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Toward Christian-Identity Response Theory: Exploring Identity, Spirituality, and Response to Adversity among African American Males Placed At Risk

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ABSTRACT

Christian-Identity Response Theory (C-IRT) adds to limited research integrating spiritual development as a central component of human development across the life span and provides a substantive theory for how spiritual development may lead to transformative practice. Thirty-four African American males in three age groups (13-17; 18-25; 26+), placed at risk during adolescence and connected with Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) organizations at the time of data collection, engaged in the research process. Focus group discussions or initial interviews were followed by in-depth interviews. Line-by-line and incident-by-incident coding led to the formation of tentative categories and themes. Data was compared to data and codes, and raised to conceptual categories. Substantive grounded theory emerged. A framework of adversities, self-constructs, adversity response strategies, positive and negative influences to adversity response strategies, and spiritual development components work cyclically to form CIR-T. Spiritual development overlays other components, allowing for spiritual development to be a core developmental dimension with which other theory components interact and enact influence over the course of the life span. Implications for a wide variety of educational contexts include targeted awareness of adversities faced, intentional development of Christian identity's influence on responses to adversity, and development of consistent relationships.

Introduction

Marginalized groups regularly and often disproportionately face adversity in societal and educational settings (Children's Defense Fund, 2007). Among the most vulnerable groups in the United States and American schools are young, African American males (Noguera, 2008). They experience more frequent suspensions and a greater number of expulsions (Hale, 2001; Majors & Billson, 1992; Polite & Davis, 1999), are overrepresented in special education Classrooms (Levin, Belfield, Muenning, & Rouse, 2007; J. Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008; Noguera, 2003) and underrepresented in advanced placement classes and gifted education programs (Whiting, 2009). African American males experience a high dropout rate (Davis, 2003; Epps, 1995; Whiting, 2009), and of those who do graduate from high school many do not read and write beyond the fourth-grade level (hooks, 2004). According to hooks, the systems in place have "fail[ed] to impart or inspire learning in African American males of all ages" (pp. 40-41).

African American males with lower academic attainment are more likely to be underemployed, experience poor health, and be involved with the criminal justice system (Children's Defense Fund, 2007; Harvey, 2008; Levin et al., 2007).

In order to combat these challenges, African American social theorists (Asante, 1987; West, 2001) and researchers (Banks, 2006; Ford, 1996) have joined educators and members of the African American community in advocating for an African-centered curriculum within churches and schools. Afrocentricity may help these boys take pride in their cultural history and their identity, yet by necessity Afrocentricity's assumptions have limited its study to one level of self, race, and made it the core component of identity (Asante, 1987; West, 1990, 2000). Current research across fields of study explores identity integration, where "different forms or facets of self (race being only one of those forms or facets) come together and impact each other in potentially transformative ways" (Stewart, 2002, p. 580).

However, there has been little research integrating a participant's spiritual development as a central component of human development, and even less on the role of faith commitment on the life trajectory of at-risk adolescents. There has been a lack of full engagement with this domain [spiritual development] in the mainstream social sciences that has limited our capacity to fully understand the person in its entirety at all points in the lifespan and within its multiple social, cultural, and national contexts (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006, p. 2).

This study sought to discover how salient connections with Christian faith may lead to turning points and affect the trajectory of African American adolescent male lives that have been placed at risk. There has been little research on the effect of de-centering race (or other types of risk contributors, stress engagements, or reactive coping methods (Spencer, Depree, & Hartmann, 1997) and centering Christ as one's primary identity. The literature has established that spiritual development is a process and that adolescent identity development is an intense part of that process (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Elder, 1998; Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980; Spencer et al., 1997; Swanson, Spencer, Dell'Angelo, Harpalani, & Spencer, 2002). This literature also indicates that choice, influenced by a myriad of ecological aspects, is a core component in the formation of identity (Elder, 1998; Spencer et al., 1997; Swanson et al., 2002). This study sought to discover through at-risk young men's stories what can happen when faith commitment fuels the change in responses to adversity.

Method

A constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) provided tools from which to conduct this research. Access to African American males, who had been or were currently placed at risk during adolescence and currently self-identify as Christian, was granted through an interdenominational Christian association (Christian Community Development Association, 2010). CCDA sent out invitations to association organizations that served the desired research population. Once invitations to participate in this research were made and an interest from

Organizations was indicated, clarifying discussions took place. Finally, institutional consent forms were signed by one organization that was present in three different mid-western states.

Two types of sampling techniques were used, purposeful and theoretical (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007). Purposeful sampling was used to select a cross-section of adolescents (13-17), young adults (18-25), and adults (26+) who were directly connected with these three CCDA organizations. The following criteria were used to draw a purposeful sample:

1. African American
2. Male
3. Self-identify as Christian
4. CCDA organization leader or receiving services from CCDA organization and recommended by a CCDA leader in Michigan/Indiana/Illinois
5. Meets/met at least two of the following at-risk characteristics during adolescence: poor academic performance; school dropout; persistent exhibition of behavior problems; extreme bullying; drug or alcohol use; juvenile offender; homelessness; parent physical or mental illness; parental substance abuse; single-parent home; incarcerated parent; foster-care; material poverty; lives in high crime area; lives in a high unemployment area.

