouf-Lafontant (2007) considers the purpose and function of the Strong Black Woman identity when she writes that, “to question strength as a social construct is to investigate whose interest it serves, to ask what other qualities may co-exist with it, and to be open to commonalities among as well as differences between Black women and women from different ethnic groups” (p.31). Adelman and colleagues (2003) state that minority women (specifically, women of different ethnic groups in Israel) are subject to racism and sexism within their own communities, as well as in society at large. As researchers continue to analyze the intersectional experiences of women, specifically in this case the outcomes associated with the Strong Black Woman identity, as racialized and gendered experiences that occur within the Black community and influenced by society (Beabeouf-Lafontant, 2007; 2008), we are actually identifying opportunities to promote resilience.

After situating strength training in the literature as purposeful within an adaptive culture as a resilience strategy, not just “a limiting...construction of Black femininity” (Beabeouf-Lafontant, 2005), it becomes critical that attempts are made to re-shape the negative outcomes of this purposeful resilience strategy. I suggest that the most impactful ecological setting to do this is within the microsystem and mesosystems (families, schools, and communities) of the developing adolescent, by making the adolescent aware of its potential harm and informing service providers of the identity’s intent and assets. This idea will be further discussed in the Implications section (below).

Through analyzing the focus group data I was able to identify the strength-related messages that African American adolescent girls from disadvantaged, urban neighborhoods receive. Four key themes emerged from the research, strength-related

messages related to adversity, perception management, relationships, and success.

Through an analysis of the emergent themes, I was able to share how those messages affect adolescents' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The internalization (or rejection) of messages related to strength influences how girls interact with people and systems within their environment.

Several times in the focus group interviews girls associated being strong as protection from others or in direct contrast to appearing to be weak. Unlike adult researchers and feminist theorists, the girls have not connected the Strong Black Woman identity with negative future outcomes. For instance, as described in the Results section, one participant explained that not being strong meant she could be an easy target for others.

Within an inhibiting environment, adolescents accept and select strength as a tool for resistance or protection.

If you are not strong or not tryna be strong, umm I think pretty much any and everything can just break you down. Like, kinda like a house. Would you rather have a house with brick walls, or would you rather have a house made of paper? The little bit of wind that comes is just goin blow you away, you'll be kinda destroyed but with bricks you won't, you know stand through it and stand strong.

Families, extended kinship networks, and individuals within social institutions, such as teachers, attempt to mitigate the impact of an inhibiting environment by creating a promotive space and developing assets (strength). Strength-training is not reserved for

members of an adolescent's support network; girls too, participate in the strength-training process by being active in their own identity development, specifically protecting themselves. I believe that at the onset some girls may pretend to be strong, with the goal of eventually becoming strong.

**Researcher:** Have you ever pretended to be strong?

**A:** Yea.

**Researcher:** Do you remember why you pretended?

**A:** Um, maybe because I worry about people seeing my real emotions or because I don't want nobody in my business.

Deciding whether it is necessary to be strong or show strength is a demonstration of agency. While suppressing emotion may not be a healthy habit to develop, which is what Beabeouf-Lafontant (2007) purports, there is a demonstration of power in selectively using strength when deemed necessary. This parallels research that Thomas (2008) conducted, which concluded that girls practice their femininities in reference to their mothers', rejecting their mother's "outdated" display of womanhood, but accepting gender expectations and being possible subjects to sexism. What exists is an asset – liability binary that creates a space and opportunity for service-providers.

### **Implications**

Strength-training is armoring (Edmondson & Nkomo, 1998). Prior research (Beabeouf-Lafontant, 2005; 2007; 2008) centers on the Strong Black Woman identity's pathology amongst Black women on the individual level, rather than identifying strength-

training as a cultural learning process and an aspect of adaptive culture. This armor serves as both preparation and protection, because the girls and their families have an expectation of adversity. Participants shared personal stories of death (specifically murder), job loss, mental illness, compromised health, domestic violence, unstable housing, single-parent households, and insufficient family income. Because of the expectation and experiences of adversity, professionals might develop discussion groups about coping with adversity and how to apply tenets of strength in a healthy way.

Beabeouf-Lafontant (2007) identifies the failure of women who subscribe to this identity to allow themselves the experience or examination of the full-spectrum of emotions or emotional states -in public and private - including vulnerability and reliance. Consequently, focus group participants who shared messages about the importance of independence and self-reliance might later become those women who binge eat or become clinically depressed because of how they have learned to express aspects of the Strong Black Woman identity as they become adults (see Beabeouf-Lafontant, 2005, 2007, 2008). This harmful embodiment could also be a result of women who pretend to be strong, as described by participants.

