Moral Choices: Towards a conceptual Model of Black Male Moral Development (BMMD)

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Abstract

This article explores moral identity and development with a focus on the intersection of race and gender. The authors' address this purpose by: a) discussing morality and related concepts; b) examining foundational literature on moral identity development; c) identifying unique considerations for Black morality; d) understanding Black Identity in relation to moral concepts; e) examining Black male gender-roles in relation to morality and moral depictions of Black males; and f) proposing a conceptual model of Black male moral identity development. Overall, this article negates Eurocentric conceptions of morality by illustrating the importance of Black community values of collectivity and agency.

Black males are frequently presented in the media as amoral beings. Negative depictions of Black males in television, radio, print, and the internet portray them as gangsters, rapists, womanizers, drug dealers and thugs. These depictions are rarely balanced with moral portrayals of Black males as successful contributors to society, family-oriented, working professionals, positive role models, or leaders. Negative representations of these males serve to shape societal perceptions of Black boys, youth, and adults (Hall, 2001; Hutchinson, 1997; Jackson, 2006). At a minimum, these perceptions demarcate Black males from being 'good' or 'righteous' individuals, rendering them as morally ambiguous beings. More often, they are presented as the vision of evil, embodying the loss of American morality.

These perceptions of Black males underscore the importance of understanding their identities and development as moral individuals. However, understanding identity among Black males is a complex task, given the nexus of moral, Black, and male-role identities and their development. These 'multiple identities' intersect in unique ways which negate a siloed examination; necessitating a more complicated and layered understanding of Black males which surpasses a surface-level understanding of identity, delving deeper into the intricacies of the Black male in America.

Bearing this in mind, this article explores moral identity and development with a focus on the intersection of race and gender. The authors' address this purpose by: a) discussing morality and related concepts; b) examining foundational literature on moral identity development; c) identifying unique considerations for Black morality; d) under-
standing Black Identity in relation to moral concepts; e) examining Black male gender-roles in relation to morality and moral depictions of Black males; and f) proposing a conceptual model of Black male moral identity development. Overall, this manuscript negates Eurocentric conceptions of morality by illustrating the importance of Black community values of collectivity and agency.

**Morality & Related Concepts**

Morality is a concept closely related to that of ethics (Exley, 2003-04). According to Starratt (2004) while “Ethics is the study of what constitutes a moral life… Morality is the living, the acting out of ethical beliefs and commitments” (p. 5). Key to these definitions is the delineation between belief (thought) and behaviors (action). Given this notion, morality is a twofold concept entailing both one’s commitment to ‘good’ courses of action as well as one’s actualization of those commitments. The twofold nature of this concept is necessitated by the reality that moral commitments and moral actions are not always synonymous. For instance, an individual may have the ability to reason and internalize moral commitments without performing those moral actions, or performing them irregularly. Further, one may engage in seemingly moral actions (i.e., protectionism or seeking the betterment of family, friends, and local community) or display moral characteristics (e.g., tolerance, friendliness, conscientiousness) without a commitment to moral beliefs (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998).

Engaging in moral behavior requires a capacity to employ moral reasoning and moral judgment. Moral reasoning refers to the rationalization process of whether decisions, actions, or behaviors are morally grounded (Woolfolk, 2008). Moral reasoning is impacted by moral affect, the emotional element of moral considerations, typified by feelings of guilt, fulfillment, and confidence associated with ethical concerns (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010). Once decisions have been rationalized, individuals formulate judgments. When those judgments align with their moral convictions; they are referred to as moral judgments.

As individuals become more committed to actions which demonstrate moral reasoning and moral judgments their identity as moral beings take form. One’s identity as a moral being is similar to that of other social identities (e.g., male-role identities, racial identities, religious identities), in that it is impacted by social phenomena whereby one places high importance on this identity as an external marker of self, and regulates their thoughts, actions, and attitudes based upon this identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002). This resonates with Erickson (1964, 1968) view of identity as an honest portrayal of one’s core commitments. With this in mind, the progression towards a moral identity has been conceptualized as a stage process; the next section explores foundational literature on this stage development.

**Foundational Literature on Moral Identity Development**

While a number of moral theories exist, several key theories have served to shape the field of moral identity development. Piaget (1932) espoused a theory of moral judgment which viewed morality as a developmental process. This theory is characterized by two stages of morality and a pre-moral stage. In the pre-moral stage, respect and awareness for rules bears little meaning. Children do not consider their actions to be right or wrong, rather this conception is beyond their level of development. In this first stage of morality, referred to as heteronomous morality, respect for rules and authority is evident. Rules are believed to emanate from powerful authorities (e.g., God, family). These rules are affirmed as unquestionable and unchanging. Moral absolutism, where morality is concrete, is of primary concern, and the exaction of justice for inappropriate actions is an expectation.

