

Identity Development of Black Americans: The Role of History and the Importance of Ethnicity

VICKIE M. MAYS, PH.D.* | Los Angeles, CA

The historical and cultural forces that have affected the identity development of Black Americans are analyzed. In particular the psychological effect of historical events in shaping the identity of Blacks is examined. Revealed are the critical influences that social, historical, political, and economic movements have had on Black Americans because of their powerless status. Ethnicity and culture are important determinants in the development of a positive and healthy sense of self for Black Americans.

NATURE VERSUS NURTURE IN IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

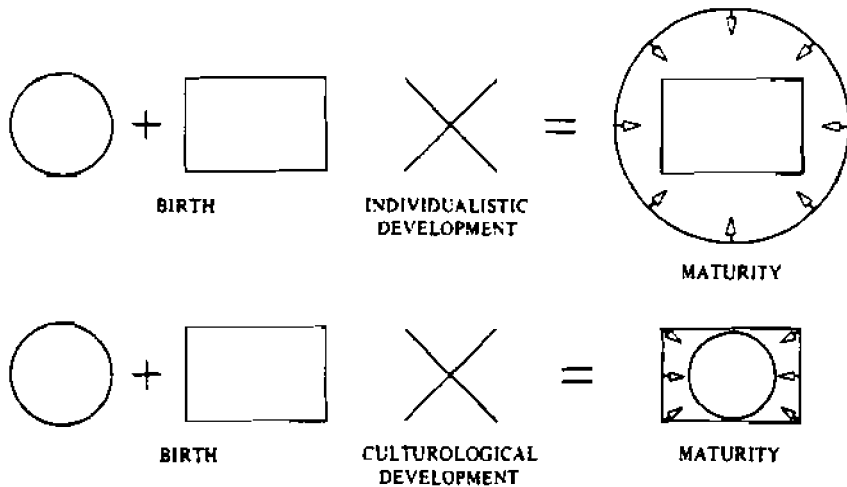
Erik Erikson¹ believed that identity must be examined not just from an individual perspective, but also in terms of the individual's relationship within the social and historical developments of society. Berger and Luckmann² support this view, stating that no human thought is immune from the ideologizing influences of its social context. This position opposes the idea that an individual's inner motives, ego, and traits are the primary determinants in the development of identity. In a model of mental health for Blacks, whether genetic predispositions or environmental factors are to be emphasized in the determination of identity becomes an issue worth critical examination because of its implication for treatment approaches. Mosby³ has illustrated these views of personality formation in the schemata of Figure 1.

It is Mosby's contention that cultural forces are more influential than genetic factors and that the Black American's identity is shaped by the dominant culture of Whites. She conceptualizes Black identity as developing in a psychocultural framework of oppressed individuals. Black persons develop within a culture that teaches that all their behaviors, beliefs, and characteristics are inferior, maladjusted, and inadequate. Thus, Black Americans internalize a sense of inadequacy. Mosby believes this cultural dominance counteracts and overrides the positive aspects of Black Americans' own innate subcultural influences.

*Assistant Professor of Psychology, Department of Psychology, UCLA, 1283 Franz Hall, Los Angeles, CA 90024.