When seeking to learn how to work with a group or a community, it is important to identify the group's assets. What the current research and socio-historical literature teaches us are the formative elements and purpose of strength-training and the Strong Black Woman identity. Human service, social work, education, and community development professionals can apply this research by helping girls to identify how and when to apply the lessons learned from strength-training. For example, helping girls

discern when to be independent and when it is appropriate to rely on others or ask for help will nurture their resilience and impact their future success.

Furthermore, the social capital implications of this research evolve from past literature that states that limited resources within disadvantaged communities is related to the exodus of the middle-class (Wilson, 1987). When girls were asked to identify who they knew that was considered strong they listed women they considered successful outside of their immediate ecological context and then those with whom they had direct relationships. If social networks were expanded or diversified, the girls' view of strength-related characteristics may evolve, as well as the identification of whom they know to be strong. Perhaps if girls are able to identify and connect with women whom they actually have access to, they might receive a diversified view success and greater access to resources and information increasing their chances for upward social mobility.

The motivation behind the messages and the lessons that participants shared is interesting as it offers insight on how the young women, their families, and extended kin experience the world around them. The lessons about womanhood focus heavily on relationships and being prepared to navigate a world in which people already have their pre-conceived notions about who they are as a member of a group, rather than as an individual. This aspect of the strength-training process could be viewed as reactive or preparatory. Participants demonstrated that they know how to manage social relationships defensively, yet not how to cultivate them. In an environment with traditionally strong extended kinship networks that have limited resources, it is important that adolescents have the opportunity to seek and maintain relationships with mentors who can support their upward social mobility by offering access to information and meaningful

experiences (see Abley, 2009). Professionals can apply this research by teaching girls to network and cultivate relationships, as well as creating formal opportunities and providing access to mentors.

Lastly, because we know how independence and success are interrelated for those who identify as a Strong Black Woman, intervention strategies could also teach girls the tools to seek out information, resources, and experiences independently. This is important for those living in disadvantaged communities where there is a dearth of resources and inadequate social institutions.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The limitations of this study are related to sampling techniques. The small (purposive) sample is not likely to be representative of all Black adolescent girls from urban, disadvantaged neighborhoods. Although not representative, the study allowed for an in-depth, qualitative examination of collective identity development among a specific group. A continued search for understanding of this socialization process may later inform a quantitative study, which could elicit a larger, more representative sample. Also, the socio-economic status of the family of each participant was unknown, but was a reasonable conclusion based on identifying the participant's zip codes and examining neighborhood level SES data. Lastly, not having complete access to two of the focus groups interviews due to technology failure limited data analysis.

Future research needs to prioritize examination of the content of strength-related messages and examine how current cultural and social relations influence its content. Strength-training is a protective strategy that Black communities utilize to promote

success and protect their girl children within inhibiting environments. Historically those environments were overtly racist and discriminatory; as racism and other forms of discrimination increasingly becomes more covert and institutionalized, and some beliefs are exercised as microaggressions, it appears that families are not speaking directly of racism and sexism – according to participants in this study. It would be interesting to assess how the changing social climate has impacted the strength-training process.

Future research should also expand on intersectionality as a theoretical frame. The Strong Black Woman identity and its related processes are not unique among Blacks from disadvantaged urban communities, yet socialization content and messages may change, depending on neighborhood context (Caughy et al., 2006). One might then explore how different environments and socio-historical contexts impact strength training and strength-related messages. The results of this study might have a different tone if it were replicated with non-American Blacks across the diaspora, for instance Blacks in Europe, and between and within various Black American communities, like Black Caribbean families in the United States and Blacks living in rural communities. Future research should use an intersectional frame to examine strength-training in Black male adolescents, specifically the process and qualitative content.

The current study adds to the literature by examining strength training and the Strong Black Woman identity as a cultural, group socialization process rather than an individual-level experience. In a group setting, where it was encouraged for ideas to be examined, exchanged, and challenged I was able to learn about strength beyond an individual's personal relationship, which emphasized it as a negotiated identity development process in a way that would not have been possible through one-on-one

interviews. Through an application of Ecological Systems theory, the study begins to create a holistic understanding of how strength plays a role in different ecological contexts.