While sharing these central characteristics, the 34 African American males who participated in this study also represent diverse socioeconomic groups, historical contexts, occupations, interests, and degrees of faith commitment.

During data collection semi-structured initial focus group interviews, followed by in- depth interviews, were conducted and artifacts collected from three age groups of African American males who were placed at risk during adolescence and who were connected with the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) organizations -. All adolescent interviews, and many young adult and adult interviews, were co-facilitated with an African American male organization leader. After being informed of the study's questions during initial focus group interviews, participants were invited to share what questions they would ask, then invited to answer these and subsequent follow up questions at increasing levels of depth throughout the research process. Theoretical sampling was utilized to elaborate and refine categories constituting an emerging theory structure and specific components within it (Charmaz, 2006). Such sampling further focused categories and their relevant characteristics by adding to existing data about each category and subsequent developing theme through the telling of their stories and answering of targeted questions (Morse, 2007).

Data collection and comparative analysis occurred until saturation point was reached and a substantive grounded theory was constructed. Line-by-line coding of focus group discussions and initial interviews led to the formation of tentative categories and themes. Data were compared to data. Then data were compared to codes. Incident-by-incident coding of some initial interviews also occurred. Categories and themes were compared, refined, and further developed. Theoretical coding helped to conceptualize how the codes were related, form an analytic story that had coherence, and moved the analytic in a theoretical direction (Charmaz, 2006, p. 63). Digital voice memos and memo writing were engaged in throughout the research process. These

helped develop a dialogue with the Researcher about the data and served as “the pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers” (p. 73) during engagement in the analytic work necessary to raise focused codes to conceptual categories. Through data collection and analysis, theory emerged. Theory framework was member checked by participants. Through this design data were collected by the researcher and analyzed to generate theory about the influence of spiritual development on faith commitment and life trajectory.

Results

While adversities in various educational settings may remain, evolve, or completely change during one’s life span and spiritual development, the substantive theory developed in this study makes it clear that for this group of participants, when one’s primary self-construct becomes that of “Christian” it is the most significant turning point in how he responds to these adversities. This shift in participants’ primary identities rarely happened suddenly, and most often occurred over the course of months and years after first encounters with Christianity. After conversion other constructs of the individual’s identity increasingly became ways of expressing their Christianity. Other identities became integrated with and subservient to the Christian identity. Family, church, school, and societal expectations served both as adversities and as positive and negative influences in response to those adversities. These adversities and influences further shaped the identity development—including the core spiritual identity development—of the participants.

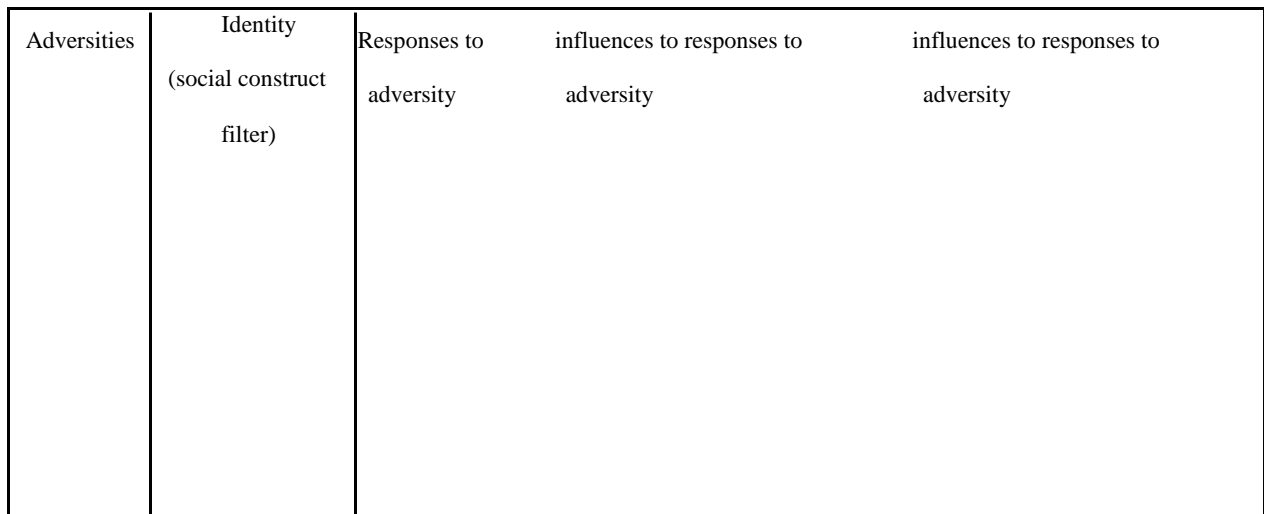


Figure 1. Christian-Identity Response Theory (C-IRT).

Christian-Identity Response Theory (C-IRT) in Figure 1 provides a theoretical structure for the influence of spiritual development on responses to adversity.

