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## Promoting social justice for African-American boys and young men through research and intervention: A challenge for developmental science

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### ABSTRACT

A social justice analysis of the circumstances of African-American boys and young men (AAB) reveals a pervasive pattern of negative stereotypes, disparate treatment, and resource deprivation that augur poorly for their development. Developmental science has yielded many insights about the deleterious sequelae of racism and economic disadvantage, but much less is known about AAB coping and adaptation. Adaptive Calibration and Positive Youth Development are offered as conceptual tools to redirect researcher to a focus on AAB's hidden talents and to illuminate the social resources that contribute to positive outcomes. The Adaptive Calibration (AC) Model proposes that chronic adversity influences the development of overlooked competencies that facilitate successful adaptation in toxic environments. The Positive Youth Development framework highlights the propitious influence of familial and community assets that promote resilience and prosocial development in spite of chronic adversity. Social justice agenda can be advanced if these ideas are used to guide research.

### Introduction

#### Overview

Equitable treatment and fair allocation of resources are the hallmarks of just societies. A social justice analysis of the circumstances of African-American boys and young men (AAB) reveals a pervasive pattern of negative stereotypes, disparate treatment, and resource deprivation that augur poorly for their development. Developmental science has yielded many insights about the deleterious sequelae of racism and economic disadvantage, but much less is known about AAB coping and adaptation. Adaptive Calibration and Positive Youth Development are offered as conceptual tools to redirect researcher to a focus on AAB's hidden talents and to illuminate the social resources that contribute to positive outcomes. The Adaptive Calibration (AC) Model proposes that chronic adversity influences the development of overlooked competencies that facilitate successful adaptation in toxic environments. The Positive Youth Development framework highlights the propitious influence of familial and community assets that promote resilience and prosocial development in spite of chronic adversity. A social justice agenda can be advanced if these ideas are given prominence, are

used to frame future research, and guide the design of social programs that attempt to blunt the effects of adversity on AAB and other vulnerable children.

#### Social justice and development

Social justice is often described in terms of fair resource allocation and equitable treatment of all members of society (Miller, 2001). Fair allocation of resources refers to the provision of adequate and equal access to economic resources, opportunities, power, and privileges. Conversely, a quintessential feature of injustice is an unfair allocation of societal resources in which some members of society live in luxury and excess, while others live in abject poverty unable to meet their basic needs minimally, if at all. Another indicator is equitable treatment. It involves the valuing of the diversity of a society's membership and being inclusive of, rather than marginalizing or stigmatizing particular subgroups. Inequitable treatment occurs when some members and segments of society are valued, affirmed, and extended a socially privileged position, while others are denigrated, marginalized, or viewed as expendable. Social justice requires affording all members fair treatment, positive

social regard, and clear processes for accessing societal resources (Tolan, Murry, Diaz, & Seidl, 2017).

Accordingly, social justice requires the creation and maintenance of equal opportunity for members to develop their talents, as well as have access to critical resources and opportunities to develop the competencies needed to thrive. It follows then that social justice requires correcting the effects of stigma and compensating for hierarchical inequality especially when there has been a history of differential access to economic resources and power (Reisch, 2002). In societies with high levels of social justice, no race, ethnic group, social class, or gender are oppressed, marginalized, scapegoated, and no group exclusively benefits from its privileges. Rigid social stratification based on race or income vitiates and belies professions of equality. This is patently true in the case of AAB who have historically faced and still face elevated impediments to fair treatment and equal opportunity for developmental success. A social justice perspective facilitates explorations of how the economic inequality, racism, and social marginalization impact basic developmental processes to produce adverse but preventable outcomes.

The two dimensions of social justice are essential conditions for positive development but are often missing for AAB. Consequently, social justice provides a relevant framing of the developmental trajectories of AAB and other vulnerable populations. To illustrate this point, this paper reviews research demonstrating the impact of inadequate access to resources and disparate treatment for AAB's development. Following this review, the paper presents two conceptual frameworks that can be used to stimulate research with a social justice perspective: Adaptive Calibration and Positive Youth Development. AC involves a paradigmatic shift away from stigmatizing AAB to focusing on their competencies and on the hidden strengths that enable them to function effectively under adverse conditions and in dangerous environments. The Positive Youth Development framework highlights the conditions and resources that arguably promote prosocial development of AAB. The third section of the paper describes several programmatic interventions, which exemplify how a social justice framework might be used as a guide for mitigating the effects of injustice. The paper concludes with recommendations for developmental science to embrace a social justice perspective in its theoretical models and empirical investigations.

