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The Influence of Peer Experiences on Bravado Attitudes among African American Males

Michael Cunningham and
Leah Newkirk Meunier

Developing an identity, or a sense of self, becomes more salient during adolescence than during the childhood years. African American males—like all males—develop a heightened awareness of adult male role expectations during this period. They also look to their peers for social acceptance and popularity relative to the peer group. Their development of self-understanding is, therefore, influenced by larger cultural expectations of what it means to be a man and also their perceptions of themselves in relation to their peers. This normative developmental process occurs within a social environment, with each adolescent boy addressing questions of identity in ways that respond to his immediate surroundings (e.g., home, school, peers, neighborhood). Among African American males living in high-risk neighborhoods, research has found that such males often develop an identity that can be characterized as "bravado" (i.e., hypermasculine or macho) (Cunningham, 1999, 2001; Spencer, 2001; Spencer, Cunningham & Swanson, 1995). However, few researchers have empirically examined this process of developing such an attitude or identity. It is unknown, for example, how peers shape the development of this type of attitude. It is also unclear whether this attitude is a coping strategy or is simply a sign of vulnerability. In this chapter, we explore the role of peers in the bravado attitudes of adolescent African American males who live in high-risk neighborhoods. We also explore the meaning of bravado attitudes among these young men.

The chapter is organized in four sections. First, we define bravado attitudes and review the small but extant literature on the association between bravado attitudes and various types of psychological and behavioral outcomes. Second, we discuss a theoretical framework used to examine how perceptions of peers are associated with bravado attitudes among African American males. Third, we present findings from our empirical study of this topic. Finally, we discuss the meaning of our findings and suggest that bravado attitudes may be both a coping strategy and a sign of vulnerability for African American males.

Bravado Attitudes

Researchers examining bravado attitudes in males have used varying definitions of the construct. It has been referred to as an expression of stoicism (Pollack, 2001; Pollack & Schuster, 2000, p. 18; Taubman, 1986) and objectivity of women (Serniak, 1992). Although these definitions might transcend racial groups, the examples given in the research often exclude the experiences of males of color. Discrimination and racism influence the identities of males of color (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Spencer & Dornbusch, 1990) and this experience needs to be taken into account in any formulation of identity development. Researchers who have examined identities in males of color have often found that an identity that is common among this broad population, particularly among African American males, is one that is characterized by bravado attitudes or "cool pose." This "cool pose," they argue, is a response to feelings of invisibility and discrimination in the United States (Majors, 1991; Majors & Billson, 1992). Majors and Billson (1992) claim: "Black males, especially those who are young and live in the inner cities of our nation, have adopted and used cool masculinity—or as we prefer to call it, 'cool pose'—as a way of surviving in a restrictive society" (p. 2).

Although the research on bravado attitudes and cool pose are useful in helping us to understand the experiences of males of color, the research rarely attempts to connect bravado attitudes to normative processes of identity development. Additionally, the definitions of bravado attitudes often suggest that they are simply displays of emotional weakness (Pollack, 2001). What is generally missing in the research is an empirical examination of the precursors of bravado attitudes and an exploration of the ways in which bravado attitudes may serve different purposes, includ-

ing assuring survival, for males of color growing up in high-risk neighborhoods.

A few researchers have made an explicit link between bravado attitudes and other variables. For example, Cunningham (1999) conducted a longitudinal examination of how community factors impacted bravado attitudes in African American adolescent males. The results indicated that bravado attitudes were linked to perceptions of hassles associated with being a teenager (e.g., parents interrupting and monitoring phone conversations and whom teens hang out with or where they go). Adolescents who perceived their parents as constantly hassling them were more likely to express a bravado attitude than those who did not have such experiences with their parents. Additionally, negative neighborhood experiences such as being followed in public places (e.g., shopping malls) or perceptions of being harassed by police while "hanging out" with friends were linked to bravado attitudes. The longitudinal results (two years later) indicated that the adolescent perceptions of parental hassles *did not,* however, have a long-term impact on bravado attitudes. Instead, only the negative experiences in public places continued to be significantly associated with bravado attitudes over time.