FIGURE 1

Mosby's Illustration of Personality Formation



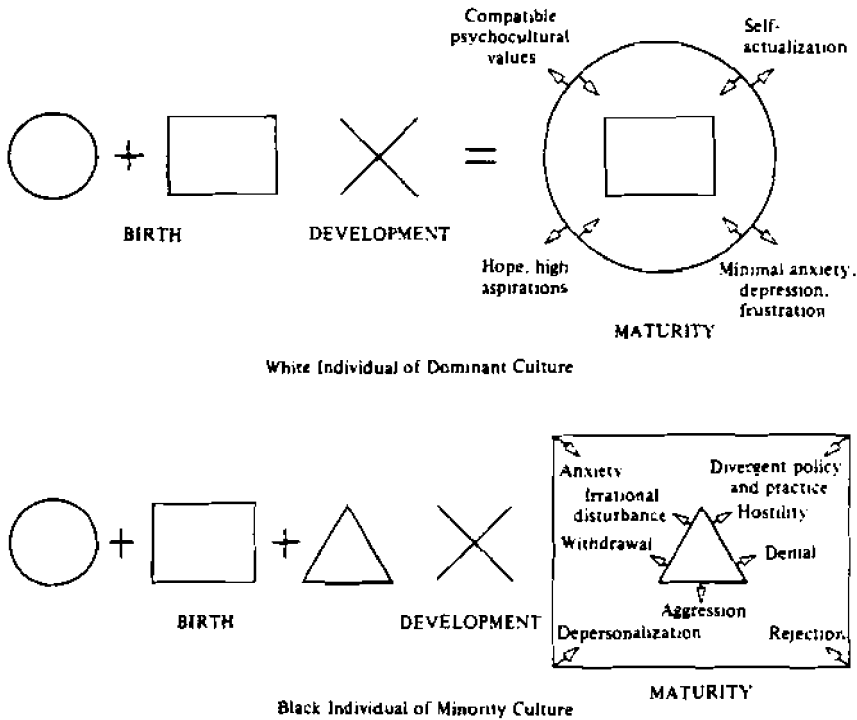
- × Time, growth
- Individual
- Culture and its institutions
- Large Size Dominance
- Small Size Inferiority
- Direction of influence

The Black American lives among societal institutions founded on the philosophy of the Euro-Americans that promulgate their own superiority and the inferiority of the Black American subculture. Figure 1 shows what happens to individual development when culture is the dominating force. Figure 2 depicts the difference in personality development for a White individual and for a Black individual within White cultural dominance.

Mosby believes that Black persons, because they are enveloped by patterns of depersonalization and conflict in social values and experiences, are condemned to unavoidable and unresolvable conflict and struggle for a satisfying identity or self-image. She concludes that the Black person's struggles are ended only by death, leaving the problem as a legacy for the next generation. Mosby's final statement seems rather harsh and pessimistic. The Black Power movement of the 1970s has tried to help Blacks to break out of the pattern and achieve a better self-image. (However, resolution cannot come through the efforts of Black Americans alone but rather with some acceptance by Whites of a role in this change. This acceptance can be legislative rather than attitudinal, though a change in attitudes would be

FIGURE 2

Mosby's Racial Comparative View of Personality Formation



- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ○ Black individual | △ Black subculture |
| ○ White individual | × Time, growth, interaction |
| □ Larger American culture | + Additive influence |

more effective.) An important premise of this paper is the notion that social, political, and economic events can influence human behavior. The identity of Black Americans has been greatly influenced by the cultural forces of the social structure. Within this framework, historical and psychocultural influences on Black Americans' identity development will be analyzed, beginning with the slavery of the eighteenth century, for psychohistorians have misinterpreted the unique psychological aspects of the experiences of Black Americans when interpreting the history of Blacks and in developing relevant psychological theories.

HISTORICAL FORCES

Slavery

Economics is an inherent part of the institution of slavery. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Blacks were bought and sold as pieces of property for cheap agricultural labor. Families of Blacks both in America and Africa were broken up—husbands and wives, parents and children were separated. The prevailing philosophy of that time (inherited from the Renaissance, from which flourished industrialization, capitalism, and urbanism) was the principle that all were free to follow their own ambitions or appetites without any subordination or allegiance. All that this meant for the Black American slaves was that they were merely a means to an end of wealth, success, and power for the White master. A major way Black slaves within the context of the majority society validated their identity was in an objectification of work activities, or productions. This objectification was necessary in Black Americans' survival because the institution had reduced them to a state of pure object, with no human identity.

Psychological effects

The psychological effect of the slave role left Blacks feeling both fearful of and angry toward the majority population. The anger resulted from a sense of the oppression and inequities of slavery. Many of the rebellions and uprisings were based on a knowledge that there were less restrictive and more humane environments. This type of rebellious anger when manifested by Black Americans has usually been interpreted by culturally ignorant psychologists as reflecting an inward anger or hatred of self leading to a negative self-image.⁴ A different interpretation is that, conversely, such anger may reflect a healthy personality reacting to unjust forces of the social system.