Located in the far-left column are the adversities faced by participants. These adversities mirror the risk factors Spencer (1995) identifies as one’s vulnerability level. How participants view these adversities directly relates to their identities. These identities are reflected in the second column in the theory’s framework. This unique makeup of self-constructs interacts and acts as a filter, or

lens, through which adversities experienced are viewed. When participants experienced their adversities through the filter of their identity, they responded to their adversities in corresponding ways. Their responses to adversities brought about a resolution to some adversities, an evolution of others, and at times an introduction of new adversities all together. These responses to adversity in various educational settings were additionally impacted by a variety of participant-identified positive and negative influences indicated in the two columns furthest to the right of Figure 1. These influences serve as potential contributors or undermining elements of individual resiliency that play an imperative role in overcoming risk factors. Positive influences to responses to adversity represent the protective factors within a participant's vulnerability level (Spencer, 1995), while negative responses to adversity represent risk factors within a participant's level of vulnerability.

Throughout any one or all of these components of the theory's structure items related to spiritual development may be present. The following specific spiritual development components overlay and interact with the other components: being introduced to Christianity, introduced to Christ, change in primary identity, transition(s), change in primary identity to "Christian," conversion, and baptism. The flexibility of this spiritual development overlay serves a vital role in the recognition of the interwoven nature of spiritual development in the multiple educational ecologies and contexts of everyday life. This allows for spiritual development to be a core developmental dimension with which other theoretical components interact and enact influence on over the course of the life span.

The Christian-Identity Response Theory's (C-IRT) framework is used in the same fashion for each of the stages of the life span identified in this research: childhood (birth-12), adolescence (ages 13-17), young adulthood (ages 18-25), and adulthood (ages 26+). Such use across the life span reflects the symbiotic interaction of human development, identity development, and spiritual development as crucial to the immediate responses to adversity of the participants, as well as participant life trajectories. Across age brackets participants referred to this process as a "journey."

Experiences of Adversities

What is the influence of spiritual development on adversities identified and experienced?

Amongst the 74 types of adversities, the participants identified throughout various educational settings throughout the research process, several categories emerge: school, aloneness, religiosity, spiritual development, family, sexual abuse, sex and romantic relationships, environmental, societal, and internal struggles. These categories and the types of adversity within them are interdependent—often one category of adversities impacting and sprouting new adversities within its category or branching into other adversity categories.

Specific forms of adversity are listed in Table 1 by order of frequency and intensity. These adversities served as the data-rich foundation and backdrop that played a powerful role in the molding of participants' identity constructs, and therefore in their responses to adversity throughout various educational settings throughout their journey of spiritual development. Many of same adversities existed across the participants' life span, but during their journeys the

concentration of these adversities and the form that these adversities took changed. Such changes were influenced by age bracket, identity development, and spiritual development.

Table 1. Forms of Adversity over the Life Span, Ranked by Frequency and Intensity

Adversity	Childhood	Adolescence	Young Adulthood	Adulthood
School	Bullied Consistent failure at school Reading difficulties Racial integration Unmotivated students* Power of school staff	Teachers who don't care Consistent failure at school Untrained teachers Split attention Lack of relevance Bullied Unmotivated students* Racial integration Reading difficulties . Power of school staff . School violence	College life Unmotivated students* Teachers who don't care	College life Unmotivated students* Teachers who don't care Professors racial prejudice
Religiosity	Church atmosphere* Church drama* Forced church attendance	Christians not living out Christian values and norms Church atmosphere*	Church drama* Christians not living out Christian values and norms	Church atmosphere* Church drama* Christians not living out Christian
		3. Church drama*	3. Church atmosphere*	values and norms
		4. Forced church attendance		
Spiritual Development	1. Putting other people/things before God* 2. Not engaging in spiritual	1. Conflicting Priorities* 2. Pride* 3. Living like Jesus did	1. Conflicting Priorities* 2. Pride* 3. Not engaging in spiritual	1. Pride* 2. Conflicting Priorities* 3. Putting other people/things

	disciplines*	4. Selfishness*	disciplines*	before God
3. Conflicting	Priorities*	5. Putting other	4. Selfishness*	4. Understanding
4. Selfishness		people/things	5. Living like	God's
5. Understanding	6. Surrender &	before God*	Jesus did*	character*
God's	submission to		6. Putting other	5. Selfishness
character*	God's will		people/things	6. Surrender &
6. Living like	7. Not engaging		before God*	submission to
Jesus did*	in spiritual		7. Lack of	God's will
7. Pride*	disciplines*		discipleship	7. Not engaging
8. Tension	8. Understanding		God's	in spiritual
between	God's		character*	disciplines*
financial	character*		9. Tension	8. Living like
stability, love	9. Lack of		between	Jesus did*
of nice things,	discipleship		financial	9. Tension
& gospel's			stability, love	between
call for			of nice things,	financial
resources			& gospels call	stability, love
			for resources	of nice things,
				& gospels call
				for resources
				10. Lack of
				discipleship