With this study I was “doing feminism”; I believe this study to have been a therapeutic exercise, for participants and myself. The opportunity to reflect on aspects of their developing identity and its relationship with their ecological environment (although they may not name it as such) was an empowering experience for participants. After the conclusion of each focus group, participants were energized and expressed the desire to talk more. I saw how grounding this study in feminist theory and applying an intersectional lens not only shifted the power dynamics within the focus group, but also left the participants feeling empowered.



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## **Appendix A**

### **FOCUS GROUP PROCEDURE**

*Welcome participants as they enter.*

*Distribute and explain assent form*

Thank you for coming today, my name is Latiaynna Tabb, I am a graduate student at the University of Delaware and today you will be assisting my with my final research project. This study will be about you, and how you feel and think about being a Black teenage girl from this neighborhood and about the idea of the “Strong Black Woman”. I will distribute an assent form for you to read and sign. The assent form explains that you are participating today by choice and that you understand why you are here with me. When you are done please pass them back to me.

When I complete my research if I need to refer to any of you specifically, I will not use your name but make up one for you to protect you true identity – this is also why I have assigned each of you a number, so I do not have to refer to you by name.

By participating in this study you are adding to research on family studies by helping me to share an understanding of Black families from your own voices. Usually this topic is studied by talking to older women (moms and grandmoms). I believe it is really important that this topic is studied by talking to young women. Black families are not studied as often as White families and how one’s family, friends, and environment may impact their outlook and understanding of what it means to be a strong Black girl.

Because this has rarely been done, your participation is really important to making an impact and possibly a change in the field of family studies.

*Distribute Demographics Questionnaire.*

I am handing out a short questionnaire so that I can find out about you, your family, and your neighborhood. When you are done, you can raise your hand and I will collect them.

*Begin focus group.*

As I said before, I am here today to learn from you. I want to find out more about your experiences growing up as a Black girl in this (or similar) neighborhoods. I also want to hear your thoughts about being, or what it may mean to be a “Strong Black Woman”, the things you have experienced or may have learned from the people around you. There are no right or wrong answers; I really want to know about what you think. I want to hear from all of you, so if you are quiet, I might ask you to say a little bit more.

I will pass around scrap paper and pencil in case you want to jot some notes down as we talk. With your permission, at the end I would like to collect those back from you. You do not have to write your name on the papers.

So to start off, I'd like to ask you about your *neighborhood*:

- 1. How would you describe your neighborhood to someone who has never been there?**

Thank you! Next I would like to learn your thoughts about *womanhood and strength*.

- 2. Do you know a Black woman the people refer to as strong?**
  - a. Who? What makes people say she is strong?**

- 3. What would you say is the most important lesson you have learned so far about being a Black young woman?**
  - a. How did you learn that ?**
  - b. Did you learn that lesson from anyone? Who? How did s/he help you learn that?**

Thank you! Next I would like to learn about your *family and support network*:

- 4. How would you describe your family?**
- 5. Are there people who you are not related to by blood that you would consider family? Who are those people?**
- 6. What types of items are in your house - like toys, pictures, or clothing - that indicate that there is an African American family living there?**
  - a. Can you tell me about them?**
- 7. Are there any family members, other than your mom, dad, or legal guardian, or non-relatives have helped to raise you?**
  - a. In what ways have they helped raise you?**

Some African American families talk about issues like racism. Does yours? (If yes)

- 8. What types of things are said (about racism)?**

Some families also discuss issues like sexism (how men may be superior to women or how women may get treated differently or have different expectations from others because they are female). Does yours? (If yes)

- 9. What types of things are said (about sexism)?**

Families sometimes experience difficulties like a death or losing a job, or someone having problems at school. Consider a time when you may have experienced that. I have

a question about those challenging or bad events. Keep in mind that you do not have to share what happened to you or your family if you don't want to.

**10. If you or your family has needed assistance or has needed something that you don't have, who would you/they ask?**

**11. What do you think it is about you that helped you get over that hump? What personality traits do you think you/they possess that have helped you overcome this challenging period.**

Thank you for sharing that with me. Next I'd like to ask more about your thoughts on *being a woman*:

**12. What does it mean when people refer to women as being strong?**

**a. Do you agree?**

**13. What are the specific messages your mother (or other female relatives and friends) gives you about being an African American woman?**

**14. Are you strong?**

**a. What makes you strong/not strong?**

**b. Is it important for you to be strong? Why?**

**c. Have you been taught to be strong? By whom? How?**

Sometimes people pretend to be strong because it is what may be expected of them or what they expect of themselves.