The second stage of Piaget’s theory is referred to as autonomous morality. In this stage, children view morality in a more abstract manner. Rules are viewed as subjective, malleable, and challengeable. Punishments are expected to be equivalent to the violations committed. It is important to note that Piaget’s theory discussed the development of moral judgment in a similar fashion to cognitive development (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010), placing importance on the role of social influence in one’s development, a socially constructed view of morality. The notion was advanced by subsequent scholars of moral development, most notably Kohlberg, whose work was adapted from Piaget’s scholarship.

Kohlberg (1980; 1981; 2008) proffers a six-stage model of moral development. These six stages transition through three levels of moral reasoning, preconventional, conventional, and postconventional. At the preconventional level, moral judgments are extrinsic and guided by individual’s needs as well as the guidelines/rules of others. In stage one, adherence to rules and authority is based upon the desire to avoid punishment. What is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are determined based upon the consequences of the action (e.g., physical harm,
rewards). For instance, a child may steer clear of touching an electric socket to avoid a spanking or reprimand from family. In stage two, conceptions of morality are guided by personal needs. The rightness of actions is based upon whether one's needs are fulfilled. Human relations are perceived through the lens of exchanges. The fairness of these exchanges is interpreted as what is 'right'; however, reciprocity of exchanges are not based on moral virtues.

The conventional level of moral reasoning is typified by person's seeking approval from others. For the purpose of pleasing others, individuals work to meet familial, immediate community, and societal expectations, customs, and laws. Conventional-level reasoning demonstrates two important components, conformity to expectations as well as upholding and supporting the advancement of the social structure which maintains these expectations. In stage three, rightness is associated with the 'good' or 'nice' persona, where actions which meet the approval of others are pursued. In addition, concern for others feelings, well-being, and maintaining trust gain importance. Others evaluate behavior based on intent as opposed to outcomes. In stage four, adherence to rules and authority are of primary concern. Following, supporting, and sustaining the social order are primary objectives as associated with one's duty to society.

Postconventional moral reasoning illustrates a transition away from belief in and maintenance of moral values based on extrinsic motivators. Rather, the individual begins to internalize moral values and the social order which sustains these values. In stage five, rightness of actions are associated with utilitarian reasoning based upon socially agreed upon norms, standards, and rules (i.e., a social contract). Upholding this social contract and the procedural values aligned with this contract are of importance. However, a relativistic view of right emerges as emphasis is placed on personal values and perspectives. As a result, 'right' becomes increasingly associated with legality. In stage six, the value given to actions emphasizes the importance of an individual's conscious, which evaluates 'good' and 'bad'. Credence is given to universal principles guided by virtues of justice, equity, and mutual respect as opposed to more objectivist laws, rules, and codes. These virtues guide individual evaluations of morality.

Gilligan (1982) responded to Kohlberg's theory, critiquing what she argues is a masculine centered model of development. Gilligan asserted that Kohlberg's theory of moral development also emphasizes Western values, favoring ideals such as individualism and the 'rule of law' (Blum, 1988; Woolfolk, 2008). She stated that most developmental theories are constructed based on the development of males, not females. Thus, Gilligan stated that females are portrayed as less moral than males due to clearly evident differences in their socialization processes. For instance, Kohlberg's model places what is commonly referred to as an 'ethic of justice' at the pinnacle of the stage development process (postconventional). According to Shapiro & Stefkovich (2005) the 'ethic of justice' (or morality of justice) conceptualizes moral dilemmas and decision-making based upon legality and "the more abstract concepts of fairness, equity, and justice" (p. 13). Noddings (2003) has noted that this orientation favors a moral absolutist understanding of morality which de-centers the importance of more relational virtues, such as feeling, compassion, understanding and trust.

In general, Gilligan (1982) argued that women are more likely to operate with an 'ethic of care' (or morality of care), a compassion-oriented framework for engaging in moral reasoning, making moral judgments. Research on a morality of care, particularly by Eva Skoe, illustrates a three level model of moral development. At level one, referred to as self-oriented, individuals exemplify egoism, in that they are concerned primarily with their own needs, progress, and well-being. Individuals are motivated by a desire to protect themselves from pain and maximize their pleasure, similar to Stage one of Kohlberg's models. An intermediary stage exists between level one and two, where individuals gain an awareness of the needs of others; they also begin to develop a dutiful desire to advance the well-being of others.