Familial	1. Relationship/la	Relationship/la ck	Living situation	1. Family
ck of relationship with		of relationship with	Relation-	dynamics
father*		father*	ship/lack of	2. Death of a
1.	2. Living situation		relationship with	loved one*
			father*	

	2. Family dynamics	3. Family dynamics	Death of a loved one*	3. Health concerns
	3. Death of a loved one*	4. Death of a loved one*		
	4. Family unemployment	5. Health concerns		
	5. Molestation			
	6. Living situation			
Sex & Romantic Relationships	1. Sex*	1. Sex*	1. Relational fears	1. Intimacy with wife
	2. Masturbation*	2. Relationship with women*	2. Masturbation	2. Sex*
	3. Pornography*	3. Pornography	3. Pornography	3. Pornography
	4. Relationship with women*	4. Consistent failure	4. Sex*	4. Masturbation
	5. Negative judgment of girls	5. Masturbation	5. Intimacy with wife	5. Consistent failure
		6. Negative judgment of girls	6. Relationship with women*	6. Relationship with women*
		7. Relational fears	7. Consistent failure	
Sexual abuse	abuse	Coping with sexual abuse	Coping with sexual abuse	Coping with sexual abuse

Environment	Lack of	Lack of	Lack of	Lack of
al Context	resources	finances*	finances*	finances*
	(finances*, stable	Drug/Alcohol use	Drug/alcohol use	Jail
	housing, food)	& abuse	& abuse	Experiencing
	Safety concerns	Geographic	Jail	unemployment
	(neighborhood	location	Experiencing	Neighborhood
	violence & drug	Lack of stable	unemployment	violence
	dealing	housing	Neighborhood	
	Geographic	Safety concerns	violence	
	location			
	Early exposure to			
	drugs/alcohol use &			
	abuse			
Societal	Negative	Being	Being	Racism*
	African American	stereotyped*	stereotyped*	Being
	role models	Negative African	Negative	stereotyped*
	Being	American role	African	Making a living
	stereotyped*	models*	American role	(legal or illegal)
	Racism	Racism*	models	Sports
			Racism*	involvement

	4. Sports involvement		4. Sports involvement	
	5. Segregation		5. Making a living (legal or illegal)	
	6. Code switching		6. Code switching	
Internal Struggles	1. Not being good enough*	1. Not being good enough*	1. Not being good enough*	1. Not being good enough*
	2. Fear*	2. Fear*	2. Wrestling with internal feelings	2. Worship of personal success*
	3. Wrestling with internal feelings	3. Wrestling with internal feelings	3. Drug/alcohol dependence	3. Drug/alcohol dependence
	4. Dealing with “so you think you’re better than me”	4. Worship of personal success*	4. Worship of personal success*	4. Fear*
	5. Ways of thinking	5. Ways of thinking	5. Ways of thinking	5. Ways of thinking
	6. Worship of personal success*	6. Dealing with “so you think you’re better than me”	6. Dealing with “so you think	
		7. Directionless		

you're better than me”

7. Directionless

Self-Construct

What is the influence of identity constructs on responses to adversity in academic schooling, non-academic schooling, family life, church life, and community life?

Participants identified 43 specific identities that helped form their self-constructs at one or more times over the course of their life span. These specific identities fall within the following categories: demographics, Christian-based identity constructs, characteristics, descriptors, roles, and cultures (see Table 1).

The unique blend of identities that made up participants' self-construct was deeply influenced by their spiritual development journeys. A major turning point of faith commitment within the participants' spiritual development was that of total surrender to Christ. This total surrender followed by a sense of freedom often became the impetus for the participant's primary identity becoming primarily Christian and strongly influenced their responses to adversity across all educational settings. Caleb shared the impact of this Christian influence within an academic college setting:

At the University of Illinois nobody was putting me on the dean's list, 'cause I was majoring in NFL, minoring in a degree, and my minor—I don't know if I was about to complete. And then I came to know the Lord. And I had the best semester academically after I came to know the Lord. I was courageous enough to talk to my professors.

While Dwight spoke of how his relationship with Christ infiltrated his decision making in multiple areas of life,

My Christian relationship with Jesus Christ has played a big part in my decision making, as far as college, in longevity in ministry, my longevity in ministry, and my decision to become a pastor. It played a great part in the decisions I make, always weighed them with leaders who were Christians, always weighed them with my walk with the Lord. So again, I'm not going to say that I didn't get into things, and make bad decisions, but it was always in the back of my mind, because I love Jesus, I would do this, I wasn't going to have sex before I was married, the whole nine yards, because of this I made those decisions to do that. My walk with God had a great influence on that.

However, participants' identities did not immediately change, rather they evolved throughout their continued spiritual development. Crispy, a young adult leader, expressed it this way, "My identity is Christ, is wrapped up in Christ and has evolved from having a relationship with Jesus." When these men had established (a) at least a beginning understanding of who God is, and (b) who they are in relationship to Him—then participants began to see that sub-categories of identities could co-exist in submission to their primary identity (see Table 2).