Anger was also used as a disguise for fears and feelings of inadequacy. As a commodity slaves were aware that "super-nigger" characteristics would bring favors to the family and reprieves from cruelty. When these characteristics could not be achieved, feelings of anger sometimes emerged to hide feelings of worthlessness. Black slaves knew that failure to produce a quota of work, even a failure based on realities of sickness, injury, or age, could result in death or in being traded and separated from one's family. And at all times Black slaves lived with the fear of brutality and cruelty which were often suffered at the whim of White masters.

Survival strategies as defense mechanisms

To cope with these feelings some Blacks engaged in adaptive survival strategies that some psychologists would refer to as defense mechanisms. One strategy used was that of adopting Whites' stereotypes about Blacks.

This identification process led Blacks to display stereotypic behaviors of incompetence, laziness, and other negative attributes.⁵ For some, an internalization of this identity occurred. The White master's conceptualization of the slave role became a sense of identity rather than a periodic adoption of a role.

Black slaves, rather than feel powerless, hopeless, and without a sense of self, found that identification *with* the master provided the power of the master. With such perceived power, slaves felt they were in a position to treat other Blacks as the master had treated them.⁷ In actuality such identity frequently did render some slave more powerful, for often less abuse was levied and more favors were granted according to the acceptable behaviors exhibited. Positions of authority, comfort, or education were often the reward.

Identification with the aggressor, however, exacted a severe cost. The self that the slave developed was a pseudo-self, stripped of its innate potential and its cultural characteristics.³ In this type of self-development, the slave became dependent on the master for a definition of self or for marketability to validate that a self existed. (The role of slave did not have meaning without the role of master). The slave began to internalize the values and to model the behavior of the master, perceiving this objectification to be destructive and incongruent with Black cultural and intrinsic needs but psychologically handicapped to do otherwise. The slave felt guilty, inadequate, inferior, and powerless, for no matter how well White behavior was imitated, the slave was still a slave.

By identifying with the master, slaves gained a false sense of security. They abdicated responsibility for self-definition and did not grapple with the process of who they were. The result of this kind of process was that the direction of the individual's life and self-identity was determined by the greater whole into which slaves had submerged themselves.⁷ Without a sense of a cultural self, the slaves' ethnicity was lost. What was left was a self riddled by feelings of anxiety, doubt, and inferiority. Thus, these feelings are not an inherent part of Black Americans' personality, but result from institutional racism through the role of slavery.

In addition to identification with the master, other adaptive mechanisms used to achieve a sense of self-esteem were religion, languages, and music. Within the context of religion Black slaves were able to conceive of self-identity in a way different from that dictated by the White master. The church became a source of comfort and support and gave the slaves pride, self-respect, a sense of family, and culture. The church also provided an arena in which achievement, upward mobility, and the development of characteristics other than work-related ones were encouraged and recognized. Frazier⁸ viewed the church as a protective sanctuary for self-development of Black slaves.

The role of the church in the Black community is an important one to understand in attempting to gain insight into the Black psyche. It was the church structure that enabled the survival for many Blacks after the abolition of slavery by providing a substitute society.⁸ A great number of the leaders in the Black community continue to come from the church.

Language was another important adaptive mechanism that enabled the Black slave to maintain some remnants of the African tradition and to develop a sense of pride. The language of Black Americans is probably one of the most notable areas where the dynamics of both the Black experience in America and the traces of African heritage are simultaneously manifested. Language is the symbolic medium by which culture and philosophy are transmitted.

In slavery, language and music became important mediums for transmitting messages and expressing individualism without reprisal from White masters. It is thought that the dialect of Black Americans, often criticized for its poor grammar, was evolved to deceive masters. For example, the double negative, "I didn't see nobody nowhere," may have been spoken to communicate "I saw somebody somewhere."⁹ The ability to disguise messages made communication among the slaves possible, enhancing their chances for survival.