At level two, the other-oriented level, individuals manifest altruistic tendencies, placing concern for others well being above their own. Due to the externality of individual's perception of 'good', the welfare of others can be sought at one's own detriment. Prior to level three, individuals reach an intermediate stage where an understanding of the importance of balance between the needs of others and oneself becomes evident, though there is a tendency towards altruism. At level three, referred to as self-and-other oriented, individuals gain a healthy balance between self-centeredness and otherness. This occurs as individuals recognize the importance of their own welfare in relationship to that of others (Pratt, Skoe, & Arnold, 2004; Skoe, 2010; Skoe et al., 2002; Skoe & Marcia, 1991). As noted by Woolfolk (2008) this stage is similar to that of Kohlberg's stage three, in that morality is other-oriented and based upon familial and other social bonds.
ConSiderations for Black Morality

In a similar manner as Gilligan who challenges Kohlberg’s model for being male-centric, Walker and Snarey (2004) has suggested that Kohlberg’s model is not sensitive to differing cultural values, orientations, and traditions. They offer five values that provide an in-depth understanding of morality and moral development in the Black community. First, they noted that race and gender are central to the experience of Black men and women in society. As such, Black communities possess an understanding of the interrelationship between racism and sexism. This provides a firm foundation for Blacks to exude both an ethic of justice and an ethic of critique.

Second, Black morality is shaped by values of resistance to oppression as well as adjustment to Eurocentric cultural norms. These binary values are the result of a social reality which must be resilient to an oppressive society. Third, Afro-cultural beliefs, convictions, and values relevant to morality are influenced by spirituality and religion. These concepts serve as core elements of Black culture. As a result, one cannot distinguish between religion and ethics, as they are interwoven and inseparable. Fourth, agency serves as a core element of a cultural tradition which counters historical and contemporary subjugation. Fifth, community is a virtue whereby collectivity is enacted over resources, triumphs, and pitfalls to advance the survival of the whole. Thus, individuals must be understood in relation to their role in their community.

These five themes can be divided into two groups, moral considerations and virtues. In essence, the first three themes are moral considerations in that understanding the nexus of racism and sexism, the balance between resistance and accommodation, and the importance of religion in Black communities are of cardinal importance. These considerations serve as a foundation for any discussion or examination of morality and moral development in the Black community. The last two themes are virtues (highly esteemed values for moral living). Given the unique socio-historical barriers which have faced Blacks, agency and community/collectivity have emerged as cultural virtues which serve to: a) advanced Black survival, b) counter oppression, and c) advance the progression of the community, as a whole.

Walker and Snarey (2004) were concerned with the Eurocentric standards implied within Kohlberg’s model (similar to Gilligan’s Western values critique). As noted by Wainryb (2006) cultural patterns can reason-ably be divided in two groups, those cultures with an individualistic orientation and those with a collectivistic orientation. In general, Western countries (e.g., United States, Britain, France, Ireland, Australia) tend to employ individualistic orientations while Asian, African, and South American countries are more collectivistic. As such, individual development and triumphs are of high importance. Collectivistic cultures, such as that of Blacks, place emphasis on community and family (Ward, 1995). Progress is interdependent, where successes and failures are shared not only by the individual, but the community itself.

Wainryb (2006) stated that societies with an individualistic orientation favor a view of morality based upon justice. However, collectivistic cultures operate from a duty-based frame, giving credence to “action dictated by the rules and duties assigned by one’s role in the social system” (p. 212). Thus morality is based upon one’s relationship to the community, a view which is akin to the conventional moral reasoning level of Kohlberg’s model. As such, while Kohlberg favors a morality of justice, and Gilligan a morality of care, Black culture is a morality of community, whereby connectedness and communal progress are important values. This does not suggest a culture devoid of a care or justice morality; rather, one that embraces the importance of both. Walker and Snarey (2004) argued that Black morality must also be understood through the concept of agency. Their view of agency can be interpreted as a specialized kind of moral agency. In the moral development literature, moral agency refers to the ability of individuals to act and make decisions on their own accord. This occurs through moral reasoning and moral judgments (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli, 1996). Given that the purpose of agency is to counter oppression, which many would agree is immoral; the connection between morality and agency is best understood. In relationship to Kohlberg’s model, agency could be associated with the conventional and postconventional stages. In a postconventional view, moral reasoning is intrinsically motivated; however, a conventional perspective may also be employed in that agency is sought in relationship to familial and community bonds.

