African American Males Speak: 
The Lifelong Process

Lena Wright Myers

This paper is based on interview data provided by 230 black males in America. Three important concepts—emascula
tion, dehumanization, and inferioritization are used in this work to characterize the outcome of the socialization process for black males. The theoretical orientation includes the structural-functional rela-
tionship of the socialization process to the larger society; with the primary empha-
sis on self-esteem. Early family life socialization does not produce significant differences in interpretations of self and the world in later life.

The lifelong process of socialization continues throughout different stages of the life course. This process includes childhood through early adulthood, and finally old age. It is the process through which social experiences make us fully human. It is also the means by which society transmits culture to each generation. Basic aspects of socialization lead to the rise and meaning of selfhood in social interaction. Perhaps the most important attitude each person holds is his or her attitude about self—an evaluation that is often labeled as self-esteem. We also have many different social selves that we express to different people.

What is this “busy talk” about the socialization of African American males in American society? It appears as if some previous writers have rationalized and legitimatized their views of African American males from an impression-istic standpoint by blaming the family structure for the outcome of its off-
spring in general, and African American males, specifically.

African American men are faced with a dilemma, when on one hand; they are placed in a relatively inferior social-structural position. On the other hand, they are urged strongly to perform roles (actions obtaining to a given posi-
tion) which may lead to a positively evaluated social-structural position. The problem becomes more complicated when we realize that numerous African American men constantly find themselves seeking legitimatizing or validat-
ing their mere existence in a white male dominated society.

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Socialization, in sociology and social psychology, almost always denotes the process whereby individuals learn to behave willingly in accordance with the prevailing standards of their culture. Although occasionally used synonymously with learning, it is usually reserved for the type of learning that bears on future role performance, which particularly involves group approval.

The author defines early socialization of black men as the way by which experiences between early childhood and late adolescence are transmitted to fit individuals into an organized way of life. This definition may be interpreted in various ways. It may mean "making a boy into a man." It may mean taking a man from an environment that has shaped his self image and redefining that image based on structural conditions, or it may imply society's use of institutionalized oppression which often hinders a black man from becoming what he is or what he ought to be in America.

You might ask: Just how do black men become socialized? Is that process from them different than that of other people in our society? If the answer is yes to the last question, then how does the process of early socialization affect them in terms of: (1) the structure of their families of origin; (2) their behavioral responses to societal role expectations; and (3) the development and maintenance of their self-esteem?

The black men interviewed for the research talked of their early life experiences, and set the stage for a critical examination of the conventional interpretations of black male socialization. Only through the recollections and perceptions of early life experiences can black American males accurately be defined. This article responds to those experiences.

The author raised three intriguing questions for guiding the research:

- What are the effects of the black, female, single-parent family structure on the early socialization of its male offspring?
- To what extent do the experiences of early socialization affect the self-esteem of black males?
- Are there structural factors that may contribute to behavioral patterns among black males?

Data for the article were secured from a systematic random sample of 230 personal interviews conducted with black males in Jackson, Mississippi, over the years 1988 to 1990. Subjects were black men who were single (never married), married, separated, divorced, widowed, or cohabited with a woman. They were 18 to 76 years old. Educational background ranged from elementary school to a doctorate degree. They had zero to nine children, and monthly family incomes anywhere from $370 to $3,000.

One unique aspect of the research for this article is that it allowed the black men to recall events, speak for themselves, and interpret their early experiences at face value. This is what has enabled the author to draw some speculative conclusions.

Historical View of Socialization

A review of the literature on the socialization of the black male indicates that the slave system and the race-caste system impacted the structure and the