**15. Do you think Black women try to appear to strong or are they actually strong?**

*Ending the focus group*

Thank you for participating; as I said before, I'm here in order to learn from you about what it means to be a young Black girl growing up in this (or similar) neighborhood(s) and your thoughts about womanhood. Is there anything else you think I should know? Do you have any questions for me? Thank you for your time.

## **Appendix B**

### **INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANT**

Strong Black Girl: Messages of Strength in the Lives of Urban African American Adolescent Girls

Latiaynna Tabb, University of Delaware

#### Description and Procedures of Research

Your daughter is being asked to join a research study. This study will explore the extended family networks of African American adolescent girls from disadvantaged neighborhoods and the messages they receive about being a Black woman. The focus will be on the messages related to strength that female teens receive from the influential women in their lives. Results from this study will be published for research purposes. They will be presented to professionals and to the public through educational programs.

Your daughter was selected because she: (1) identifies as Black or African-American, (2) is between the ages of 16 and 18, and (3) lives in an urban neighborhood.

Teenage girls will be recruited primarily from recreation centers and youth-serving organizations. It is expected that 30 teenagers will participate in this study. Whether you allow your daughter to participate or not, the services or programs she participates in from the recreation center or other organizations will not be affected in any way.



Adolescents (under 18) in the study must have their parent's or legal guardian's permission to participate. Your daughter will be asked to participate in a focus group that will be digitally recorded and audio-taped. The focus groups will have between 4-6 participants. Your daughter will be asked about the messages she receives related to strength from her kinship network and how these messages may affect her thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Your daughter will participate in a group interview. The focus group is estimated to take approximately 60-90 minutes. She will be interviewed by Latiayna Tabb, a Masters student in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Delaware. In addition to her interview, she will be asked to complete a short demographic survey.

#### Confidentiality

Your daughter's name will remain confidential, and will not be mentioned in the research reports. Your daughter will receive a number which may be used on all forms, notes, tapes, and computer documents instead of her name. Your daughter may also be referred to by a pseudonym. The information that your daughter provides will not be shared with you. Reports on the study may use some quotes and situations, but these will not include any identifying information. No one other than the researcher will have access to your daughter's name and interview information. All records will be stored in a locked cabinet and all computer files will be password-protected and encrypted. The focus group data will be kept indefinitely.

Finally, you should understand that we will in all cases take actions necessary, including reporting to authorities, to prevent serious harm to your daughter(s) or others such as in cases of child abuse or neglect.

We are required to notify the proper authorities if we suspect that your daughter is being abused or neglected, or if your daughter intends to hurt herself or others. This includes reporting any recent act or failure to act which presents a serious risk of harm to a child or results in the serious physical, emotional, or sexual harm of a child.

Your daughter's participation in this project is voluntary. Your daughter can refuse to participate in this research study with no penalty. Participation has no effect on the services or programs provided by recreation centers or other organizations. Your daughter can choose to not answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

#### Benefits and Risks

Through completing the interview, research participants will contribute to family studies research by sharing their thoughts and experiences and expanding the knowledge base of the lives of teenage Black girls through your own voice. Participants will also gain insight into the experiences of other teenage girls.

The risks to participation in the study are minimal but include: that other participants may share something someone else said, and that participants will be upset by a question, this is highly unlikely, but possible. Identity will be kept confidential by referring to your daughter, if necessary, by a pseudonym or a number.

#### Compensation

An incentive for participation will include a \$10 gift card.

#### Contact Information

If you have any questions about this research project contact Latiaynna Tabb, Department of Human Development & Family Studies, University of Delaware, Phone: 267-265-1847 or her advisor, Dr. Ruth Fleury-Steiner, Ph.D., Department of Human Development & Family Studies, University of Delaware, Phone: 302-831-8560. If you

have any questions regarding your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson, Human Subjects Review Board, 210 Hullihen Hall, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716, (302) 831-2137.

**I have read the consent form and agree to have my child participate in the research study. I will receive a copy of this consent form.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Daughter's Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Daughter's Age

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent (Guardian) Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent (Guardian)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix C**

### **INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANT (18+)**

Strong Black Girl: Messages of Strength in the Lives of Urban African American Adolescent Girls

Latiayna Tabb, University of Delaware

#### Description and Procedures of Research

You are being asked to join a research study. This study will explore the extended family networks of African American adolescent girls from disadvantaged neighborhoods and the messages they receive about being a Black woman. The focus will be on the messages related to strength that female teens receive from the influential women in their lives. Results from this study will be published for research purposes. They will be presented to professionals and to the public through educational programs.