Walker and Snarey (2004) have argued that socioeconomic factors must be taken into consideration when evaluating morality as well as moral reasoning, judgment, and identity development. Their scholarship challenges the dichotomy presented by the morality of justice and morality of care dialogue which fails to adequately consider other virtues and their connectivity.
between justice and care. Their work is grounded in the notion that individual’s identity as moral beings cannot be examined in isolation from their racial/ethnic identities. It also connotes an understanding that experiences and perceptions of morality vary across cultures. The authors’ believe that this viewpoint is not necessarily postmodern or relativist in nature, but rather it suggests a more comprehensive and holistic view of morality which is equivalent to the complexities of moral dilemmas faced by individuals.

The arguments extended by Walker and Snarey (2004) mirror that of two additional ethical lenses, the ethic of critique (or morality of critique) and the ethic of Afri-community (or morality of Afri-community). The ethic of critique counters the ethic of justice; it is a critique of justice orientations which favor laws, rules, and codes for making moral judgments (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). A morality of critique is grounded in the notion that laws, procedures, and policy are created and sustained by the powerful to maintain and advance their domination in a social hierarchy (Caldwell, Shapiro & Gross, 2007). As such, this critical perspective identifies challenges that structures which permeate superiority, injustice, and inequality (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005).

The ethic of critique mirrors the spirit of Walker and Snarey’s (2004) model, especially their concept of agency (akin to moral agency) and their consideration of equality and accommodation. The alignment of this concept and consideration is grounded in an ideology which challenges a historical legacy and contemporary reality of oppression. Further, an ethic of critique validates the importance of multiple forms of marginality. This is aligned with Walker and Snarey’s notion of the importance of both racism and sexism in shaping the Black moral experience. It is also aligned with emerging conceptualizations of the interrelationship between social justice, moral reasoning, and moral practice (see St. John, 2009).

Walker and Snarey (2004) identified the importance of community as a foundational lens for understanding and investigating Black morality. The authors of this manuscript advance the notion of an ethic of Afri-community. This ethic places emphasis on the welfare of Black communities when engaging in moral reasoning. It connotes the value of ‘others’ in decision making processes, whereby the community has equal or greater importance than the individual. This moral lens is neo-utilitarian in nature. Utilitarianism emanates from the writings of David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill who advocated the importance of society as opposed to the individual. This philosophy is characterized by the maxim, ‘the greatest good for the greatest number’. In this conception, courses of action which produce the greatest pleasure for society as a whole are valued (Beckner, 2004; Strike, 2007).

From a neo-utilitarian lens, the scope of ‘the greatest good’ is limited to the Black community. While the focus of moral reasoning, judgments, and decision-making is centered in the local Black community, there is an understanding of the universality of struggle among Blacks. As such, an individual’s scope of racial identity (e.g., regional, national, pan-African) is what serves to limit the inclusivity of what connotes the ‘Black community’. Central to the morality of Afri-community is the notion of collectivity. The shared Black experience, marked by a historical legacy of oppression and resistance, has served to continue pre-slavery values of community progress. Thus, the success, failures, and challenges of individuals are collectively shared by that of the community.

Two important considerations clarify the role of these moral lenses (e.g., justice, care, critique, Afri-community) described in this article. First, as identified within the stages of moral development from Piaget to present, the final level of each model idealizes a virtue or combination of virtues which are not always attained. As such, the pinnacle of each stage model (postconventional, self- and other-oriented) is not always actualized. Second, the moral decision making process of each lens necessitates non-consequentialist and consequentialist action. Consequentialism refers to moral decision making which takes into account the outcome (or consequences) of decisions. This approach is an ‘ends’ as opposed to ‘means’ mode of decision making. In contrast, a non-consequentialist approach connotes the importance of maintaining objective laws, rules, and principles, removing morality from outcomes, but emphasizing the importance of unchanging moral standards. Gilligan’s (1982) critique of Kohlberg’s model extended the notion of a non-consequentialist ethic of justice, where ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ exists devoid of outcome. In contrast, the morality’s of care, critique, and Afri-community are all consequentialist in nature, where ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are determined by the outcomes of individual’s and their communities.

**Considerations for Black Racial Identity**

A complete understanding of Black morality is enhanced by an understanding of Black racial identity. In the 1970’s, Cross articulated a stage theory of Black
identity development. This theory was referred to as Nigrescence which referred to "the process of becoming Black" (Cross, 1978, p. 13). This theory explored the transition from a pro-White identity which was assimilationist in form, to an authentic, pro-Black identity. This theory affirmed that a positive Black concept was needed to overcome "attributes of compliance, subservience, repressed rage, and . . . oversensitivity to racial issues" (p. 14). The model was characterized by five stages, pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment. In the pre-encounter stage, an anti-Black social orientation exists where one's ideology is aligned with dominant Eurocentric cultural values. Guided by these cultural values, one may align more with an individualistic perspective. With this perspective, attention is given to one's own plight and advancement in the social order as opposed to collective progress. In all, at the pre-encounter stage, there is a negative view towards Black society and culture.