In another study of African American males and females (see Stevenson, 1997), the anticipation that one might be a victim of community violence was significantly associated with stoic responses such as bravado attitudes. However, bravado attitudes were only evident among African American males who lived in high-risk urban neighborhoods. Spencer (2001) expanded on this research and also found that living in high-risk neighborhoods was associated with bravado attitudes. In contrast, however, to previous research on bravado attitudes that presents this construct solely as a negative outcome, Spencer describes bravado attitudes as "a reactive coping style" that is not only a normal part of identity development among some youth living in high-risk environments, but is also necessary for psychological survival. She argues, further, that bravado attitudes are linked to experiences in the home, school, and neighborhood. Within these environments, the peer group is especially salient.

Peer Influences

While peers are considered critical to healthy adolescent development, little is known about the influence of peers or peer groups on the develop-

ment of African American males (Way & Chen, 2000). Peer groups during adolescence are rewarding because of the opportunities that they provide for social comparisons (Erwin, 1993). Similarities between group members are seen as providing a consensual validation of the adolescent's thoughts, feelings, and behavior. But groups not only validate the individual's identity, they also tend to make their members more similar to each other and different from the out-group. In order to be accepted by the group, there is pressure to conform to group expectations and standards (Brown, 1999). Even though research has suggested that the development of antisocial behavior may be closely linked to peer group processes or to peers in general (Poulin, Dishion & Haas, 1999), the role of peers in the development of bravado attitudes specifically is unclear.

Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST)

Our theoretical framework for investigating the influence of peers on the development of bravado attitudes is Spencer's (1995) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST). This perspective integrates Erikson's theory of identity formation, Piaget's notion of formal operations, and Bronfenbrenner's (1989) ecological perspective, with emphasis placed on the self-appraisal process (Swanson, Spencer & Petersen, 1998). Specifically, the PVEST framework suggests that identity processes, especially for people of color, are linked to risk experiences, stresses encountered, coping methods employed, adaptive identity processes, and patterned outcomes (e.g., good mental health or school engagement versus compromised mental health or school dropout) (Spencer, 1995). The model takes into account structural and contextual barriers to identity formation and their implications for psychological processes such as self-appraisal. This model is particularly appropriate for examining adolescence because it helps us understand how the neighborhood or community context influences adolescents' self-perception and attitudes.

Although many have argued that adolescence is a particularly difficult period in the lifespan (Arnett, 1999; Erikson, 1959), this period may be even more difficult for African American male adolescents from poor families living in high-risk environments. Being an economically disadvantaged minority group member, he may find it difficult to achieve posi-

tive developmental outcomes because of prejudice, discrimination, or barriers to full opportunity for personal growth (Cunningham, 1999; Cunningham & Spencer, 1996, 2000; Gibbs et al., 1989). In general, issues not faced by majority youth complicate the life experiences of minority adolescents in the United States. Political, cultural, economic, and social forces interact in complex ways with identity development, self-image, relations with peers, school achievement, and career goals (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Spencer & Dornbusch, 1990). These interactions all occur within specific neighborhood and community contexts in which the peer group plays a significant role. The current study uses the PVEST framework to investigate the association between perceptions of peers and bravado attitudes.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 356 adolescent African American boys aged 11–15. Respondents were sixth, seventh, and eighth graders who attended public schools in a large urban Southeastern American city. Although these boys were middle school students, their ages ranged from eleven to fifteen at Time 1 of data collection (M age = 13.22, SD = 1.09). Some of these adolescents have been retained in school once, twice, and in some cases three times (e.g., 30% have been retained at least once in their school career).

The boys were part of a larger cross-sectional longitudinal study, Promotion of Academic Competence (Project PAC) (Spencer, 1989). This research project was concerned with the development of competence and resilience of African American youth. The students were randomly selected from four middle schools and were given informed consent forms to obtain permission from their parents. Out of the four schools, over 80% of consent forms were returned at two of the schools and the other two schools had return rates above 70%. At three of the four schools, 80–90% of the students received free or reduced lunch support. At the fourth school, approximately 70% of the students received free or reduced lunch. The sample is representative of African American families living under impoverished conditions.[1]

Procedures

As a part of the Project PAC sample, students were seen in small groups at their respective schools; they completed survey instruments about peers and about bravado attitudes during one of three sessions. The majority of the researchers were the same race of the participants. All researchers were well-trained graduates, undergraduates, or older adults who were hired specifically as adolescent interviewers.