When asked to identify his primary identity, Japhia, a young adult Christian rapper and bank teller, recognized the role of sub-identities in his self-construct:

I think my primary identity comes from who Christ says I am. . . . I'm talking Biblical Christian. I wouldn't say African American; I feel that's more sub-identity, for lack of a better term. . . . Ok, follow me. I look at it as Christian on top, then a sub would be African-American, and then a sub of that would be of the hip-hop culture. And so I think it's kind of this is navigating these two, because there's a culture within African American community but more influenced by hip hop community. . . . I like the fact that I'm black, not that I think I'm better than anybody, I just like the way African Americans do things. I don't think it's better. Again, hip-hop culture—I'm intrigued with. So now it's, I'm a Christian and I'm African-American and I'm part of the hip-hop culture. Rather than competing for the role of primary identity, sub-categories became an avenue to express worship for Christ as they engaged in living out their everyday lives Christianly. I see myself as a Christian first before anything, and applying everything else to what I have. Like for example, my identity now is a Christian. I'm [also] an uncle because I have nephews. I'm a Christian as I work as well. I'm in school right now, and I'm a ministry leader right now, and seeing what I can do with my role as a Christian in those identities too. And show Christian in my actions in everything I do. (Deon, personal communication, May 22, 2012)

Table 2. Influence of Spiritual Development Journey on Identity Development

Pre-Conversion	Conversion	Transitional Identities	Distinctly Christian Identities	Remaining Sub-identities of primary identity Christians
Male		Christian	Ambassador	Leader
Teenager/adolescent		African American	Christian	Encourager
Young Adult		Teenager/adolescent	Biblical/Go dly man	Comedian
Adult		Young Adult	Godly husband	Hard worker
African American		Adult	Christian leader	Work in progress
Poor		Poor	Pastor	Nice guy
Middle class		Middle class		Athletic
Wealthy		Wealthy		Musician
				At-risk

Hard worker	Hip-hop culture	Stereotyped
Code-switcher	Christian culture	Single
Student	Oddball	Student
Nice guy	Alone/Loner	Bridge Builder
Invisible	Boyish/childish	Teenager/adolescent
Encourager	Stature	Young
Athletic	Athletic	Adult
Musician	Musician	Adult
Comedian	Addict/Recovering Addict	African American
Oddball	At-risk	Poor
Alone/Loner	Tough guy	Middle class
Reject	Stereotyped	Wealthy
Boyish/childish	Mixed up	
Stature	Doubtful	
Addict	Single	
At-risk	Student	
Pimp	Husband	
Tough guy	Father	
Stereotyped	Man	
Student	Uncle	
Mixed up	Code-switcher	
Doubtful		
Skeptical		
Unsure		
Single		
Leader		

Over the course of their spiritual development journey, clarity of participants’ identity emerged as primary identity became “Christian.” Deon shares,

My primary identity is as a Christian, but it wasn’t always that way. For the first 19-20 years of my life, it was just to be known as a musician, just even being that little kid in the church having a solo, always wanting that attention, that joy or false joy, whatever false hope I wanted from playing music. But now it’s . . . I wouldn’t say I’m a man like he is. I’m a babe in this thing. Got a lot of growing to do. So I would say I’m just a babe in the faith. Just really trying to grow and get equipped so I can be that man one day.

These data ground participant self-constructs as filters through which adversities are viewed. The development of these identities is also influenced by both the adversities experienced and even more powerfully by their spiritual development. The most significant turning point in identity occurred as participants’ primary identity became that of “Christian.”

Adversity Response Strategies

How might spiritual development influence turning points in responses to adversity in various educational settings?

As participants looked through the filter of their own identities they responded to the adversities in their lives. As primary identity shifted to that of “Christian,” participants’ minds were and continued to be renewed over the course of spiritual development. They reported 38 responses to adversity through the course of their life spans. With the exception of leaving the church or lack of school attendance, these responses to adversity cross over boundaries of specific settings. They are listed in Table 3 in order of frequency and intensity shared by research participants.

During adolescence, maladaptive responses—avoidance and aggression—to adversities were the most common responses. Participants tended to isolate themselves by building protective emotional walls during childhood and adolescence. Then in young adulthood and adulthood the participants began the story of rewriting their trust maps and dismantling piece by piece the walls that they had built to protect themselves but had left them spiritually and emotionally isolated from others.

Adaptive responses of seeking help started to be noticeably utilized in adolescence, with a significant increase in their use during young adulthood, and continued practice into adulthood. Most often adolescents would seek out a conversation with their mentor, if they had one, or their mother or friends for advice.