The second stage of this model is the encounter, where an event, series of events or circumstance prompts the individuals to reconsider their anti-Black worldview. As a result, one's identity in relationship to an alternative (non-dominant) outlook is considered. Cross noted that the encounter is a twofold process, involving the incident which allows the individual to become more receptive to an identity shift, and the process whereby one reconsiders and tests out new ideas, perceptions, and interpretations. In the immersion-emersion stage, individuals commit to a revised worldview which challenges Eurocentric notions, ideals, and values as well as the social systems which sustain them. In this process, one's Blackness is projected strongly; this includes glorifying Black heritage, people, and culture (while denigrating that of Whites). This projection can include rage, anger, and hatred towards Whites. However, one's internalization of Blackness is minimal as their identity is in flux, still being negotiated and redefined. Stage four, the internalization stage, illustrates an internalization of Blackness. This marks a transition toward a more healthy Black identity, where negative attitudes towards White people, society, and culture subside. While the Black community remains the primary domain for friendships, renegotiation of relationships with White occurs. In the final stage, referred to as internalization-commitment, one's Black identity is accompanied with a long-term commitment towards social change designed to advance the welfare of the community as a whole. In essence, one's identity matures towards a longstanding dedication to the Black community and collectivity (Cross, 1971).

Since the development of this theory, Cross's Nigrescence model has undergone changes. Most notably, this theory was revised in the 1990's, evolving from a linear developmental stage model to a multidimensional identity model. An important element of the new model was the acknowledgement of multiple social identities, in addition to race/ethnicity, which serve to shape the Black experience. Cross added identities which were associated with stages. The pre-encounter stage had two identities, assimilation and anti-Black. The immersion-emersion stage also had two identities, anti-White and intense Black involvement. The internalization-commitment stage was merged with internalization, and three associated identities were added, Black nationalist, biculturalist, and multiculturalist. In the 2000's, Cross again revised the development scale. In the revised scale, the identities associated with the pre-encounter stage changed. The anti-Black identity was transitioned into two separate identities, mis-education and self hatred. The identities in the internalization stage were also changed, as the multiculturalist identity was expanded into two distinct identities, multiculturalist racial and multiculturalist inclusive (Worrell, Cross, & Vandiver, 2001). In general, the distinction between multiculturalist racial and inclusive is that the latter desires or engages in coalition building beyond racial minority groups while the former builds coalitions only within racial minority groups (Vandiver, Cross, Worrell, & Phagen-Smith, 2002).

Why discuss racial identity in an article of Black male morality? Theoretical connections and research has suggested a relationship between racial and moral identity. For instance, Wright (1987) argued that social and moral consciousness was an integral aspect of Black identity development. This notion seems to be affirmed to research on Black identity which has found a significant relationship between this identity and moral development (see Helms, 1990; Parham & Williams, 1993; Richardson & Helms, 1994). Further, Moreland and Leach (2001) illustrated a conceptual relationship between the stages in Cross' model and that of Kohlberg's model. They suggest the following constructs and inclusive stages: external self (preconventional, pre-encounter); self-awareness (preconventional, encounter); shared community (conventional, immersion-emersion); and objectivity (postconventional, internalization). Moreland and Leach investigated the potential conceptual relationship between these models and concluded that "racial identity and moral judgments are linked and that emotionally embedded within Black
racial identity statuses differentially influences moral decision making” (p. 255). Similar findings between racial identity and moral development have been found among Whites as well (Sciarr & Gushue, 2003; Silvestri & Richardson, 2001). Further, the Black conception of morality as associated with the concepts of agency and community seem to resemble the internalization stage of Cross’s model. As noted, the internalization stage suggests an internalized commitment toward the progress of the Black community. It also connotes the importance of a core commitment to countering the historical and contemporary legacy of subjugation. In this section, we have illustrated the relationship between racial identity and morality; in the next section we explore a similar relationship between gender-role identity and morality.