Measures

Peer Influence

The Peer Factors scale (Cunningham, 1994) was used to assess adolescents' perceptions of their peers. The scale was taken from items from the Project PAC survey (Spencer, 1989). The scale was confirmed with principle components analysis followed by varimax rotation. Nine factor groups were developed with factor loadings of .60 or greater. The resulting factors assessed perceptions of peers in the immediate contexts of the adolescents (for a detailed description of the method see Cunningham, 1994). The factors are described as perceived peer factors because they are based on the boy's own view of his experience. In accordance with the PVEST perspective, the emphasis of the scale is on self-appraisal processes as they relate to interactions with peers. The participants answered the questions about themselves and their perceptions of their peer relationships. For example, in the first factor named *Negative Self Perceptions,* students were asked how they felt when they were with their peer groups. This factor has four items and a Cronbach's alpha of .74. An example item is, "I am not much good at anything." The second factor was named *Necessary to Talk About Problems.* It has five items and a Cronbach's alpha of .76. The items describe behaviors or attitudes that facilitate mental health such as, "It is necessary to talk to someone about your problems." This theme of self in relation to peers continued with the third factor, which was comprised of four items and described a *Sense of Alienation* (e.g., "Others don't understand my problems" $\alpha = .70$). The fourth factor was similar to the third; however, the three items described *Feelings of Unpopularity* within a school context (e.g., "This school is too big and other kids do not know me" $\alpha = .76$). In contrast to factor four, the fifth described positive interactions within one's school context. It has three

items and was labeled *Good Self and Context Match* ($\alpha = .77$). The items were, "I feel comfortable in a mixed race class, all African American class, and an all White class." The sixth factor tapped into adolescent experiences of increased self-awareness. It has two items and was labeled *Worry About Acceptance* (e.g., "I worry about being liked" "I worry about having friends" $\alpha = .71$). The seventh peer factor was concerned with *School Popularity.* It has three items and $\alpha = .73$ (e.g., "The girls or boys like me at school"). The eighth factor focused on a physical comparison of one's self to one's peers and it was labeled *Self is Better Than Peers.* The students were asked to describe their physical maturation as compared to their same aged peers. For example, "Compared to your peers, are your physical changes early, about the same time or later?" ($\alpha = .80$). The last factor described dangerous situations in the neighborhood. It has two items and is labeled *Peer/Gang or Turf Hassles* ($\alpha = .80$) (e.g., "I often avoid turf wars" and "I am often hassled by gangs").

Bravado Attitudes

To assess bravado attitudes, the modified Machismo Inventory (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984) was used. This protocol was administered as part of a one-on-one interview. The *Machismo Inventory* consists of 30 forced-choice items designed to measure the three components of the macho personality constellation (i.e., callous sex attitudes toward women, violence as manly, and danger as exciting), with ten items assessing each component. Examples of items from each component, with the macho response indicated first, are as follows: For "callous sex attitudes toward women," students were asked a set of items such as "When you are at a party, it is ok to get a girl drunk, high, or hot and she'll let you do whatever you want?"; or, "It's gross and unfair to use alcohol or drugs to convince a woman to have sex." An example of a "violence as manly" item was "I still enjoy remembering my first real fight"; or, "I hope to forget fights I've been in." A "danger as exciting" item was "I like to drive fast, right on the edge of danger"; or, "I like to drive safely, avoiding all possible risks." The Cronbach alpha coefficients for the current sample were .75 for overall Machismo scale (or bravado attitudes), .77 for Callous Sex attitudes subscale, .77 for Violence as manly subscale, and .71 for Danger as exciting subscale.

Results

To examine adolescents' perceptions of their peers, the Peer factors were converted to standardized scores (i.e., *Z*-scores). As such, the mean for each factor was centered at zero. The means in Figure 10.1 suggest that boys typically thought that it was *not* necessary to talk to others about their problems ($M = -.14$, $SD = 1.39$). Other researchers have linked this lack of openness to receiving help from others to bravado attitudes (Pollack, 2001) and emotional vulnerability (Spencer, 2001; Spencer, Cunningham & Swanson, 1995). Additionally, boys commonly perceived that they have to deal with gang or turf hassles in their respective neighborhoods ($M = .17$, $SD = 1.21$), which has been reported as common experiences for adolescents who live in high-risk neighborhoods (Aber et al., 1997).

