



Afrocentrism: a Perspective of Positive Development Among Black Youth

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Abstract

Afrocentrism is a perspective wherein phenomena, ideas, events, and cultures that influence the lives of people of African descent are centered within the epistemologies of the African descent communities. Afrocentrism as a socialization mechanism for youth has been increasingly endorsed by African descent communities globally but remains nascent within youth studies literature on adolescent development. The omission of Afrocentrism as a perspective on youth development represents an oversight of culturally responsive, anti-racist research with African-descent youth populations. This conceptual article revisits Afrocentrism as a perspective to envision healthy development of Black youth. In doing so, the authors propose that positive development among Black youth intersects not only with the reality of youth developmental universalisms and race-related concerns, but also that Africanness and associated philosophical underpinnings, as will be described, are central to their healthy development. Historical, theoretical, and findings from exemplar Afrocentric programs are presented, with implications for future scholarship.

Keywords Afrocentrism · Black youth · Youth development · Anti-racism · Community practice

Development during adolescence is gaining greater attention as a milestone for determining youth well-being and future health outcomes as adults. Evidence suggests that adolescent behaviors often have far-reaching consequences that extend into adulthood, significantly contributing to the risk of premature morbidity and mortality (Frech 2012). Indeed, factors associated with positive youth development

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are critical during adolescence and have long-term outcomes in later developmental stages (Zhou et al. 2020). However, for many Black youth in the USA, the process of procuring positive associated youth developmental outcomes is journeyed and negotiated through a myriad of social, political, and historical systemic racially informed inequities (Grills et al. 2016). In the USA, data suggest that Black youth have higher risk for poor youth development and are overrepresented in cases of school failure, criminal justice involvement, and premature death compared to other youth populations in the USA (Boyd et al. 2022; Jones-Eversley et al. 2020; Lateef et al. 2022a, b, c). The cause of poor youth development outcomes for many Black youth stems from longstanding inequalities experienced by Black communities (Kozol 2012). These inequities often apply undue pressure to their normative development, predisposing many to poor developmental outcomes, such as low school performance and achievement, criminal justice involvement, and premature death (Joe 2012; Jones-Eversley et al. 2020; Loyd & Williams 2017; Stepp et al. 2011).

However, the development of Black youth during adolescence on their future life course outcomes is not just the sum of risk factors, but also includes an array of culturally centered protective and resilience-based mechanisms (Jones & Neblett 2016; Loyd & Williams 2017). In this regard, in this article, the authors propose a socialization model that includes the study of Afrocentrism, providing a framework for exploring positive development of Black adolescents. We propose that Afrocentric socialization, which enables Black youth to occur connections with their history, heritage, and identity, is central to civil rights activist King (1967) suggestion for promoting a “deep sense of somebodiness” among Black youth—necessary to navigate and flourish within anti-Black political environments. Afrocentric socialization prioritizes the social achievements of African-descendant people (also known as an “Afro-optimistic” history) and may have the potential to have a positive influence on Black youths’ identity, psychosocial and behavioral adjustment, and future life-course aspirations and ambitions (Huguley et al. 2019; Lateef et al. 2022a, b, c; Wang et al. 2020). This article begins by outlining Afrocentrism’s historical and theoretical origins as a socialization framework for Black youth development. Next, evidence from selected published exemplary Afrocentric socialization programs that have demonstrated the value of Afrocentric environmental exposure in the lives of Black youth are discussed. The article concludes with implications for future Afrocentric youth research in response to the current gaps and limitations in Black youth developmental scholarship.