### **AAB's inequitable access to resources**

Most African-American families and, in turn, their children lack an equitable or even adequate access to

societal resources, particularly economic resources (Murry, Block, & Liu, 2016). As a result, AAB develop with a dearth of the opportunities associated with economic sufficiency. Over one-third of African-American youth under the age of 18 live in households with incomes below the poverty threshold (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2017). The median income of Black families with children is less than half the median income of White families with children (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2017). Moreover, a disproportionate percentage of African-American children live in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty and severely under-resourced schools (Carnoy & García, 2017). AAB are often trapped in a cycle of intergenerational poverty that results in significantly lower rates of upward mobility than White children (Chetty, Hendren, Jones, & Porter, 2018). Social and economic stratification restrict opportunities available to AAB by situating their development in low-resource contexts (school, neighborhood, health care, and justice systems) replete with systemic, structural barriers to personal development and self-determination (Spencer, 1986). The result is an ecology of blocked opportunity, psychological strain, and heightened exposure to physical harm that together elevate morbidity and mortality (Gaylord-Harden, Barbarin, Tolan & Murry, 2018). As AAB move into late adolescence and early adulthood, they encounter systematic economic disparities resulting in extended periods of joblessness, underemployment, and lower wages than White youth (Fuligni & Hardway, 2004). These additional inequities amplify the disadvantages related to the intersection of their ethnicity and gender (Murry et al., 2016). As such, this leaves AAB subject to intense levels of adversity not experienced by boys of other racial/ethnic groups or by African-American girls. For example, a recent study comparing siblings within families found that AAB born to single mothers with low educational attainment, raised in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, and attending poor-quality public schools have a higher incidence of truancy and behavioral problems throughout childhood and adolescence, exhibit higher rates of behavioral and cognitive disability, perform worse on standardized tests, are less likely to graduate from high school, and are more likely to commit serious crimes as adolescents than their sisters (Autor, Figlio, Karbownik, Roth, & Wasserman, 2016). Moreover, social stratification based on race and income subjects AAB to virulent antagonistic social

responses at levels not directed toward other racial/ethnic groups or toward African-American girls.

### **Disparate treatment of African-American boys**

Disparate treatment is ubiquitous in the lives of AAB (Gibbons, Gerrard, Cleveland, Wills, & Brody, 2004). It comes in many forms and from many directions: institutional or systemic discrimination, unfair behaviors, and harsh punishment often justified by prejudice or negative attitudes (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986). The social experiences of AAB are characterized by negative stereotypes, social marginalization, micro-aggressions, scapegoating, and low expectations about competence and morality. AAB reported significant levels of racial discrimination as early as the age of 10 (Gibbons et al., 2004) and grow in frequency as they age (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006). Over 90% of African-American youth experience at least one incident of discrimination during their lifetime (Gibbons et al., 2004). These micro-aggressions may include being harassed by store personnel, experiencing others' low expectations due to ethnicity or race, being excluded from social organizations, being wrongly or unfairly disciplined at school, and being threatened or called a name (Fisher et al., 2000). In a study examining the experience of micro-aggressions among African-American youth, subtle discriminatory remarks were commonplace and ongoing within the educational setting (Thomas, Caldwell, Faison, & Jackson, 2009). The prevalence of such events is significantly greater for AAB than for other racial/ethnic groups and for African-American girls.

AAB are assigned to an inferior social position and are among the most stigmatized groups in the United States (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000). Compared to other children, AAB are disproportionately labeled as having learning deficiencies, dysregulation of attention, behavior and emotions, and low academic motivation and involvement (Graham, Taylor, & Hudley, 1998; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). They are overrepresented in remedial and special education classes (Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). A dominant narrative about AAB is that they are irresponsible, unpredictable, predatory, violent, criminal, incompetent, sexually threatening, hyper-masculine, and callous (Isom, 2007; Pierre, Woodland, & Mahalik, 2001). These persistent narratives legitimate scapegoating and projections of prejudices, fears, and insecurities with dire and sometimes deadly consequences for AAB (Stevenson, 2016). Parents and

teachers are not immune to this phenomenon. African-American parents have lower expectations for African-American boys than for African-American girls, even when controlling for level of academic achievement (Wood, Kaplan, & McLoyd, 2007).