Considerations for Gender-Role Identity

Males are socialized through their interactions to perform gender-role identities. Gender-role identities refer to the “beliefs about characteristics and behaviors associated with one sex as opposed to the other” (Woolfolk, 2008, p. 194). Thus, expectations of boyhood and manhood are shaped by social processes, with awareness of difference beginning at an early age. Since gender-roles are socially constructed, perceptions of male gender-roles are not only shaped by patriarchal figures (e.g., fathers, older brothers, uncles), but by all members of society (e.g., sisters, peers, co-eds), and through the media. However, since socialization varies by numerous factors (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, religion, culture), the construction of what it means to be male differs by one’s background (Kimmel & Messner, 2004).

Wade (1996) noted that Black males perceive traditional masculine roles to include: providing for one’s family, being goal-oriented, as well as aggression and competitiveness. These roles are common masculine ideals found across racial/ethnic groups. However, Wade also stated that non-traditional masculine ideals were endorsed by Black males, this included spirituality, community, interest in the welfare of others, compassion, and familial equality. The importance of spirituality resonates with that of Walker and Snarey’s notion of the interconnectedness of religion and ethics. Religion and spirituality are core elements of Black culture (Mattis, 2004), which has served as a source of inspiration to counter socio-political and economic injustices experienced by Black communities (Newlin, Knafl, & Melkus, 2002).

In particular, spirituality and religion have been identified as core elements of Black resistance and resiliency, as a coping mechanism for Black males (Herndon, 2003; Page, 2008). Additional research from Hammond and Mattis (2005) indicated that Black males also perceived responsibility to self, family, and community as important components of masculinity. The importance of community is echoed in the work of Ornelas, Amell, Tran, Royster, Armstrong-Brown, and Eng (2009), who noted that Black males “expressed a commitment to healthy collective action and social change that best originate[s] from and take[s] place within their communities” (p. 13). More specifically, Black male adults articulated a commitment to mentoring, modeling healthy behaviors, and advocating social conscious for Black youth. These ideals suggest the existence of a moral frame which is unique to the gender-role identity of Black males. Clear connections between Black gender role ideals and the previously espoused ‘morality of agency’ and the ‘morality of Afri-community’ can be drawn.

In contrast to these ideals, stereotypical depictions of gender-roles serve to sustain damaging conceptions of male identity. Oppression against women, engagement in sexually promiscuous behaviors, physical danger, and emotional stoicism are some of the negative outcomes of socially perceived roles of manhood (Phillips, 2006). Many popular stereotypes and personas of Black males depict them as amoral (less often) and immoral (more often). We maintain that Black males are no less, or more, moral than their counterparts from other racial/ethnic and gender groups. However, we suggest that there is an over-projection of Black amorality and immorality in popular communication mediums. These portrayals serve to validate, reinforce, and justify their ill-treatment and disregard by society as a whole. This reduces the angst of the dominant majority over the questionable treatment of Black males in social institutions (e.g., education, criminal justice system, health care). Thus, commonly accepted conceptions of Black male immorality have inevitably led to their mistreatment (e.g., overrepresentation in special education, criminal justice system, low-performing schools).

Majors and Billson (1992) introduced the concept of ‘cool pose’, a gender identity espoused by Black males where lack of caring about others and one’s own development and future are performed as a marker of masculinity. This identity exudes power, pride, and control as core values of manhood, often serving as a protective mechanism against societal oppression. In
general, depictions of Black gender-roles center around three primary stereotypes, the athlete, the entertainer, and the criminal (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Hawkins, 1998). While the first two stereotypes are morally ambiguous, the latter supposes otherwise. Further, these stereotypes can be interdependent in nature, thereby leading to a larger perception of immorality. Embedded within these stereotypes are numerous masculine roles. Like the stereotypes, masculine roles range from immoral to amoral to moral. Oliver (2006) identified three common masculine roles associated with Black males, usually evident in the ‘street’ context, including: “the tough guy/gangers, the player, and the hustler/balla” (p. 928). All roles portrayed in this context are clear examples of a/immoral views of Black males.

The tough guy/gangster role is typified by overt displays of hardness, toughness, aggression, and violence. Physical altercations are viewed as a pathway toward respect, notoriety, and masculinity. The player persona is representative of males who are womanizers. These males engage in sexual encounters with numerous partners; added respect is gained based upon greater numbers, control, and exploitation of partners. The hustler/balla is “a role orientation in which manhood is defined in terms of using one’s wits to aggressively pursue access to legitimate economic opportunities and the illicit resources of the ghetto to improve one’s economic and material condition” (Oliver, 2006, p. 930). Economic gain is attained through the sale of pirated/stolen goods, prostitution, and dealing drugs. These three common roles/personas serve to further illustrate how morality is not usually associated to Black males.