Afrocentric Youth Development

The roots of our proposed Afrocentric Youth Development Model originate from the histories of philosophical resistance that people of African descent, enslaved, and later, free politicians, psychologists, and educators told their youth to instill a positive view of their culture heritage. Indeed, as defined by Mazama (1994), Afrocentrism foundationally is a worldview, an ideology committed to liberatory modes of thinking and combats longstanding Eurocentric concepts and attitudes of African inferiority stemming from the slave trade and colonial eras. As a pedagogical approach for

youth, Afrocentrism comprises two major components. First, it narrates a positive view of Black and African history as worthy—countering the negative portrayal of African-derived communities (Balakrishnan 2021). Second, Afrocentrism emphasizes thematic behavioral and moral principles that communities of African descent have developed to lead truer and happier lives despite oppression (Jackson 2015; Nobles 2015; Whaley & McQueen 2004). Together, these two axes have formed a socialization approach that today empowers many African-descendant youth populations both culturally and psychologically. This model has emerged through three distinct historical periods, which the authors will discuss: (1) its grassroots origins in the USA; (2) the development of the distinct discipline of Black Studies and African and African American Studies in the twentieth century; and (3) science inquiry advanced by Black scholars and practitioners in the fields of psychology, education, and social work. A brief description of each phase is provided below.

Grassroots Origins

Afrocentric socialization emerged as a grassroots pedagogical model of education in the US prior to the twentieth century. Black children were routinely denied schooling under slavery or were taught curricula that justified eurocentrism on the basis of various achievements of Western civilization (Webster 2021). Black American communities took it upon themselves to instruct their children in their own histories, principles, and accomplishments (Givens 2021). From its grassroots origin, the Afrocentric Youth Development Model offers a canon of world history that foregrounds Black and African agency (Moses 1998). From the civilization of ancient Africa (e.g., Nubia, Egypt, Punt), to the fierce resistance of the Zulu Empire, Afrocentric interpretations to African history instructs students on major world events in which African descendants took part (King & Swartz 2015). It also educates Black youth on the hardships of slavery and colonialism but within a rhetorical framework of Black resilience and potential (King & Swartz 2018).

Although these practices started as non-institutional efforts to educate Black youth, the Civil Rights Movement in the USA led to formalized efforts in these studies—African American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois was instrumental in developing restorative narratives of African cultures and history. His later years' project, *The Encyclopedia Africana*, was intended to be “unashamedly Afro-Centric” in offering a comprehensive and illustrious history of all “the peoples inhabiting the African continent” (Allman 2013; Alridge 1999). At this time, Du Bois joined a growing number of Black and African scholars who were determined to write African history for their newly enfranchised countries and communities. These works led to the second wave of Afrocentrism in what is often referenced in the USA as the *Black Campus Movement*.

US Black Campus Movement and Afrocentrism

A direct consequence of the Civil Rights Act was that, between 1965 and 1972, African American students, who were previously barred from higher education due

to Jim Crow policies and a lack of protection, entered more than a thousand American colleges and universities (Reid-Merritt 2010). Upon arrival, they faced physical threats of violence and discrimination from the faculty and staff. They also encountered a Western canon of scholarship that refused to include African descent people on equal terms (Kendi 2012; Rogers and Rogers 2011). Histories of Western civilization were still taught as the central drama in world formation, without any acknowledgment of African contributions (Davidson 2005; Mazrui 1986). Moreover, any African people with desirable social developments (e.g., ancient Egyptians) were creatively classified as “White” to uphold the conflation of White racial superiority with glorified benchmarks of human achievement (Diop 1991; Ehret 2016).

The Black Campus Movement responded to these confrontations by demanding not only a separate department for Black and African American studies—one that offered enough courses and professors to meet students’ demands—but also a form of disciplinary inquiry that directed serious skepticism towards the belief that history or science could be taught *without* mentioning Black and African achievements (Kendi 2012). In this context, scholars such as Mariba Ani (1994), Asa Hilliard (1997), Jacon Carruthers (1995), Maulana Karenga (1988), and Molefi Kete Asante (2003) offered Afrocentrism as a pedagogical model of “oppositional consciousness.” Afrocentrism “call[ed] into question many of the basic assumptions of Western thought” and “advocate[d] a wholesale rejection of Eurocentric worldviews” (McPhail 2009). Central to this approach was the accusation that the social studies taught to American youth had only a pretense of inclusivity. By mentioning slavery and colonialism without highlighting African descent populations’ extraordinary achievements, social studies perpetuated the myth that only White populations were industrious and capable (Jordan 1974).

