

**“Who Am I?” Utilizing a Systematic Review of the Literature to Explore Relevant  
Black Youth Identity Models for Social Work Practice**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Social Work  
in the School of Social Work  
at  
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

September, 2022

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## Abstract

The identity and wellbeing of Black adolescents is often explored in the context of racial development with emphasis on the deficits of the developing youth. Subjected to adultification, racism, and anti-blackness in the United States, Black youth face unique challenges that interventions and theories do not adequately account for. A systematic review was conducted to examine the available applicable models, interventions and theories to answer the following question: *In what ways do interventions target the nurturance of Black identity and wellbeing?* Several themes emerged including connectedness as a buffer for the developing youth, however, the nurturance of Black identity was not present. Assuming identity development is a monolithic and universal experience, literature fails to examine the complexities of intersecting identities for the developing Black youth.

**Keywords:** *black adolescent, black youth, identity development, social work, wellbeing*

## **Acknowledgement**

To the Black youth of Harlem and beyond: You made all this possible. I hope untethered and uncomplicated joy continues to find you.

To my committee: Dr. Davis you have inspired me more than you know. Your knowledge, care, support and motivation does not go unnoticed. Kat, your humanness, and kind spirit has helped me stay grounded in this fight. Together, your passion for well-being as a birthright has fueled my interests and added value to my work.

To my friends, new, old and in between: You have all encouraged me to dream bigger and speak louder. My voice has been amplified because you have continued to believe in my words, passion and zest for life.

To my family: You all had bigger visions for yourself and life when we migrated to the U.S. from Jamaica. It is due to your sacrifice and love that I can breathe life into my wildest of dreams.

To Shiloh: My most perfect manifestation of life. You breathed into this world and made me new. I hope when you can read this, you know that joy is always in your reach.

Lastly, to my husband and, my best friend: I know you often joke and say “I feel like I’m getting my doctorate too,” but that much is true. This is as much your degree as it is mine. You encourage me daily to shine brighter than the sun and illuminate more than the moon.

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## **Introduction**

### **Adolescent Wellbeing Defined**

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines adolescence as a crucial time period prior to adulthood spanning from the ages of 10 through 19 accompanied by increased physical growth, cognitive development, identity development, autonomy and increased risk behaviors. Patterns and coping skills developed during this time are key determinants of adulthood development processes (Anderson et al., 2019; Avedissian & Alayan, 2021; Brittan, 2012; Lin & Shek, 2019; Ross et al., 2020). Adolescents who show overall positive experiences of wellbeing including emotional, physical, mental, and psychological wellbeing decrease their chances of negative health outcomes and risk behaviors into adulthood. However, this is not a solo endeavor, as adolescents require additional connectedness and support from their external environments (e.g., school, family, society) to encourage optimal internal wellbeing (Avedissian & Alayan, 2021; Ross et al., 2020). As a newer concept to literary studies that is often difficult to conceptualize Ross et al. (2020) proposed a working definition and framework of adolescent wellbeing as follows:

Adolescents have the support, confidence, and resources to thrive in contexts of secure and healthy relationships, realizing their full potential and rights (Ross et al., 2020, p. 473).

According to Ross et al. (2020), when this is achieved, regardless of context, all adolescents should be able to experience optimal wellbeing. Emerging from this developmental period is the identity specific question: “Who am I in relation to the world around me?”

### **Eurocentric Perspective of Wellbeing and Identity Development**

Throughout the literature there is an assumption that adolescent wellbeing and identity