Due to their confrontation with the false ideas of gender-identity, many Black males will experience gender-role conflict. As noted by O’Neil, Helms, Gable, David, and Wrightsman (2010) “gender-role conflict is a psychological state where gender roles have negative consequences or impact on a person or others” (p. 32). Fear of performing socially perceived behaviors associated with femininity result in this conflict. In general, research on gender-role conflict suggests six areas of strain; a) emotional stoicism, difficulty or refusal to express one’s emotions; b) homophobia, fear, hatred, or stereotypical perceptions of homosexuals; c) valuing control of and power over others as well as competition; d) restriction of affection towards others; e) fixation with achievement and gaining glory in one’s professional, personal, and civic life; and f) health care issues due to lifestyle traits (e.g., poor diet, sexual promiscuity, substance abuse, stress) (O’Neil, 1981; 1982, 1990; 2008).

Edwards and Jones (2009) offer a model of gender identity development. This model features three stages, with the second stage having three phases. In stage one, perceptions of manhood are external. These expectations are communicated to males through both the dominant society and one’s own cultural group. In stage two, individuals perform gender-roles in accordance with these external perceptions. Three phases are associated with this stage, 1) a desire to cover up elements of one’s identity which are in conflict with perceptions of manhood. This phase is also associated with feelings of inadequacy in fulfilling these perceptions. This occurs at both a conscious and unconscious level; 2) hiding aspects of one’s true identity which do not conform to societal expectations (referred to as ‘wearing a mask’); and 3) recognizing that fulfillment of social expectations can result in immoral practices which degrade women and complicate one’s authentic identity. This occurs through experiences where stereotypical gender-roles are performed, often resulting in the degradation of others. In stage three, one begins to develop a genuine gender identity. This is a result of recognizing that the ‘mask’ is not an accurate representation oneself and that the consequences of performing stereotypical gender roles are not desired. What does it mean to be moral? Do conceptions of morality differ by race? Or, gender? What does it mean to be moral, and Black, and male? The next section incorporates these considers into a model of Black male moral development.

Towards a Model of Black Male Moral Development (BMMD)

Thus far, we have provided a cursory overview of Black moral identity, Black identity development, and male gender roles. This was presented to illustrate the complex interplay between moral, racial, and gender identities, all which serve as important considerations for the development of a conceptual model of Black Male Moral Development (BMMD). In constructing a conceptual model, the author’s considered similar stage developments patterns from numerous models.
With respect to morality, we drew from Gilligan’s (1982) conception of an ‘ethic of care’ and Walker and Snarey’s (2004) considerations of Black morality. Though Gilligan’s proffered the ethic of care as pertaining to women, a core element of this model is the importance of social connectedness; this is a response to Western conceptions of individualism. Skoe’s (2010) three levels of care serve as the framework for portraying this ethical lens. Given the importance of community and collectivity in Black morality as articulated by Walker and Snarey, Gilligan’s model provided an anti-thesis to the dominant majority conception of morality espoused within Kohlberg’s model. While several important considerations can be construed from Walker and Snarey’s (2004) elements of Black morality, the author’s were most concerned with illustrating the importance of moral ‘agency’ and ‘community’ as discussed within the realm of the ‘morality of critique’ and the ‘morality of Afri-community’. Kohlberg’s model (1980) was also included, given its widespread use in the field, as well as Moreland & Leach’s (2001) research which illustrates significant relationships between the stages in Kohlberg’s (1980, 1981, 2008) model and that of Cross’s (1971) model. In particular, we examined the general levels in this model (pre-conventional, conventional, post-conventional).

In terms of Black identity, Cross’s internalization stage has similar considerations to the two aforementioned moralities. This further suggests the relationship between morality and cultural dispositions, patterns, and values. Cross’ model was also used as a guidepost for developing our conceptual model given its widespread use in investigating the Black experience. Much of the gender role identity information presented herein illustrated socialization issues around Black masculinity. However, literature on Black gender identity indicated an orientation towards community, collectivity, and spirituality (Hammond & Mattis, 2005; Ornelas et al., 2009; Wade, 1996). As noted by Walker and Snarey (2004), notions of morality are best understood through the interrelationship of religion and ethics in the Black community. Thus, spirituality, especially as influenced by the ‘Black church’ serves as a primary domain for Black male moral socialization. The author’s model of moral development was also influenced by Edwards and Jones (2009) model of male gender-identity. This model sufficiently characterizes the moral dilemmas that masculine socialization poses to all males, including Black boys, youth, and adults.