In response, Afrocentric projects of the 1970s–1980s saw the rise of Afro-optimistic histories and socialization practices. The holiday of Kwanzaa, developed in the 1960s but popularized by Maulana Karenga in the 1980s, celebrated pan-African themes of collectivism and faith thought to underlie many African societies (Mayes 2009). African values and practices such as adopting African names were encouraged as a path to empowerment, alongside reading African histories. In this way, Afrocentrism came to combine an epistemic approach to history as well as various self-care practices. It is in this sense that Afrocentrism has grown closely aligned with the new fields of study in Black mental health.

Afrocentrism and the Black Mental Health Paradigm

The third wave of Afrocentrism, which informs our model of Afrocentric Youth Development, is the inclusion of Afrocentrism within mental health scholarship and human service practices (e.g. Schiele 1996) proposed within the applied social sciences. Shortly after the rise of the Black Campus Movement, Black psychologists like Na’im Akbar (2003), Wade Nobles (2006), Linda James Myers (1993), and Kobi Kambon (2012) began to resist the canon of literature within their disciplines related to advancing the mental health and well-being of Black clients, families, and communities. They advanced ontological assumptions of identity that Black

Americans and other Black populations within the western hemisphere were part of the kaleidoscope of African cultural groups and that valid health theory and frameworks of Black populations must reflect the continuity of cultural ties they have to Africa. The development of Black psychology strongly influenced the development of Afrocentric social work and Afrocentric educational practice, whereby practitioners began to infuse Afrocentric principles, such as the seven principles of Kwanzaa (i.e., *Nguzo Saba*), among others, as the basis of treatment or within the educational curriculum and school settings (Williams-Butler et al 2022).

Afrocentric Youth Development Programs

African Thematic Cultural Norms

Acknowledging the rich diversity inherent in African cultures and their various expressions across the continent and diaspora, the identification of thematic qualities, particularly within West-Central African cultures, serves as a foundational element shaping contemporary Afrocentric perspectives. An examination of these cultural norms reveals the essence of Afrocentric priorities towards foster Black positive youth development. Communalism, an essential characteristic embedded in numerous African societies, prioritizes the collective over individualism (Mbiti 1990). This communal ethos engenders an environment of mutual support, shared responsibilities, and interdependence. As a cornerstone of Afrocentric interventions, communalism nurtures a profound sense of belonging, a crucial component for the empowerment and growth of Black youth.

Additionally, oral traditions stand as pivotal conduits for transmitting ancestral knowledge, stories, and values across generations within African descent communities (Kambon 2012). While these traditions manifest uniquely across regions and ethnic groups, their role in preserving cultural heritage remains constant. Afrocentric interventions often utilize the value of oral traditions to instill a sense of history, heritage, and identity, providing young individuals with a rooted foundation as they navigate life's challenges. These stories serve not only to educate but also to inspire resilience and strength in the face of adversity. More, spirituality, deeply intertwined with African cultures, offers a profound connection to the divine and a wellspring of guidance. This spiritual dimension is reflected in a diverse array of practices, ranging from indigenous belief systems to the expressions of Christianity and Islam. Afrocentric interventions often draw upon the spiritual realm to provide a moral compass and a source of resilience for Black youth. The ability to find solace and strength in spirituality is thought to equip young individuals with coping mechanisms that transcend the material world. Kinship networks, characterized by extended families, fortify bonds and offer safety nets during times of need. These networks serve as a source of support and affirmation of cultural values. Afrocentric youth development programs recognize the significance of kinship, leveraging family ties to enhance support systems and reinforce cultural identity (George & Dei 1994).

The rhythms and music that permeate many African cultures also provide avenues for emotional expression and healing. Incorporating these elements into Afrocentric interventions not only enables creative expression but also offers therapeutic outlets for emotional well-being (Cruz Banks and Jackson 2019). The integration of art and music not only celebrates cultural heritage but also contributes to the holistic development of young individuals. The holistic worldview rooted in African cultures acknowledges the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual realms. This perspective shapes a balanced outlook on life and informs comprehensive education and well-being initiatives. Afrocentric youth development programs guided by this worldview often emphasize not only individual growth but also community enrichment, sustainability, and harmonious coexistence (Lateef et al. 2022a, b, c).