The music of Black slaves allowed an expression of individualism and an establishment of a unique sense of self. Haskins and Butts⁹ hypothesize that rhythm and intonation techniques first surfaced in the songs of the cotton fields. Because hands and feet were busy, they could not be used to keep time. Voices, with intonation being all-important, were used to express personal sounds. Ironically, while expressing individualism, deceptions of vocalized tones, drum messages, chants, and other kinds of songs and a speech full of double negatives, double entendres, and half-truths led to "dual identities." The notion of dual identities implies the existence of two selves. To borrow Fromm's terms, there is a "pseudo self" and a "real or true self."¹⁰ Within a pseudo self an individual merges totally into a personality created by culture and society. The real self is defined as one which has developed through a reflexive, conscious process rather than through a process of conformity.

If identification with the slave master and deception in language and music contributed to dual identities, so did the master-slave relationship. In it, many of the dynamics of a parent-child relationship were present. The slave and the master were dependent on one another economically and psychologically, giving the relationship a symbiotic quality. On a psychological level, each was dependent on the other for validation of self-worth. The master needed to brag of his commodities, slaves needed to brag of their work. The slave, like the child, sought praise and rewards and emotional gratification from the White master. In Botkin's¹¹ collection of slave narra-

tives, there seem to be implications of what one might interpret as superego. Slaves told of feelings of guilt and desires to be punished when they disobeyed White masters. It is within this relationship that the pseudo self of the Black developed, causing the real self to become more and more estranged.

Those slaves who maintained a dual identity may have been better able to transcend slavery to reach freedom. Some writers think that the role of the "accommodating slave," or "Uncle Tom," was but a facade used to manipulate the White master and the real self.¹²⁻¹³ Dollard¹² has suggested there may be some problem in maintaining a facade. Accommodating the renunciation of protest against, and the acceptance of, undesirable conditions may lead to idealization of that which originally had been hated and feared. Pettigrew¹⁴ is even more pessimistic, stating that after a period of time the person and the role-playing are indistinguishable. The personality consequences of such role playing leaves the Black with a "confusion of self-identity and lower self-esteem."

Slaves who presented a pseudo self often modeled the behavior desired by the master but with the consciousness that their self-identity had another dimension.

RECONSTRUCTION

Many of these psychological dynamics and adaptive skills that were developed during slavery persisted after the Emancipation Proclamation through the Reconstruction.

Psychological effects

Black Americans during the initial phase of Reconstruction were filled with hopes and dreams. The bonds of dependency and identification that had existed in the master-slave relationship were starting to change. Other dynamics were at work as some free Blacks became individualistic and, in their attempts to imitate Whites, lost their sense of community with other Blacks.

Some Blacks were beginning to demand such subsistence rights as housing, a system of social welfare, and employment. Others became elected to political parties to create a new way of life for Blacks and a new sense of self-esteem for themselves.

Whites were unable to contend with this change in the Black American role. If Black Americans were no longer slaves, then Whites could no longer find security and identity in the role of master. The interracial cohabitating and marriages that had begun during the early Reconstruction period were threatening to the identity of White males.¹⁵ With the establishment and support by private funds of Black educational institutions, many of the stereotypes that helped maintain the concept of intellectual inferiority of Blacks were being dissolved. The fears and threats of some Whites led them

to acts of terrorism, lynchings and property destruction.⁵ As Blacks became less valued for physical labor, murders, beatings, and lynchings increased. Between 1882 and 1935 about 3,000 Blacks were lynched.

JIM CROW

About 1877 many of the advances Blacks had made, such as election to political offices and better housing, were slowly being taken away by the legislative processes. Laws known as the Black Codes and lynch laws gave Whites the right to punish and murder Blacks at their whim. These laws enabled slavery to be reestablished under a different name and for a different purpose—control and economic maintenance.