The next set of analyses examined the relations between the perceptions of peers and bravado attitudes (i.e., believing that violence is manly, believing that dangerous situations are exciting, and having callous attitudes toward women). Pearson bivariate correlations (see Table 10.1) suggested that there was an inverse relation between age and negative self-perceptions, feelings of unpopularity, and low physical maturation. Younger teens were more likely than older teens to have negative self-perceptions, to feel unpopular, and to report low physical maturation. There was also a significant correlation between the "Necessary to talk about Problems" factor and each dimension of the bravado attitudes scale. When adolescents reported that they believed it was necessary to talk about their problems with peers, reports of bravado attitudes were low. In addition, there was a significant association between "Good self and context match" and each dimension of bravado attitudes. Feeling comfortable in the classroom context with peers was associated with low scores on bravado attitudes. Furthermore, there was a significant correlation between "A sense of alienation from peers" and two of the dimensions of bravado attitudes—"danger as exciting" and "callous sex attitudes toward women." Strong feelings of alienation from peers were associated with beliefs that dangerous activities were exciting and negative attitudes about women. Reports of frequent peer/gang or turf hassles were also significantly associated with two dimensions of bravado attitudes, namely, believing that dangerous activities were exciting and having negative attitudes about women.

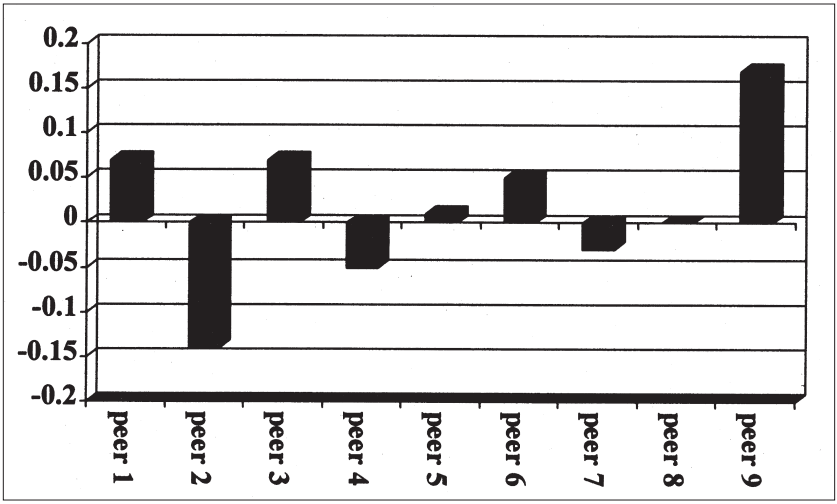

Figure 10.1 Means of Perceived Peer Factors

Note: Peer 1 = Negative Self Perceptions, *Peer 2* = Necessary to Talk About Problems, *Peer 3* = Sense of Alienation, *Peer 4* = Feelings of Unpopularity, *Peer 5* = Good Self and Context Match, *Peer 6* = Worry about Acceptance, *Peer 7* = School Popularity, *Peer 8* = Self is Better Than Peers, *Peer 9* = Peer/Gang or Turf Hassles

TABLE 10.1

Correlations between Perceptions of Peers and Bravado Attitudes

	Age	Bravado Attitudes	Danger as Exciting	Violence as Manly	Callous Sex Attitude
Peer1	–.10*	.06	.04	–.05	.17**
Peer2	.01	–.19***	–.14**	–.14**	–.19***
Peer3	–.04	.10*	.10*	.00	.17***
Peer4	–.22**	.04	.05	–.01	.06
Peer5	.02	–.23***	–.22***	–.16**	–.18***
Peer6	–.08	–.05	–.02	–.07	–.02
Peer7	.06	–.02	–.00	–.04	–.02
Peer8	–.13**	–.05	–.01	–.07	–.03
Peer9	–.02	.17**	.12*	–.07	.23***

Note:$^{+}$ = $p < .10$
* = $p < .05$
** = $p < .01$
*** = $p < .001$
Peer 1 = Negative Self Perceptions, *Peer 2* = Necessary to Talk About Problems, *Peer 3* = Sense of Alienation, *Peer 4* = Feelings of Unpopularity, *Peer 5* = Good Self and Context Match, *Peer 6* = Worry about Acceptance, *Peer 7* = School Popularity, *Peer 8* = Self is Better Than Peers, *Peer 9* = Peer/Gang or Turf Hassles