To construct our model, we aligned similar stages in each of the identified models and concepts. This allowed the author’s to take into account the multiple identities.
of Black males in the construction of a conceptual model of morality development. Though presented in a stage process, the BMMD is multidimensional, non-linear, and dynamic in nature. It represents a continual cycle of moral development throughout the lifespan. It should be noted that each moral decision or consideration may necessitate its own stage process. This model is characterized by five stages, moral externality, moral experiment, moral consequence, moral negotiation, and moral internality. In general, individuals transition from an individualistic perception of morality marked by a lack of social consciousness. They progress towards a morality of critique and morality of Afri-community. Their identities (e.g., gender-role, racial identity) and the considerations of Black morality, as espoused by Walker & Snarey (2004) influence their moral development processes. Identity development and stage progression is influenced by stereotypical perceptions of Black males which portray them as amoral and immoral beings.

Figure 2

Conceptual Model of Black Male Moral Development (BMMD)

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Moral externality refers to the external regulation of morality from authority figures (e.g., family, community, peers, co-eds). In this stage, individuals embrace normative moral behaviors, actions, and mores from others. Dictations of right and wrong are taken for granted. This stage is akin to the self-oriented, pre-encounter, and external expectations stages of other models. The connection between said stages is the dominance of one’s socialization experience. For example, Skoe’s (2010) model illustrates transcendence from egoism to a balance of self of others. In a Western society, individuality and individualism are socially constructed values which shaped one’s perception of ‘good’.

In the moral experiment stage, individuals engage in actions that have moral implications. In this light, moral experiment refers to a testing (or experimental) process where choices ranging in morality are made. To engage in such actions requires development which is sensitive to one’s moral affect. In general, an individual’s actions will mirror that of their socialization, such as wearing a mask of un-authentic masculinity (e.g., partying, womanizing, restricting feelings).

In the moral consequence stage, individuals with developed capacities for moral reasoning and judgment consider the consequences of their actions. As such, moral consequence refers to the evaluation of positive and negative impacts of choices tested in the prior stage. Thus, the moral experiment and moral consequence stages are interconnected. Individuals evaluate the outcomes of their worldviews and gain an added awareness of the implications of their actions. For instance, in Skoe’s model, an individual gains an awareness of the negative consequences of egoism. With respect to Cross’s (1971; 1978) model, an encounter takes place, where one gains an awareness of the implications of their racial identity. In Edward and Jones’s (2009) model, the male gains an awareness of their ill-treatment of others and themselves in the pursuit of fulfilling gender-roles.

In the next stage, referred to as moral negotiation, one’s identity as a moral being is negotiated; a process made more complex by the simultaneous negotiation Black and male identities. As such, moral negotiation refers to the process of whereby alternative paths are pursued, considered, or rejected; this path may directly conflict with their previous socialization experiences. This period is marked by a continual questioning of values, one’s identity, and reconsidering past choices based on lived experiences.

The final stage, referred to as moral internality, is marked by an incorporation of information derived from previous stages. Moral internality refers to the process where moral decisions and a revised moral identity are internalized into one’s being. For Black moral identity, this pinnacle of morality is characterized by two important concepts, a ‘moral of critique’ and a ‘moral of Afri-community’. This pinnacle is what distinguishes this stage process from others, in that these values must be understood within the unique socio-cultural context of the Black community. Further, they must also be viewed through the lens of gender-roles, in that male gender-identity and role conflict are simultaneously negotiated.

Overall, this manuscript sought to illustrate the intricacy of Black morality, Black identity, and Black male gender-role identity in relation to morality. The purpose was to identify similarities in these identities which would serve to inform a conceptual model of Black Male Moral Development (BMMD). Themes across Black morality, identity and gender-roles illustrated the universal importance of community and moral agency. As such, morality was viewed in relationship to one’s contribution to the Black community in counteracting a historically legacy and contemporary reality of racism and sexism.

This model was presented as a mechanism to engender discourse around the complexity of Black morality, the importance of Black community virtues in shaping conceptions of morality, and the stereotypical portrayals of Black males as amoral and immoral beings. The focus of this model as a whole was to identify the value of identity in shaping Black male morality. This model may be useful in the construction of programs, activities, and interventions designed to enhance Black moral development (e.g., rites of passage programs). While this article focused on the intersection of Black, gender-role, and moral identities, it should be noted that further complexities exist. Black males have additional identities (e.g., occupational, sexuality), which also influence their moral development. These identities should be accounted for in empirical research which investigates morality and moral identity among Black males. Future research should investigate the validity of this theoretically-based model for usefulness in interrogating the Black male moral experience in America.
References