Major Findings

Research that advances the knowledge of serious consideration for the effectiveness of Afrocentric approaches to Black youth development is still nascent. However, at a community level, Afrocentrism is an established youth socialization paradigm within Black communities (Gilbert et al. 2009). Moreover, while Afrocentrism has received less attention in the conceptual literature on children and youth, it is the most invoked program model to address specific protective factors and mechanisms of psychosocial prevention and interventions for Black youth (Jones & Neblett 2016). Jones and Neblett (2016) and Lateef et al. (2022b) published works that used systematic methodologies to comprehensively review the state of prevention and intervention programs targeted at the positive development of Black youth by integrating Afrocentric principles in programming. These reviews identified 20 *distinct* programs that focused on Black youth development by integrating Afrocentric principles in programming. The findings on Afrocentric programs have focused on a myriad of outcomes among Black youth, including (1) academic performance, (2) substance use, (3) sexual health, (4) social behaviors, and (5) self-concept. Methodologically, these programs were designed to function as community-based, school-based, and family-based interventions. Many Afrocentric interventions indicate noteworthy improvements from pretest to posttest measurements. Nonetheless, a significant challenge within this field of research lies in the inconsistency of methodological rigor across various studies and the insufficient volume of reported investigations. These factors underscore the need for a more comprehensive investigation into the effectiveness of Afrocentric interventions when contrasted with universal approaches for Black youth. Five exemplary Afrocentric youth programs are presented below, accompanied by their documented outcomes. These findings contribute essential evidence reinforcing the ongoing exploration of Afrocentric youth research.

Imani Rights of Passage Program

The Imani Rights of Passage Program (IROP) is a community- and school-based intervention aimed at introducing Black youth to their cultural heritage while promoting

positive outcomes in academic achievement, self-concept, and coping strategies to prevent risky behaviors (Whaley et al. 2017; Whaley and McQueen 2004, 2020). The IROP is a 15-week program. The curriculum evolved from an initial two-year after-school program and has since been active for more than two decades, making it one of the longest documented running Afrocentric interventions evaluated and published. At its foundation, the IROP exposes youth to African/Black culture, which is infused in all aspects of programming. The youth engage in two hours of weekly programming facilitated through lectures, workshops, writing exercises, and field trips. They also engage in Afrocentric holidays such as Kwanzaa, celebrating the Nguzo Saba values of Umoja, Kujichagulia, Ujima, Ujamaa, Nia, Kuumba, and Imani. Evaluative studies of the IROP on Black youth development have demonstrated a positive association with participants' academic performance, school behavior, reduction in violence risk, ethnic and racial identity, and self-esteem (Whaley et al. 2017; Whaley and McQueen 2004, 2020).

Sisters of Nia

Grounded in the Afrocentric principles of Nguzo Saba, Sisters of Nia was designed as a 16-week school-based cultural intervention for Black girls (Belgrave et al. 2016). The program focuses on increasing the connection between girls and their cultural values, beliefs, and African cultural heritage. In addition, the program aims to bolster participants' positive development through activities to promote an increase in social competence, emotional regulation, and positive interpersonal relationships. The curriculum is designed to be conducted in both large and small groups to promote interdependence, strong bonds, and interaction between peers and adult female program facilitators. Sessions cover various topics including African culture, leadership examples of Black women, faith, and the development of positive relationships. Participants also receive homework exercises to build sisterly bonds; incentives are provided to encourage exemplary demonstrations of cooperation and kindness. Evaluative findings of the Sisters of Nia have demonstrated significant increases in participants' ethnic identity and socio-emotional regulation, as shown by lower levels of relational aggression. Additional qualitative findings from schoolteachers and staff members of participants indicated positive changes, demonstrating higher levels of social competence among participants in schools where the program has been implemented (Belgrave et al. 2016).