Discussion

The findings suggest that different aspects of peer experiences were related to bravado attitudes for African American males. Specifically, peer experiences in school and in the neighborhood were significantly associated with various dimensions of bravado attitudes. Alienation from peers, not feeling willing or able to speak with someone about problems, not feeling comfortable with peers in a classroom, and experiencing gang/turf problems in the neighborhood were all related to dimensions of bravado attitudes. Those males who seem more at risk interpersonally with their peers were more likely to report bravado attitudes than those who are less at risk in their peer environments. Poulin, Dishion, and Haas (1999) have found that friendships low in trust and satisfaction were associated with delinquent behaviors among adolescent males. This finding, along with the current findings, suggests that helping males develop positive peer relationships should be the focus of prevention and intervention programs serving adolescent male populations. Furthermore, adults working with youth should pay attention to the neighborhood context from which the youth come. Turf wars and gang struggles may pose a particularly difficult obstacle for many African American males living in high-risk environments. These experiences in the neighborhood, as suggested by our data, may play a large role in explaining why these males maintain bravado attitudes.

These findings have implications not only for practice but also for research. Based on the current findings, there is a clear need to further explore how multiple contexts, such as schools, neighborhoods, and the home environment, impact (separately and simultaneously) adolescent attitudes about themselves. How does school, for example, shape adolescent males' attitudes about themselves? Researchers have noted that African American males are strongly influenced by negative school environments that disproportionately place them in special education courses, do not consider them for gifted programs, and have low educational aspirations for them in general (see Ford & Harmon, 2001; Ford & Harris, 2000; Garibaldi, 1992, 1997). Our findings suggest that not feeling comfortable in class relates to bravado attitudes. These findings imply that the experience of school for African American youth makes a difference in their development (see Way & Robinson, 2003). Supportive school environments that do not perceive African American males as threatening and problematic might facilitate positive identity development among these males.

The finding regarding the association between turf wars and gang problems and bravado attitudes supports Spencer's argument that bravado attitudes are coping strategies based on perceptions of safety in the environment. Bravado attitudes may be adaptive, or at least necessary for survival, in high-risk communities. However, bravado attitudes may also be associated with vulnerability, as suggested by the fact that such attitudes have often been found to be associated with negative outcomes. For instance, Swanson, Cunningham, and Dottererr (2002) found that bravado attitudes mediated the relation between stressful life events and depression in African American males. In other words, the negative effects of stressful life events on depressive symptoms were heightened when there were strong endorsements of bravado attitudes. Therefore, bravado attitudes may be necessary for survival or indicative of a coping strategy but, at the same time, linked to vulnerability such as depression, alienation, and/or not being able to ask for help from others. Yet it is unclear whether these adaptive and maladaptive responses continue to be both adaptive and maladaptive over the long term. Perhaps as African American adolescent males become young adults, what was once adaptive and maladaptive becomes simply maladaptive.

Although the present research suggests that peers influence bravado attitudes among African American males, caution should be taken when interpreting the findings. Because the study is correlational, there is no way of determining the direction of effect between peer influences and bravado attitudes. It is plausible that maintaining bravado attitudes leads to alienation from peers, not believing that one should talk about problems with others, and not feeling comfortable in the classroom with peers rather than vice versa. Furthermore, there may be other aspects of peer relationships that were not investigated in the current study, such as feeling trusted and secure in one's relationship with one's closest friends, that may be an important predictor and/or outcome of bravado attitudes. Finally, our research did not address the mental health and behavioral consequences of bravado attitudes. While previous research, for example, has suggested that bravado attitudes have negative effects on mental health outcomes, it is unclear how or in what ways such attitudes negatively affect mental health outcomes or whether these effects are long-term. Future research needs to explore more fully the acquisition, maintenance, and consequences of bravado attitudes for African American males.

NOTES

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1. The parents also completed an extensive in-home interview. From self-report family income information, it was determined that 58% of the students' families met federal poverty guidelines (i.e., for a family size of four, an annual family income of $13,950). All of the in-home parental interviewers were same-race examiners.

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