Implicit racial biases about African-American adults are ascribed to AAB as young as age five (Todd, Thiem, & Neel, 2016). Thus, even as preschoolers, they are perceived as dangerous, hypersexual, threatening, and malevolent in their intentions. Implicit racial bias can prime early childhood educators to expect disproportionate problems with African-American boys. This bias contributes to closer scrutiny and/or more pejorative labeling of boys' behavior (Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, & Shic, 2016). These negative narratives continue and, in fact, intensify across their life span. During middle childhood, African-American boys are often presumed to be older than their actual ages and perceived to be less innocent than same-age White peers (Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014). As African-American boys move through school things worsen, they are more likely to be scapegoated as disruptive, aggressive, and oppositional in primary school and academically incompetent and antisocial by the time they reach high school (Stevenson, 2016). Although they are no more likely than other youth to be disruptive or violate rules at school, they receive much more severe punishments (e.g., suspensions and expulsions) for less serious offenses (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). African-American and Latinx boys were eight times more likely to receive a school suspension referral than White students. However, African-American boys still received significantly more suspension referrals than Latinx boys (Day-Vines & Terriquez, 2008). Thus, the process of stereotyping and marginalization of AAB begins early, is sustained over their lifetimes, and parallels the rise in discrimination targeted to them. Even with considerable family economic and social resources, AAB are not protected from such social marginalization (Murry, 2019).

### **Why social injustice matters for AAB**

Resource deprivation and disparate treatment of AAB in the form of discrimination are not trivial in their effects. Being exposed to discrimination can evoke reactionary symptoms that are similar to trauma and can compromise both psychological and physical health (Pieterse, Todd, Neville, & Carter, 2012). Marginalization across multiple contexts leads to an

overwhelming level of stress that can, in turn, impair emotional and cognitive development (Coll et al., 1996). Racism-related stress in the form of micro-aggressions can take a toll on, deplete coping resources, and threaten individual wellbeing (Harrell, 2000). Not all AAB grow up in economically disadvantaged communities but those who reside in segregated communities, with high concentrations of poverty, scarce resources, elevated crime, and violence experience even greater strains. As residents of these communities, AAB are disproportionately subjected to high levels of community violence (Elsaesser & Voisin, 2015; Gaylord-Harden, Cunningham, & Zelencik, 2011), with 50% to 96% of African-American adolescent males reporting witnessing violence in their communities (Goldner, Gross, Richards, & Ragsdale, 2015). Although African-American male and female adolescents report exposure to similar forms of community violence (Foster, Kuperminc, & Price, 2004), AAB are exposed to violence more often than African-American girls (e.g., Salzinger, Feldman, Stockhammer, & Hood, 2002). Even though rates of racism-related stress are high for both African-American boys and girls, AAB are more developmentally vulnerable than girls particularly with respect to the development of self-regulation of behavior, substance use (Brody, Kogan, & Chen, 2012), smoking (Wiehe, Aalsma, Liu, & Fortenberry, 2010), and chronic diseases (Brody, Lei, Chen, & Miller, 2014). Similarly, teacher discrimination was more common and had more pronounced effects on AAB's than girls' academic engagement (Wang & Huguley, 2012).

Growing up in toxic environments, viz., low and under-resource, racially and economically segregated communities, places AAB at high risk not only for social, emotional, and psychological difficulties but also for major health problems, the early onset of chronic disease and premature aging and death (Barbarin, Murry, Tolan, & Graham, 2016; Graham & Gracia, 2012). In addition, AAB are disproportionately at risk for experiencing the violent and traumatic death of friends and family members compared to males in other racial/ethnic groups (Smith, 2015). While these experiences often occur in interpersonal interaction, they arise from institutional racism and cut across multiple systems and settings (Stevenson, 2016). For instance, AAB in low-income communities experience more adversarial police-initiated encounters involving excessive force than boys from other ethnic groups (Schuck, 2004). Further, within the criminal justice system, young AAB are sentenced more harshly than any other group. Race is a

significant factor in the sentencing more often for younger males than it is for older males (Steffensmeier, Ulmer, & Kramer, 1998). In summary, economic hardship and racial animus set off a cascade of processes that undercut individual wellbeing and impede the physical, cognitive, and emotional development of African-American boys.