The rise in racism of this Jim Crow period from approximately 1877 to 1914 spread from the South to the North and West where previously Blacks had found democracy, housing, and jobs. In the Jim Crow period many of the menial jobs were given to immigrants. Blacks were stripped of their employment, segregated in their housing and social interactions, and forced to live in poverty. In the South the Ku Klux Klan grew in membership, and terrorism and lynchings rose. Most of all, the interracial socializing and marriages were ended by watchdog groups like the Ku Klux Klan.

Psychological effects

On a psychological level these activities had a profound effect on the identity development of Blacks. The anger of Black Americans increased, but because of the extreme violence and murders by groups like the Ku Klux Klan, the tendency toward rebellion decreased. Previously, Southern Black slaves had looked to the North as a place of refuge, but as the North no longer served as such, Blacks' desire to escape or rebel ceased while fear increased.

The anger which was characteristic of Black Americans of this period was often misinterpreted as self-hatred. Comer⁵ explains, for example, the excessive use of drugs and alcohol were passive, self-destructive behaviors, or anger turned against the self as expressions of self-hatred and low esteem. Comer says that violent behavior of Blacks against other Blacks as well as the low aspiration level and high rate of family conflicts, was often a displacement of anger toward Whites. Though Nobles⁴ warns that much of the literature on self-hatred in Blacks must be cautiously interpreted, it does seem appropriate to say that some of the violent behavior exhibited by Blacks during this period may be indicative of their tremendous anger at Whites and displacement of this anger toward self and significant others.

The Jim Crow period marked a further lessening of the dependency exhibited in the master-slave relationship. The violence and cessation of employment and protective legislation by Whites destroyed many of the previous need-fulfillment aspects of the relationship. Blacks began to turn more toward other Blacks for support and survival.

The racial segregation of this period, which created the ghettos, led to a greater sense of community and tribal relationship among Blacks. For Blacks as a group to survive, many of the tasks of child rearing and emotional support were divided among the entire community. Blacks who had food, shelter, and other goods shared with those less fortunate. The policy of racial segregation that allowed Black educational institutions to continue permitted a few select Blacks to develop skills and gain jobs to take care of other Blacks so that Whites would not have the responsibilities. Teaching, nursing and social work were jobs open to Blacks.

The economic achievements of a few Blacks along with more education and jobs enhanced self-development in the Black community, but differently than the experience of Whites during industrialization. A sense of contribution and participation existed in this Black development that did not exist in the production process of slavery. Now Blacks were able to look at their products and feel pride, achieve visibility from their work, and fulfill their potential as never before. Maintaining their sense of community prevented the individualism and psychological isolation that Whites had experienced with the rise in their productions. The pride experienced by Black Americans via community participation developed as a survival force in the face of overt expressions of racism and denigration by Whites.

What is important about this period is that it marks the beginning of the loss of individuality for the sake of group survival. Having broken symbiotic relationship with White masters, Blacks now sought a relationship within the context of the Black family (community/tribe), which promoted the development of a collective sense of identity.

RENAISSANCE

The Black Renaissance (about 1915 to 1930) highlights the spirit of group identity and cohesiveness. This era was marked by a pride in African heritage and a positiveness of the Black experience in America. The Marcus Garvey movement advocating return to the motherland (Africa) had a large following. At the same time many Blacks creatively expressed the experience of slavery through music, poetry, art, dance, and a multitude of mediums, all with pride and a desire to share a collective experience.

Psychological effects

The anger and rebellion held in abeyance by the violence of the Jim Crow period was slowly reasserting itself. It can be speculated that the demands of the Garvey movement, for instance, came to the fore as a result of the feelings of support derived from the group cohesiveness of this era. Blacks as a group were now able to vent their anger constructively and make demands thereby lessening fear and self-hatred.

CIVIL RIGHTS

In the 1950s and 1960s the Black American rebelled against the policies of segregation and violence that were institutionalized in the social system. The support, cohesiveness, and pride of communality that Black Americans were experiencing led to a challenge of the purported superiority of White Americans. The underlying principle of the Civil Rights movement was a refusal by Blacks to accept the White power structure's rationalizations for the continued treatment of Blacks and the poor as inferior.