You were selected because you: (1) identifies as Black or African-American, (2) is between the ages of 16 and 18, and (3) lives in an urban neighborhood.

Teenage girls will be recruited primarily from recreation centers and youth-serving organizations. It is expected that 30 teenagers will participate in this study. Whether you choose to participate or not, the services or programs you participate in from the recreation center or other organizations will not be affected in any way.

You will be asked to participate in a focus group that will be digitally recorded and audio-taped. The focus groups will have between 4-6 participants. You will be asked

about the messages you have received that relate to strength from your kinship network and how these messages may affect your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. You will participate in a group interview. The focus group is estimated to take approximately 60-90 minutes. She will be interviewed by Latiayna Tabb, a Masters student in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Delaware. In addition to your interview, you will be asked to complete a short demographic survey.

### Confidentiality

Your name will remain confidential, and will not be mentioned in the research reports. You will receive a number which may be used on all forms, notes, tapes, and computer documents instead of her name. You may also be referred to by a pseudonym. The information that you provide will not be shared with anyone. Reports on the study may use some quotes and situations, but these will not include any identifying information. No one other than the researcher will have access to your name and interview information. All records will be stored in a locked cabinet and all computer files will be password-protected and encrypted. The focus group data will be kept indefinitely.

Finally, you should understand that we will in all cases take actions necessary, including reporting to authorities, to prevent serious harm to you or others such as in cases of child abuse or neglect.

We are required to notify the proper authorities if we suspect that you have been abused or neglected, or if you intend to hurt yourself or others. This includes reporting any recent act or failure to act which presents a serious risk of harm to a child or results in the serious physical, emotional, or sexual harm of a child.

Your participation in this project is voluntary. You can refuse to participate in this research study with no penalty. Participation has no effect on the services or programs provided by recreation centers or other organizations. You can choose to not answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

### Benefits and Risks

Through completing the interview, research participants will contribute to family studies research by sharing their thoughts and experiences and expanding the knowledge base of the lives of teenage Black girls through your own voice. Participants will also gain insight into the experiences of other teenage girls.

The risks to participation in the study are minimal but include: that other participants may share something someone else said, and that participants will be upset by a question, this is highly unlikely, but possible. Identity will be kept confidential by referring to you, if necessary, by a pseudonym or a number.

### Compensation

An incentive for participation will include a \$10 Wawa gift card.

### Contact Information

If you have any questions about this research project contact Latiaynna Tabb, Department of Human Development & Family Studies, University of Delaware, Phone: 267-265-1847 or her advisor, Dr. Ruth Fleury-Steiner, Ph.D., Department of Human Development & Family Studies, University of Delaware, Phone: 302-831-8560. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson, Human Subjects Review Board, 210 Hullihen Hall, University of Delaware,

Newark, DE 19716, (302) 831-2137.

**I have read the consent form and agreed to participate in the research study. I will receive a copy of this consent form.**

\_\_\_\_\_

Name

\_\_\_\_\_

Age

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

## **Appendix D**

### **INFORMED ASSENT FORM**

Strong Black Girl: Messages of Strength in the Lives of Urban African American Adolescent Girls

Latiaynna Tabb, University of Delaware

*Informed Assent Form*

This focus group is being conducted by Latiaynna Tabb for partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in the Master of Science in Human Development and Family Studies and the University of Delaware. I am studying the experiences and perspectives related to messages African American adolescent females from disadvantaged, urban neighborhoods receive about being a Black woman and their extended family networks. You were selected to participate because you: (1) identify as Black or African-American, (2) are between the ages of 16 and 18, and (3) live in an urban, disadvantaged neighborhood.

Adolescents (under 18) in the study must have their parent's permission to participate.

You will be asked to participate in a focus group that will be digitally recorded and audio-taped. The focus group is estimated to take approximately 60-90 minutes. In addition to the interview, you will be asked to complete a short survey asking about your background information.