In making the case for unjust treatment of AAB, we acknowledge that this account does not capture many significant within group differences that arise, for example, from variations in gender identity and socioeconomic status. Their differential access to resources and the bias they experience may lead to somewhat different strains. For instance, the nature bias or stereotypes and access to mitigating familial, community, and cultural resources may be more constrained for AAB who identify as gay compared to those who identify as straight. A lack of acceptance of sexual minority boys often imposes additional and different challenges than their counterparts. Conversely, AAB growing up in affluent household may be less vulnerable to the strains related to food insecurity and other forms of economic hardship. Nevertheless, they share the denigrated status of being African-American males. Moreover, although the focus in this paper has been on the adverse experiences of AAB, African-American girls face parallel difficulties and challenges to their coping. Our focus on boys is not intended to understate the difficulties faced by African-American girls or to suggest that their situation is less dire or that it deserves less attention.

### ***Shifting the research narrative on AAB***

Now that the ubiquity of disparate treatment and resource deprivation and their effects on AAB have been demonstrated, we turn to the question of whether and how AAB overcome these effects and become competent individuals, in spite of social injustice. This will require a shift in the focus of developmental researchers who are often drawn to examine adversity-related risks and the deficits that flow from them. Although this focus may be well-intentioned and have value in highlighting the vulnerability of AAB, it is a two-edged sword. The downside of an exclusive problem-focused lens is that it discounts AAB's personal agency in developing adaptive responses to an unjust society (Murry et al., 2018). The exclusive focus on the debilitating effects of adversity may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes used to justify disparate treatment and low expectations about AAB's abilities. For example, the extensive

documentation of the behavioral and academic difficulties of AAB may confirm fears that AAB are anti-social predators and justify beliefs that efforts to remediate academic difficulties are futile. In addition, an exclusive focus on the effects of adversity reveals little practical information about the underlying conditions that maintain inequitable access to resources. This work generates few implications about ways to address the problems because research from this direction rarely focuses on the underlying factors that motivate racism and maintain economic disadvantage. To shift the narrative on AAB, it will be necessary to develop and adopt different frameworks to guide and motivate our research. With a different set of conceptual lenses, it is possible to uncover previously undetected ecologically adaptive competencies AAB develop in the process (Frankenhuis & de Weerth, 2013). In the following two sections, this paper describes two distinct conceptual frameworks (viz., Adaptive Calibration (AC) and Positive Youth Development (PYD)) that can help the field of developmental science rebalance and shift the narrative on AAB from victimization and pathology toward a deeper understanding of the assets and resources available to support their positive development and toward underappreciated adaptations and overlooked strengths they develop under conditions of adversity.

### **Adaptive calibration**

AC is an evolutionary theory proposing that environmental challenges shape the development of biological phenotypes and direct behavioral responses toward survival and functioning that is adaptive for that environment (Ellis & Del Giudice, 2019). AC helps to explain how adversity can contribute to development of qualities that constitute valuable competencies within a given setting. The AC framework begins with the premise that children who experience adverse conditions become “stress adapted” over time (Ellis, Bianchi, Griskevicius, & Frankenhuis, 2017). Early-onset and chronic adversity shapes stress responses that are translated into cognitive, emotional, and behavioral adaptations suited to environmental demands (Frankenhuis & de Weerth, 2013). In the face of frequent, varied, and unpredictable threats, and limited certainty of protection, individual responses are adjusted and aligned to optimize the likelihood of survival (Ellis et al., 2012). AC contributes to a social justice perspective because it moves away from a paradigm of individual blame and a focus on pathology toward a paradigm asserting that

environments dictate what is adaptive independent of moral considerations. Although resource deprivation, racism, and its sequelae are thought to impair cognitive, behavioral, and emotional functioning, AC offers an alternative more optimistic perspective. Namely, children growing up in adversity develop capacities geared to help them deal with the challenges their environments present to them and as a result, they perform better in conditions characterized by high levels of stress than individual who do not grow up in harsh or demanding environments (Frankenhuis & de Weerth, 2013). Response patterns that may be evaluated as maladaptive in low-stress environments may be rational and functional for high-stress environments. In contrast to theories that highlight the adverse consequences of adaptation to stress, AC takes a more positive view that responses to harsh, threatening, and unpredictable environments may promote specialized and adaptive capabilities. For example, stressful environments may contribute to development of enhanced memory, executive function, problem-solving, and emotion recognition (Frankenhuis & de Weerth, 2013). These adaptations are deemed beneficial because they increase fit and enable individual to be successful within that environment. Children who experience chronic adversity are sensitively attuned to emotions; they correctly identify and remember aggressive stimuli, recognize expressions of anger or fear, and better detect and evaluate the potential of a situation for harming them (Frankenhuis & de Weerth, 2013). Accordingly, each type of environment promotes development of somewhat distinct patterns of cognitions, behavioral strategies, emotional expression, and even neuro-hormonal functioning. Though patterns differ, each can be judged appropriate and valuable to the extent that they advance individual environment fit and, in turn, increase ability to survive and thrive under those conditions and in those settings. AC emphasizes that development is directed by ecological conditions toward the acquisition of competencies that help AAB meet the environmental challenges they face.