Table 3. Responses to Adversity Across the Life Span, Ranked by Frequency and Intensity

Responses to Adversity	Childhood	Adolescence	Young Adulthood	Adulthood
Maladaptive - Avoidance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Humor Isolate Avoidance Lack of care/caring Manipulation Build Walls Absorbed situations Shutdown Focus on music 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Humor Build walls Isolate Avoidance Manipulation Lack of care/caring Leave church Absorbed situations Engage in sexual acts Focus on music Alcohol abuse Shutdown 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Alcohol abuse Build walls Shutdown Focus on music Engage in sexual acts Isolate Manipulate Humor Avoidance Lack of care/caring Alcohol use Leave church 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Alcohol abuse Focus on music Shutdown Manipulation

		13. Decreased		
. school attendance				
		15. Alcohol use		
		16. Masturbation		
		17. Pornography		
		18. Laziness		
Maladaptive - Aggression	Anger Fighting Demonizing White people Engage in sexual acts	Anger Fighting Engage in sexual acts Demonizing White people	Anger Engaging in criminal activity Demonizing White people	Demonizing White People Extramarital affair
Adaptive-- Seeking Help	Focus on music Prayer Counseling	Searching Prayer Focus on music Sought help from influential role models Seek accountability Surrender Counseling	Searching Prayer Sought help from influential role models Church attendance Seek accountability Focus on music Counseling Surrender	Prayer Church attendance Go to rehab Sought help from influential role models (+/-) Seek accountability Counseling Focus on music
Adaptive-- Problem Solving	Played sports Focused on academic achievement Wrestling with God Confronting shame Humanization of White people	Played sports Talking Humanization of White people Focus on academic achievement Tear down walls Wrestling with God Development/use of spiritual disciplines	Wrestling with God Talking Humanization of White people Renewed focus Go back to school Tear down walls Development/use of spiritual disciplines	Forgiving White people Focus on academic achievement Talking Confronting shame Tear down walls
Emotional Responses	Guilt 2. Fear	1. Feelings of inferiority	1. Feelings of inferiority	1. Feelings of inferiority

3. Feelings of inferiority	2. Guilt	2. Helplessness	2. Guilt
4. Shame	3. Fear	3. Guilt	3. Shame
5. Crying	4. Crying	4. Fear	
	5. Shame	5. Crying	
	6. Helplessness	6. Shame	

Responses to adversities were strongly influenced by participant self-constructs, and, therefore, by their level of faith commitment and spiritual development journey. Although both maladaptive and adaptive solutions (Spencer, 1995) were used throughout the life span regardless of faith commitment and spiritual development, there is a significant turning point when participants' primary identity changes to that of "Christian." How participants addressed their primal emotional responses does reflect the evolution from maladaptive response strategies toward adaptive strategies through the "renewal of the mind" and the "transformative power of God." (as termed by participants). As participants moved into young adulthood they sought assistance from "a band of brothers." This is a term participants used to describe a spiritual group of peers committed to living out Christ in the way they lived. Once into adulthood, these adaptive responses continued and, for some, expanded to seeking help from a professional counselor or substance-abuse program. Mr. Rose sought out a counselor after committing adultery. When getting drawn back into "doing rocks and drinking, [but] not gone back to heroine or marijuana", Donald "went to bottom line recovery house" followed by joining the New Hope substance-abuse ministry. When faced with anger, Roger began using prayer and talking with his mom as problem-solving strategies. Dank used confession to his mentor and a "band of brothers" in an attempt to overcome his obsessive addiction to pornography.

Problem-solving adaptive responses leaned heavily on a strong faith commitment and were scattered across the life span in a way that reflects the spiritual development of the participants. They identified playing sports as a way to deal with aggression, focus on academic achievement, or returning to school to "get your gift certified" (Caleb, personal communication, May 22, 2012) as purposeful steps out of poverty, the development/use of spiritual disciplines to build a relationship with God to renew their minds, confront shame, tear down walls, and humanize and forgive White people.

Emotional responses consistently reported from childhood through young adulthood were neither solely adaptive nor maladaptive. Rather, they reflect the emotional landscape present during both adaptive and maladaptive response strategies. Most are present throughout the life course regardless of spiritual development. Feelings of inferiority encompass many of the other emotional responses without detracting from the intensity or validity of each of them when stood alone. Within internal struggles, feelings of inferiority, of not being good enough, were prevalent responses throughout participants' life spans—even in the face of what from the outside would have been viewed as affirming and often led to a deeper faith commitment in one's spiritual development.

Primary ways of coping with adversity prior to making a faith commitment were through avoidance or aggression—sometimes both—rather than problem solving and seeking help.

However, as participants continued in their spiritual development and faith commitment, maladaptive coping responses of avoidance and aggression decreased, while adaptive coping responses of problem solving and seeking help increased, thereby leading to an increased likelihood of a positive life trajectory. However, it was the act of turning toward these adaptive coping responses—particularly that of seeking out help from role models and the church—that often led to a new set of adversities.

Positive/Negative Influence(s) on Adversity Response Strategies

What influenced the participants' responses to adversity positively and negatively over the course of their lives?

Throughout the cyclical nature of adversities—responses to them—and the outcomes that manifested themselves, positive and negative influences were at work in shaping how participants responded to their adversities. They identified 40 positive influences to responses to adversity and 31 negative influences to responses to adversity (see Table 4) over the course of their lives. Some were closely aligned to age, such as school attendance and home life. Others dealt more directly with spiritual development and faith commitment rather than with human development and maturation.