Aban Aya Youth Project

The Aban Aya Youth project is a four-year school and community-based Afrocentric social development program designed to teach participants knowledge and skills to promote self-efficacy, substance and alcohol avoidance, non-violent conflict resolution, abstinence and sexual health, and social competence within the school (Flay et al. 2004; Liu et al. 2009). The program also aims to improve youths' self-esteem, cultural pride, and healthy bonds with their family and community. The program is designed as a three-year curriculum from the fifth through eighth grades. Each curriculum session takes 40–45 min to complete. Sessions vary to include parents, teachers, community agencies, and local businesses to promote positive connections between

participants and their broader ecological systems. Longitudinal evaluations of more than 1153 African American youth participants in the Aban Aya program demonstrated no significant intervention effects for girls. However, for Black boys, the findings demonstrated significant reductions in violent behavior (by 35% compared to the control group), provoking behavior (41%), school delinquency (31%), drug use (32%), and recent sexual intercourse (44%) (Flay et al. 2004; Liu et al. 2009).

I Have a Future

Developed at Meharry Medical College in 1987, the I Have a Future (IHAF) program was designed to reduce African American youth's incidence of early pregnancy, community violence exposure risk, substance use, school failure rates, and future unemployment risk (Greene et al. 1995). Like other Afrocentric programs, the IHAF program is grounded in African cultural principles and strives to improve participants' cultural connections and pride through socialization with the seven principles of the *Nguzo Saba*. The program incorporates Afrocentric principles throughout its six core modules: (1) Family Life Education Skills, (2) Pre-Employment Training, (3) Prosocial Skills, (4) CHARM (choosing how to adorn and refine myself), (5) MATURE (Males adorning, thinking, and using refined energies) Violence Prevention, and (6) Conflict Resolution. Through each program module, participants engage in group discussions and experiential learning activities that provide opportunities to think critically about each area from an Afrocentric perspective and practice applying the principles of the *Nguzo Saba* within each domain. Evaluative findings on the IHAF program demonstrate a strong negative correlation between participants' adherence to Afrocentric values and self-reported delinquency and violent behaviors. Conversely, adherence to Afrocentric values was associated with a positive self-concept, psychosocial maturity, and goal-setting clarity (Greene et al. 1995).

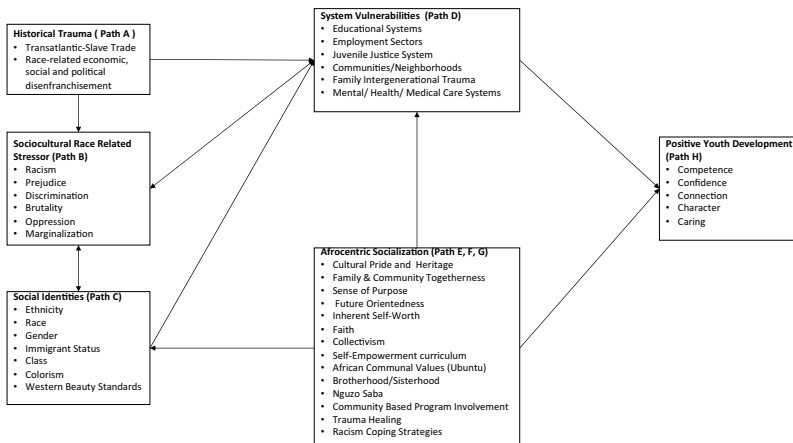
Young Empowered Sisters

The Young Empowered Sisters (YES!) program is a ten-week culturally relevant school and afterschool community-based intervention designed for African American high school girls (Thomas et al. 2008). The primary aims of YES! are to promote girls' positive sense of Black and African cultural heritage, adherence to African-centered values of *Ubuntu* or collectivism, and raising awareness of the ramifications of racism in society with the intent of promoting participation in liberatory activism. The intervention's curriculum modules focus on cultural values and African and African American history. Participants engage in group projects that provide opportunities for girls to build a sense of belonging and sisterly camaraderie and are taught the impact of policies on Black communities, coping strategies against racism, and non-violent political avenues to support anti-racist efforts to address the ramifications of structural racism in Black communities. Evaluation findings on the YES! program demonstrated that girls in the treatment group had higher levels of ethnic identity, communalism, awareness of racism in the lives of Black Americans, and greater interest in civic engagement compared to the control group (Thomas et al. 2008).