### **Positive Youth Development (PYD)**

In contrast to AC that orients research toward identification of adaptive responses resulting from adversity, PYD is oriented to document the conditions that promote development of prosocial competencies in spite of adversity. The PYD framework is founded on two principles. The first principal underscores the primacy of individual agency in striving to achieve competence.

Development is actively and specifically directed by humans toward achieving positive outcomes. These outcomes include “an integrated moral and civic identity and a commitment to society beyond the limits of one’s own existence that enable youth to be agents both in their own healthy development and in the positive enhancement of other people and of society” (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003, p. 172). The second principle suggests that even when access to social resources and physical safety are restricted, certain sociocultural assets may dampen the effects of adversity and promote optimal development. Specifically, positive or prosocial outcomes arise when individuals are able to draw upon alternative social, familial, and community resources that align with developmental tasks and needs (Larson, 2000). Similar to AC, PYD suggests that children growing up in harsh environments acquire psychosocial competence that enables them to avoid the adverse effects of racism, racial denigration, resource insufficiency, and inequality. Moreover, PYD underscores the notion that desired prosocial developmental outcomes such as an integrated moral system, altruism, and emotional attachment to others can occur in parallel with behaviors that may be judged as disruptive or antisocial. Accordingly, in spite of high levels of persistent impediments, the majority of AAB develops prosocial competencies such as empathy, loyalty to kith and kin and strives to be successful and happy. More importantly, PYD provides a basis for theorizing about and examining strategies AAB use to stay out of harm’s way while achieving a full and healthy social life (Tolan, Guerra, & Montaini-Klov Dahl, 1997). In addition, it leads to investigations of the social resources AAB need at each stage of development that make it possible to stay out of harm’s way and that facilitate the transition to adulthood.

In addition to adopting AC and PYD frameworks as a foundation for future research, developmental science can rebalance the narrative on AAB by expanding research on the role of specific cultural, familial, and community assets in explaining the prevalence of prosocial development in spite of crushing inequities. These assets include provision of a positive family climate, parent strategies to socialize and protect, and support from religious and secular communities.

### **Resources supportive of Positive Development**

#### **Family climate**

Family life in which members are emotionally close and feel supported is arguably the most critical asset in mitigating and avoiding the risks for children associated with toxic environments (Gorman-Smith, Tolan, & Henry, 2000). Emotional warmth combined

with high parental involvement, consistent discipline, and expectations of mutual family obligations have the potential to safeguard sons and reduce the likelihood of delinquent behavior, even in settings replete with violence (Gaylord-Harden, Barbarin, Murry, & Tolan, 2017; Gorman-Smith, Henry, & Tolan, 2004).

#### **Socialization strategies**

A specific strategy used widely by families to sidestep the sequelae of racial stigmatization, inequality, and discrimination is to nurture a positive ethnic identity and instill prosocial values (Neblett, Philip, Cogburn, & Sellers, 2006). Families accomplish this by engaging youth in dialogue about racial discrimination as injustice and thus build their children’s capacity to resist oppression. These socialization efforts to promote positive ethnic identity also lead to increased self-esteem, emotional wellbeing, self-regulation, improved conflict management and coping, stronger family ties, and improved anger management (see Hughes et al., 2006 for a summary).

Families also achieve positive outcomes by transmitting attitudes, values, and norms about appropriate behavior and by applying appropriate consequences to misbehavior (Whitaker & Miller, 2000). AAB’s adoption of these attitudes and norms is more likely to occur when the family has a positive emotional climate in which youth and parent engage in frequent positive communication behaviors (Whitaker & Miller, 2000). Open communication between parents and adolescents also shapes youths’ images of risk-taking peers (Williams, 2003), increases self-regulation and self-control, and increases their willingness to avoid risk opportunity situations and resist peer pressure (Berkel et al., 2009; Murry, McNair, Myers, Chen, & Brody, 2014). Some parents find it necessary to resort to unusually drastic steps such as “exile parenting strategies” that relocate their sons to safer spaces for weekends or summers to stay with relatives or fictive kin when other strategies do not result in sufficient protection (Jarrett, 1999; Richardson, Van Brakle, & St. Vil, 2014).