Interestingly and unsurprisingly, the very influences that are positive in one instance can also be the most painful negatives in another. Among the most highly ranked and intense of these influences are fathers, teachers, influential role models, religious experience, music, and involvement in sports. Positive and negative influencers often fit within more than one of these categories. For example, influential role models could be fathers, teachers, or coaches. Additionally, participants' responses to religious experience could be significantly swayed by any one of the relationships with these groups.

Table 4. Positive and Negative Influences on Responses to Adversity

Context	Positive Influence	Negative Influence
Academic School Life	Academic experience of school	Uncaring teachers
Geek community		Teachers that don't teach
Books		Under-resourced schools
Caring teachers		
Educated teachers		
Non-academic School Life	Involvement with sports	Coaches
	Coaches (football, wrestling, basketball)	Involvement with sports
Involvement with music		Involvement with music
Friend's advice		Media
Hip hop culture		Hip hop culture
Family Life	Father	Father

	Mother Children Wife Relationship with grandparents Family expectations Relationship with siblings	Mother Family expectations Relationship with siblings
Religious Experiences & Expectations/Church Life	Church attendance Involvement in church Church community Religious experience The pastor Responses from the church Discipleship Christian Community Development Association Spiritual mentor Father figure Sunday school teacher	Church attendance Involvement in church Responses from the church Religious experience Christian Community Development Association Development/use of spiritual disciplines Church community Discipleship The pastor
Community Life	Creative/Artist Community Geek community Hip hop culture Access to health care Time in history (historical context) Social expectations Media Law Police presence Father figure Relationship with significant other	Time in history (historical context) Social norms Social expectations Media Hip hop culture Laws Access to health care Police presence Inappropriate relationships Relationship with significant other Friend's advice Negative influential role models
Relationship With Self	Primary identity (self-construct) Growing up	Primary identity (self-construct)

Fathers were among the most highly emotively discussed influences on responses to adversity. The few participants who had Christian fathers, who had engaged them and taught

them how to be African American Christian men, spoke of them highly. The older the research participant, the more clearly, they could see the tremendous blessing of having such a father. However, most participants who shared a home with their fathers experienced relationships that were distant and often volatile. Often fathers did not live with their sons and with this came its own set of negative influences to responses to adversity. These influences often perpetuated feelings of directionlessness, aloneness, and anger that in turn created their own adversities and spilled over into responses to the other adversities the participants experienced.

Teachers held a special influence over the participants' academic school life. They could make or break one's academic life. Good teachers would engage with their students, while other teachers would turn their attention to their cell phones. When frustrated some teachers would say, "Well, do what you want. I'm getting paid anyway." However, when a teacher tenaciously pursued participants' academic success while developing relationships built on respect, they could inspire participants.

Regardless of age, positive influential role models retained their importance on participants' spiritual life. Through shared constant prayer and challenges to watch and pray for others, positively influential Christian role models added value. Often the ministries of the church themselves became a positive influence within participants' religious experience as well.

For most participants, music also played both a positive and negative influence on responses to adversity. Among the positive influences identified by participants were: singing in church that provided opportunity for active involvement in church life, and an Opera scholarship that gave Dwight educational options, and later in life cutting a Christian 'hip-hop' album that gave a purposeful outlet to the frustrations of trying to live Christianly in an unchristian world. Among the ways that participants identified music as a negative influence on adversity was the life associated with 'hip-hop' culture and in coping with racial issues.

Sports involvement was another both positive and negative influence on responses to adversity. Sports involvement in K-12, and when applicable through college, provided motivation for participants to keep their academic grade point averages up. However, with great success in sports, participants began to worship their own success and to be drawn away from intentional spiritual development.

Discussion

The C-IRT framework builds off Spencer's (1995) fusion of Bronfenbrenner's (1989) ecological systems theory. It too is a self-appraisal process by which an individual may evaluate him/herself. While C-IRT heavily builds off of the concepts of the five components—net vulnerability level, net stress, reactive coping strategies, emergent identities: stable coping responses, and coping outcomes—the data that C-IRT is grounded in calls into question the compartmentalization of experiences in multiple contexts. C-IRT instead allows for more fluidity of process (Garcia, 2014)

Christian spiritual development in the lives of these participants is a journey with Jesus inextricably woven into the nuances of the ecology of everyday life that Spencer (1995) refers to. It has been central to the identity development and subsequent responses to adversity. By its very nature Christian spiritual development for this group of African American males placed at risk during adolescence is a journey of God growing, engaging, ministering to and equipping His people to fulfill the calling He placed on their lives as they grapple with internal and external forms of adversity.