A Model for the Study of Afrocentric Youth Development

How should we advance youth development research among Black youth? From an Afrocentric perspective, the context of positive development, adjustment, and adaptation in the face of developmental challenges in the lives of Black American youth is not a sequestered phenomenon. Instead, their trajectory is presumed to be embedded within networks of relationships—relationships that occur across generations and within multiple domains of developmental impact factors of varying influences (Baldwin 1984; Parker 2021; Smith Hatcher et al. 2017). The Integrative Model for the Study of Stress in Black American Families (IMSBAF) by Murry et al. (2018) provides an excellent methodological framework to advance the study of Afrocentric socialization as a mechanism of socialization in the lives of Black youth. More specifically, the model proposes that historical, sociocultural, social position, and environmental stressors converge on the development, adjustment, and adaptation of Black individuals and families. Furthermore, acts of “ordinary magic” are cultural strengths that provide important buffering effects against anti-Black environments (Murry et al. 2018).

Based on our review of the historical development of Afrocentric praxis, published Afrocentric youth programs, and the IMSBAF model, Fig. 1 presents a proposed model of key Afrocentric socialization considerations for the study of Afrocentric positive development among Black youth. The model begins with an explicit recognition of the impact historical racism/White supremacist ideology (Path A)



Note: The model aligns with Murry et al.'s. (2018) Black family stress model and Learner's (2009) Five Cs of positive youth development, incorporating previously published Afrocentric interventions.

Fig. 1 Afrocentric socialization path model for the study of Black youth positive development

has had on the positive development of African descent children in Western society. Black youth are often bombarded by daily messaging, imagery, and microaggressions that reinforce century-old praxis, supporting the idea of Black inferiority. Thus, a core component of Afrocentric cultural socialization is to provide Black youth with the opportunity to maintain and recover their sense of cultural wholeness and healing from the internalization of Eurocentric ideas of Black potentiality and worth. This keen focus regulates the impact of sociocultural race stressors (Path B), which intersects with biases that Black youth experience in navigating social positions of ethnicity, class, gender, and geography (Path C). The intersection of addressing historical vestiges of racism in socialization, in turn, regulates Black youths' navigation of larger ecological systems transversed in the process of becoming emerging young adults. Afrocentric socialization (Path D), which includes Black youths' degree of messaging and orientation to cultural heritage, values, and norms of African-derived communities is thus theorized to have significant buffering effects—mediating and moderating roles in how Black youth circumvent the potential adverse effects of systems and social identity. The authors propose that Afrocentric cultural socialization has both direct and indirect influences (Paths E, F, and G) on Black youths' ability to express traits associated with positive youth development, which are the building blocks universally assumed to be associated with healthy development in young people (Geldhof et al. 2015).

Future Directions

Our proposed model, informed both by the theoretical scholarship and empirical findings of past research, is designed to address the following questions for youth development scholars and practitioners. What is Afrocentric cultural socialization? What are the critical cultural indicators it proposes inform the procurement of healthy development among Black youth? How does an Afrocentric approach to Black youth development theoretically define the paths that impede or promote positive youth development for this population? In doing so, the authors extend the work of previous discussions on the importance of culturally centered youth development scholarship and prevention to address the nuances of what it means to be African, Black, and a youth in societies impacted by racism. This paper is also intended to serve what Jones and Neblett (2016) have called an *intellectual switchboard* to promote crosstalk between Afrocentric and youth development theory development towards advancing research to improve the lives of Black youth. As a next step, there is a need to move beyond identifying factors to explicating the processes by which Afrocentric socialization, as proposed within the model, is linked to developmental outcomes in Black youth. Therefore, we urge researchers to examine the relevance of our theorization for research with Black youth. The authors hope that this paper supports the essential place of both conceptual and applied research to advance in tandem, to address the needs of Black youth as they transition from adolescence into emerging and established adulthood.

Author Contribution Both authors contributed equally to the conception and writing of the manuscript and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this manuscript.

Declarations

Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals Not applicable.

Informed Consent Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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