You can tell anyone you want about the study, although I ask that you keep what others



say to yourself. I will not tell anyone what you said or that you took part in the study. However, if you tell me that you are not safe, I will have to tell someone so that they can help you. The risks to participation in the study are minimal but include: your identity being revealed by the other participants in the group. I will to the best of my ability keep your identity concealed; my efforts will include referring to you, if necessary, by an imaginary name. Your benefit from participating in this study include contributing to family studies research by sharing your thoughts and experiences and expanding the knowledge base of the lives of teenage Black girls through your own voice. Participants will also gain insight into the experiences of other teenage girls. If you do not want to be in the study, nothing bad will happen to you. Your parent(s) knows about this study, and said it was okay for you to join in if you want, but you do not have to-it is up to you. Please ask any questions you have. If you decide to be in the study, you will receive a \$10 American Express gift card.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You can refuse to answer any questions and can quit at any time without penalty. To keep your responses confidential, please DO NOT write your name or any other identifying information on any documents, besides this *informed assent form*. If you are interested in receiving a summary of the research, put your name, mailing or email address below and I will send you a copy. If you have questions about the study, please contact me at [LSTabb@udel.edu](mailto:LSTabb@udel.edu).

Thank you for your participation and time during this focus group.

*By signing this form, I agree to participate in this focus group. I know that my participation is voluntary. The researcher has also informed me of the risks and benefits associated with participating in this study.*

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

*Yes, I would like a copy of a summary of the research results. Please send them to me at:*

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Email/Mailing Address \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix E**  
**IRB APPROVAL LETTER**



**RESEARCH OFFICE**

210 Hulihan Hall  
University of Delaware  
Newark, Delaware 19716-1551  
Ph: 302/831-2136  
Fax: 302/831-2828

**DATE:** March 27, 2013

**TO:** Latiayna Tabb, BA, MS  
**FROM:** University of Delaware IRB

**STUDY TITLE:** [351269-3] Strong Black Girl: Messages of Strength in the Lives of Urban African American Adolescent Girls

**SUBMISSION TYPE:** Amendment/Modification

**ACTION:** ACKNOWLEDGED

Thank you for submitting the Amendment/Modification materials for the above research study. The University of Delaware IRB has ACKNOWLEDGED your submission.

The following items are acknowledged in this submission:

- Amendment/Modification - amended procedure (UPDATED: 03/25/2013)
- Amendment/Modification - original procedure (UPDATED: 03/25/2013)
- Amendment/Modification - amendment to focus group questions, procedure, and participant eligibility (UPDATED: 03/25/2013)

If you have any questions, please contact Clara Simperts at 302-831-2137 or [csimperts@udel.edu](mailto:csimperts@udel.edu). Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

**Appendix F**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY**

Please respond to all of the following questions or statements to the best of your ability.

Age: \_\_\_\_

Zip Code: 191\_\_\_\_\_

Do you consider yourself to be Black or African American?

- Yes
- No

If you attend high school, what **grade** are you in? \_\_\_\_\_

What high school do you go to?

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What is the highest level of schooling or degree your **parent(s)/legal guardian(s)** have earned?

- Middle school
- Some high school
- High school diploma/GED
- Some college
- Associate's/Technical degree
- Bachelor's degree

- Master's degree or higher

What is your **parent(s)/legal guardian(s)** marital status?

- Single/never married
- Married
- Separated
- Divorced
- Widowed

Who do you live with? (names are not required only relationship. Ex. *Mother, sister, brother, cousin, grandmother*)

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**Appendix G**  
**DATA TABLES**

Table 1

*Sample's Median Household Income by Zip Code*

<u>Zip Code</u>	<u>Income</u>	<u>%</u>
19101	No data	4
19104	\$35,156	13
19124	\$38,300	17
19131	\$41,735	17
Table 2		
19134	\$33,932	4
19139	\$35,073	4
19142	\$38,153	13
19143	\$43,266	4
19150	\$55,317	13
19151	\$48,164	5
19082	\$52,406	4

---

Note. Data from U.S. Census Bureau, 2008-2012

American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

*Parent/Guardian Educational Attainment*

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<u>Education</u>	<u>#</u>
Middle	1
Some HS	6
High school	4
Some college	6
AA/technical	2
Bachelor's	3
Master's	1

---

Table 3

*Parent/Guardian Marital Status*

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<u>Marital Status</u>	<u>#</u>
Single/Never Married	8
Married	8
Separated	3
Divorced	4
Widowed	2

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Table 4

*Participant age*

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<u>Age</u>	<u>#</u>
15	1
16	11
17	6
18	6

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