Participants identified “journey” as the overarching story of the influence of spiritual development on responses to adversity. Participants defined their spiritual development as a journey in which God spoke freedom, peace, and purpose to their lives. Like Elder’s (1998) Life Course Theory, C-IRT recognizes that with age the ability to recognize what is truly a turning point and what may only appear to be a moment in time is refined. With added time and perspective, participants were able to more clearly reflect back on their lives, thus identifying significant turning points in response to adversity and explaining the reasons for that shift. The shift from an internal understanding of who God is and who they were in Him evolved and reflected the primary identity construct of “Christian.” Such internal work has led to external evidence of God’s work in their lives. Major turning points in the responses to adversity accompanied shifts in ways of thinking. Responses to adversity were significantly influenced by the way participants viewed themselves and therefore perceived and responded to the adversity. The direction of this work supports Burke’s (1980) early development of Identity Control Theory that posited that “people choose behaviors, the meanings of which correspond to meanings in their identity” (Burke, 1980, as cited in Stets & Burke, 2005, p. 1).

For adolescents this was seen in a decrease of violence, fighting at school or in the street. Across all age brackets it also led to a decreased use and abuse of drugs and alcohol and the emergence of a renewed view of sex and women.

There was also a gender-based evolution from male, to man, to godly man that adolescents and young adults particularly strongly identified with. Beyond a role, manhood into the development of C-IRT further raised new insights in ways in which a role also interacts with social and personal identities within one identity.

The influence of Christ on their journeys has led participants to develop a heart of service. C-IRT’s identification of a shift in primary identity development to that of “Christian” results in the development of a sense of purpose and calling that supports Spencer’s (1995) fifth component of PVEST and Burke’s (2007) concept of identity change. It was revealed in participants’ desire to engage in ministry as they live their lives.

The more participants identified with Christ and Christianity, the more adaptive (instead of maladaptive) coping strategies (Spencer, 2006) were used regardless of setting. While all participants identified themselves as Christian, varying degrees of faith commitment were communicated as they shared about their lives, spiritual development, and responses to adversity in various educational settings. Any identification with Christ had some influence on responses to adversity. However, the most consistent and significant turning points in responses to

adversity occurred after participants had a conversion experience and when their spiritual development led them to “Christian” as a primary identity. As participants gained clarity about who God is and who they were in relationship to God, it affirmed a sense of value and belonging, instilled a sense of purpose, and gave them a blend of freedom and responsibility. Sub-identities continued to exist, but instead of competing with the identity of being Christian, they became the vehicles through which Christianity was lived out on a daily basis. “Christian,” “African American,” “Man,” or some derivative thereof routinely worked collaboratively after the shift to “Christian” as the participants’ primary identity. Preach, a young adult and ministry leader, says it this way:

Not that I don’t take pride in being an African American. But the most I treasure is the fact that I am a follower of Christ. So that’s above all else. Couldn’t care less about being skinny, being tall, being Black, or even being a church so-called goer. But my identity isn’t in any of those things necessarily, as it is being that in Christ. (Preach, personal communication, May 29, 2012)

This challenges Burke’s (2007) Identity Control Theory, which, while acknowledging the complexity of the self and a hierarchy of identities, does not yet appear to address the encompassing integration of a primary identity as detailed by this research’s participants. Although maladaptive and adaptive coping strategies (Spencer, 1995) still were utilized after participants’ primary identity was “Christian,” maladaptive coping strategies were looked upon less favorably and often were seen as adversities to overcome in themselves. The longer that a participant viewed themselves primarily as a Christian the more they identified as “a work in progress.”

Recognizing the continued struggle against longstanding external and internal adversities, these participants openly relied on God’s grace, forgiveness, wisdom, and restoration of their lives. There is a significant influence of spiritual development on adversities identified and experienced by this group of participants. There are two sets of adversities. One set that remained consistent through the life span, but the intensity with which they were felt or the manner in which they presented themselves, evolved over the course of the participants’ life span. In these cases, spiritual development influenced how the adversities were perceived and therefore experienced. In the other set of adversities, new adversities emerged to reflect the stage of life and/or faith commitment of the participants.

What has developed into a substantive theory during this project needs to be tested for further verification. Demographically the participants and the Researcher shared only a common commitment to Christ. Though researcher gender was generally shared as something that increased the vulnerability of sharing and data richness, it would be interesting for the same research to be conducted by an African American male and/or female principal researcher to see if it reveals another dimension or added depth to aspects of the theory. Additionally, the same research could be conducted while focusing on more limited definitions of educational settings for additional depth of understanding the influence of spiritual development’s influence to responses to adversity within that specific educational setting. This would add more specific

depth of understanding for teachers, church and community-development ministry professionals and volunteers, and parents in their direct circles of influence.

While this research focused on African American males who self-identified as Christian and were placed at risk during adolescence, the same research process could be used to learn about the influence of spiritual development on responses to adversity among a wide range of populations—women, different racial backgrounds or mix of racial backgrounds, or from a variety of religions. Such studies would serve as voices for other canary groups (Guinier & Torres, 2003) and an opportunity for practices of reconciliation through deep listening and the widening of individual and collective memories (Ricoeur, 2004; Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008).

Those within the church and church-based ministries have the opportunity to engage in active and intentional, relational, and consistent discipleship of African American males starting in childhood and continuing into adulthood. Academic educators also have an opportunity to respond to the call for relevance of academic subjects to student interests, lives, and employability. All benefit from an understanding of the ecological factors that research participants identified in this study as competing for their attention.

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