#### **Cultural and community assets**

Involvement in religious communities (e.g., attendance, affiliation with a given church, or religious faith) can facilitate moral development, racial pride, healthy self-esteem, and self-efficacy, and in turn increased prosocial competence, including academic success and civic engagement, among both rural and non-rural African American youth (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). For African-American youth, the church also increases

their connections to other adults with whom they can build supportive relationships. Church involvement may affect adolescents directly as well as indirectly through the support that their parents gain from church members and neighbors (Black, Cook, Murry, & Cutrona, 2005).

Communities also contribute to positive development of AAB. Community members, teachers, and relatives mentor AAB through modeling, advocacy, direction, and emotional support (Hurd, Tan, & Loeb, 2016). Such mentoring contributes to improved educational engagement, including greater rates of retention and success in higher education (Hurd et al., 2016). Growing up in a close-knit community is beneficial to development. In these neighborhoods, adults support each other and engage in collective socialization, i.e., monitoring neighborhood children (Burton & Jarrett, 2000; Simons et al., 2002).

AC helps in this regard by providing a compelling counter narrative that recognizes adaptive behaviors arise in response to risky environments. PYD offers insights about adaptation within environments that may be adverse but are more auspicious due to familial, community, and cultural assets that mitigate the effects of adversity. Together, AC and PYD provide a conceptually compelling basis for interrogating and understanding positive development of AAB in the face of environmental, social, political, and economic structural inequities.

### **Integrating a social justice perspective into developmental research**

Development of AAB will not be fully understood until the issues discussed here related to disparate treatment and inequitable access to resources are integrated into and used to contextualize discussions the findings. This means that researchers must attend to the ways differences in access to social, political, and economic resources and disparate treatment overtly and indirectly influence developmental pathways and outcomes (Tolan et al., 2017).

### **Research humanizing AAB**

A social justice perspective implies an imperative to understand and combat stereotyping, stigma, and their effects. This may be an especially difficult challenge for developmental science. Stevenson (2016) observes that existing developmental research on AAB is itself replete with biases and limitations. As a whole, this body of work focuses narrowly on risk factors and

employs group-comparison designs in which the outcomes of European American youth are the standard used to evaluate the development of AAB. The concentrated attention on risks and the often-unfavorable comparisons to a European standard has a cumulative effect of dehumanizing AAB and blocking empathy for the struggles they may face. Moreover, adherence to traditional theories and methodologies to study AAB restricts the ability of researchers to conceptualize differential pathways along which humans manage challenges, enable self-capabilities, and fulfill goals within the conditions they face. Adoption of a social justice perspective on AAB may lead to a more empathic and humanizing view of them and focus on their strengths instead of their risks for dysfunction. This would make it possible to reconstrue AAB as empowered, i.e., as actively directing and managing their development; seeking opportunities and resources to align with needs; and optimizing their opportunities and prospects for goal attainment (Watts, 2010).

### **Family research**

A social justice approach would also open up opportunities for significant advances in our understanding of how youth overcome economic resource limitations and learn to access alternative social resources and opportunities to meet their developmental needs than from an overriding concern about the effects of risks (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998). In this regard, the role of family life would be a key. Research on family life might lead to insights about how AAB access resources to mitigate the consequences of economic and social injustice. For example, future research studies could explore the mechanisms through which supportive and emotionally expressive relationships with parents mitigate the effects of negative stereotyping on AAB. Research could also interrogate in great detail how AAB adapt, set, and accomplish goals, cope, access, and use available supports, and draw from cultural heritage and close familial and community ties to do well (Tolan et al., 2017).

### **Intervention research**

Investigations may also explore the key organizational and interpersonal features that make programs serving AAB successful. Insights from this work could be useful for informing others engaged in educational and developmental support of AAB, provide focus for empirical tests of the program efficacy, and provide

theoretical basis for interpreting how programs play a positive role in the development of AABs. The value of a social justice perspective is evident in research findings on family, church, and community use of strategies such as persevering with hope, calling out perpetrators of bigotry, and reciting oral histories to reframe events and in turn mitigate the adverse effects of historical trauma. While not addressing directly the sources of unfairness, these strategies provide youth with alternative attributions for the causes of their plight. These alternate worldviews correct the distortions that fuel self-blame, misdirected hostility, and alienation from conventional avenues to success and wellbeing. Similarly, these programs reinforce positive ethnic identity (e.g., heritage and historical basis for identity) and bind youth to community through reciprocal responsibility.