BLACK POWER

The early 1970s saw the shift in the ideology of Black Americans from integration to segregation. Black Power of the 1970s was concerned with the rejection of White power and with the "nation-building" of Blacks as a people. Psychologically, Black Power represented denial of the deprivation models and the assertion of a positive self-image as vocalized through the slogan "Black is beautiful".¹⁶

The Black Power movement represented a new identity and sense of self-esteem based on rejection of White institutions and values. It represented the ability of Blacks to mobilize inner resources for self-enhancement. The culture and traditions that integration required Black Americans to give up became important symbols of the rejection of White dominance.

Thus, Blacks developed a collective sense of community and identity. Being Black implied particular beliefs, attitudes, or history with which other Blacks could identify. However, one of the problems with this group identity was its lack of individual or self-development. The group, or the cause, became more important than the individual. This was the philosophy of several of the revolutionary Black groups of the early 70s. Along with the drive for status and power, the self that was validated at that time was one of being needed. The individual derived a sense of self from the group rather than the group being defined by the selves that formed its existence. The aim of some Black groups, such as the Black Panthers and the Muslims, was to instill a new identity in their members, an identity which reflected ethnic group pride.

Yet what these groups failed to analyze was that much of the success of their endeavors was based on the psychological gratifications of relationship bonds, which develop incidental to membership and demands of the organization. Ludwig¹⁷ suggests the parallel of Alcoholics Anonymous, which has been successful in raising self-esteem and instilling pride in numerous individuals. They fostered pride not in alcoholism, but rather in their achievements and accomplishments. Gratification results from being needed.

SENSE OF SELF

Organizations or groups that strive only to enhance racial ethnic identification leave the individual developed only to the level of collective identity. The individual does not know him/herself in any other context than that of the group. The individual is able to develop and interact only as far as the boundaries of the group have progressed.

Now that many of the Black revolutionary and action groups of the 1960s and early 1970s have disbanded, many Black Americans are left without a sense of individual self-identity and with insecurities about their collective identity. Many questions and ambivalences surround the identity of Black Americans during the 1980s. With the increased economic status and mobility afforded Blacks, attempts to maintain Black traditions and the African cultural heritage are of major concern to Blacks as a group. Many Black Americans are wrestling with these issues. Black middle class parents living in predominantly White neighborhoods question how to instill a Black identity or aspects of Black culture and strengths in their children. Others worry that their children are too "White," but they struggle to define what being Black means after stereotypes are discarded.

More important than economic or educational achievements is the struggle for a definitive experience of one's individual self. A quest for this knowledge knows no color, but in the search must be an understanding of Black Americans' experiences and ethnicity. Mosby³ suggests:

Identity has to be more personally based. . . . It is not forced identification with the dominant White culture. Nor is it submissive advocacy of an alien African culture or heritage which bears no immediacy or relevancy to one's contemporary life (p. 135).

SUMMARY

History and ethnicity are important in the identity development of Black Americans who have lived among Whites promulgating their own superiority over the Black American subculture. Slavery objectified Blacks as pieces of property; it had the psychological effect of making Blacks both fearful and angry towards the majority population, leading them to engage in adaptive survival strategies, such as adopting assigned stereotypes or modeling Whites' behaviors and finding self-expression in religion, language, and music. During the Reconstruction, the master-slave relationship changed; many free Blacks became individualistic and lost their sense of community with other Blacks. Jim Crowism created ghettos and led to a greater sense of community among Blacks. The Jim Crow period marked the beginning of the loss of individuality for the sake of group survival. During the Black Renaissance of approximately 1915 to 1930, group pride and cohesiveness continued to grow, culminating in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the Black Power movement of the 1970s. Sense of self was submerged in

ethnic group pride. During the 1980s, to achieve a definitive experience of self, Black Americans struggle with the ambivalences surrounding their identities.

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