Title of the Symposium:

Meaning Systems in the Construction of Adolescents’ Social Identities

Title of the Presentation:

Voices: Self-complexity and adolescents’ construction of their African American identity

There is considerable empirical evidence that African American identity is multidimensional and develops in stages across the lifespan (Cross, 1991; Sellers et. al, 1998). However, little is known about the content of African American identity or its meaning within the lives of African American adolescents. Boykin (1986) suggests that the experiences and psychological functioning of African Americans are necessarily complex because of simultaneously negotiation of three experiences: the mainstream, minority and Black cultural experience. However, empirical research exploring multiple experiences related to race is limited and has rarely been examined within adolescent populations. Furthermore, it is clear from social psychological research that self and identity processes are complex both in terms of structure and content (Banaji, & Prentice, 1994; Linville, 1985;Markus & Nurius, 1986; Tesser, Felson,& Suls, 2000). The purpose of this paper is to advance understanding of the experiences of African American adolescents and how they construct their identity and place in society. The following two research questions are examined: (1) In constructing their identity, do African American adolescents adopt multiple and competing discourses to describe what it means to be an African American? (2) What are the ideological dilemmas that African American adolescents describe in their efforts to understand the meaning of being an African American?

The sample for the current interview study includes 16 African American adolescents who were selected from a larger ten-year longitudinal survey study. Participants for the current study were selected based on identity and gender measures within the larger survey study.
African American adolescents adopt multiple social representations and self-interpretations in constructing what it means to be an African American. Stereotype awareness and compensation were described as meaning systems whereby adolescents confront stereotypes in the form of images, attitudes, and expectations regarding style, dress, intelligence, and behavior. For some, subjection to stereotypes means personally compensating for or not confirming stereotypes through the self-regulation of their own behavior. Another meaning system that emerged was pride. Within this meaning system, the cultivation of pride in being an African American had two different sources. For some, pride emanated from learning positive things about African American culture and history, while for others pride emerged as a self-protective reaction to others negative views or in anticipation of future racism. Finally, adolescents described being African American as having meaning in terms of phenotypic features such as skin color, facial features, and hair texture.

Two prominent ideological dilemmas emerged associated with adolescents meaning systems: (1) reconciliation of stereotypes and racism and their own views of self and African Americans; (2) maintaining a sense of self or uniqueness while simultaneously wanting to be a member of group. Resolution of the first ideological dilemma was sometimes accomplished by making cognitive changes that stressed individualism in self-definition and psychological distance from African Americans.

In sum, these voices of African American adolescents begin to unravel self and identity complexity in the meaning of being an African American. Theoretical and methodological questions that these findings raise are discussed.