For example, YouthPower in Boston offers a specific model for engaging AABs and other youth in community-based participatory research and community organizing to help shift how youth view their challenges and responsibilities. These include careful and systematic documenting of youth–police encounters and subsequent sharing of that information with police toward changing how police see youth. Similarly, youth organize communities for political action, social connection, and collective efficacy – directly connecting personal empowerment to changing the social systems in which they are developing (<https://www.youthpower.org/youthpower-our-approach>). YouthPower may work because it provides opportunities for youth involvement in meaningful activities and in decisions that affect their lives. This approach is captured in the youthful cry of “Nothing about us without us.”

Communities United in Chicago (<https://communitiesunited.org/>) is another example of a community-based youth development organization that engages youth with violence exposure and deprivation-related trauma histories to connect to the organization for personal development. Youth explore newly gained insights about their personal development to date in order to create a vision of how their futures selves might be constructed. The organization offers job training that includes business interests of the youth and harnesses their successes into state-level influence on policies related to youth treatment in schools (e.g., documenting youth voice and applying that voice in public hearings to change expulsion related to illegal substance use incidents in schools). These are just two examples of shifting the internal narrative that is based in recognition of the extraordinary challenges of

AABs. Other research-based interventions emphasize the intersection of masculinity, culture, and positive development, often referred to as manhood development programs. These manhood programs connect youth with community elders, provide cultural and political education for critical consciousness, enhance ethnic pride and personal agency, and provide opportunities for employment, community engagement, and political action (Watts, Diemer, & Voigt, 2011). These programs have in common a social justice perspective that provides AAB a context that helps to combat the negative messages they receive from society and provides support in claiming resources needed to develop. Many of these programs promote prosocial development through opportunities for serving others, mentoring, and racial socialization that promotes consciousness-raising, political awareness, and a positive identity.

Developmental science must continue in its efforts to contribute to social justice by exploring how African-American boys and families cope with trauma, and identify conditions of resource provisions that can make a difference in their lives. A social justice approach that incorporates AC and/or PYD can elaborate, illuminate, and guide developmental science toward contributing to health, equity, and social justice. Although the research to date on the effects of familial, cultural, and community assets has been illuminating, we have just scratched the surface of what can be known about resources available to support the development of AAB. Additional research on cultural strengths, family relationships, and community supports is needed along with research that focuses on how AAB make use of these resources. This knowledge will be essential to support AAB until our nation implements bolder policies to reduce income inequality, and we confront the vestiges of racism more courageously. Finally, because development does not occur in a vacuum, there is a need to consider ways in which multiple systems that are structurally and functionally integrated and embedded in history and sociocultural systems, including educational, public policy, governmental, and economic systems, affect the developmental trajectories of males of color.

### **Recommendations for developmental science**

In summary, we recommend the following steps to help developmental science increase the impact, relevance, and validity of research on vulnerable children and youth by embracing a social justice perspective, and move it toward the goal of improving the

developmental outcomes for AAB and other vulnerable populations:

1. Incorporate notions of social justice as a frame for its research to contextualize interpretation of its findings related to AAB and other similarly disadvantaged groups. Integrate into the framing of research questions and interpretation of findings a fuller consideration of social justice that acknowledges the pervasive and complex effects of racial intolerance and economic inequity on development.
2. Balance the focus on vulnerable populations by giving added attention to the strengths they possess and the competencies they develop. Move beyond a focus on risk and on conceptions of AAB in terms of deficiencies or as passive victims.
3. Design and evaluate intervention to enhance AAB's capacity to negotiate their environments. Research in this tradition could aim to identify ways to eliminate the most impactful barriers, end resource inequities and combat bias and social marginalization.
4. Prioritize research that not only illuminates structural and systemic impediments to positive development but that also identify effective strategies to overcome those impediments.
5. Go farther and investigate the underlying causes of disparate treatment of AAB. For example, this may lead to studies of the effects of reducing the toxicity of social environments, combatting white racism, providing access to resources, and generating ideas about ways to reduce and resist social marginalization.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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