development is a universal and monolithic experience. Conceptualizations of what is consistent with adolescent wellbeing focus on positive attributes of identity development, assumes socioemotional needs are met, and are derived from the Eurocentric perspective (Anderson et al., 2019; Avedissian & Alayan, 2021; Constantine & Sue, 2006; Ross et al., 2020; Vera et al., 2022). Adolescent identity theories and models fail to include marginalized aspects of development (e.g., ethnicity, gender, and sexuality) that impact the effort and ability it takes to sustain positive wellbeing over time (Anderson et al., 2019; Avedissian & Alayan, 2021; Constantine & Sue, 2006; Lin & Shek, 2019; Ross et al., 2020; Vera et al., 2022). Specifically, Black adolescents whose identity development process and acquired coping skills differ from their peers. Black adolescents experience of anti-blackness, racialized trauma, adultification, oppression and socialization can greatly impact their identity lens and overlook the care needed for Black youth (Anderson et al., 2019; Brittian, 2012; Constantine & Sue, 2006; Jones et al., 2020; Lozada et al., 2022; Vera et al., 2022). Black adolescent identity is unique, and complex given its combination of the standard developmental process (e.g., biological and cognitive developments) and the process of integrating into ecological, social-cultural and racial development. This may impact Black adolescents reaching Mo et al. (2020) definition of adolescent wellbeing, ultimately making it difficult to achieve.

### **Black Adolescent Wellbeing and Identity in Context**

Literature and models on Black identity are increasingly shaped by respectability politics, western Eurocentric societal norms and scholar-based values that are often distorted and stereotypical in approach. Fixated on racial development in the background of whiteness, achieving optimal wellbeing and identity development often focuses on mitigating deficits and buffering the experiences of racism and oppression (Brittian, 2012; Copeland, 2006; Duncan &

McCoy, 2007; Jones et al., 2020; Travis & Leech, 2014). Black youth are removed from the process of developing thriving identities within the historical and social-cultural context of the United States. This is found in the increased need to focus on racial identity and encourage assimilation (Brittian, 2012; Copeland, 2006; Duncan' & McCoy, 2007). This propels the stereotype that Black youth need less care and protection, voiding Black youth of their innocence. Lozada et al. (2022) states:

Black youth as adults (and therefore also dangerous) live in the psyches of those who make decisions about the structure of and access to social institutions that impact Black adolescents and their communities and serves as the basis of systematic and interpersonal discrimination, prejudice, and oppression (p.16)

This can be reflected in the stereotypical images of Black youth portrayed in media, the harm of Black youth by law enforcement, schools over punishment of Black youth, and the minimum representation of optimal and thriving Black youth in the western developmental process (Brittian, 2012; Jones et al., 2020; Lozada et al., 2022). The disregard for the emotional and psychological wellbeing is situated as heavily impacting youth facing mental health practitioners. These practitioners can buffer, however, they are often misinformed and misaligned with the needs of Black youth (Copeland, 2006; Jones et al., 2020). Thus, their assessments, treatments and conceptualizations of needs are not informed by the impact of intersecting identities and difficult experiences.

### **Theoretical Lens: Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality**

Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in her 1989 essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" whilst describing the experience of marginalized Black



women within anti discriminatory law, antiracist policy and theory through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black Feminism. Crenshaw (1989) heavily discussed the ways in which law and theory did not consider the impact of Black women's multiple marginalized and intersecting identities and how negating these factors contributed to oppression. Law and theory's dichotomous focus on either gender or race were heavily geared towards the perspective and experiences of white women (Crenshaw, 1989). Within her orientation of intersectionality to her readers, Crenshaw (1989) states:

This focus on the most privileged group members marginalizes those who are multiply burdened, and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination. I suggest further that this focus on otherwise-privileged group members creates a distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon (p. 140).

Though Crenshaw's (1989) work focuses on the marginalization and oppression of Black women, it's important to connect the theory of intersectionality to Black adolescent identity and wellbeing. Considering Black adolescents have varying intersecting identities (e.g. race, gender, sexuality) intervention and theories may not account for the different experiences due to the use of universal definitions, interventions and theories as truths. In the context of this review, intersectionality is used as a framework to consider how exclusion by intersecting identities impact effective care for Black adolescents.

### **Purpose of Review**

Currently, there are limited systematic reviews focusing on the development of Black identity and wellbeing. Thus, the purpose of this review is to answer the following question: In

what ways do interventions target the nurturance of Black identity and wellbeing?

### **Scope of Review**

#### **Method**

The literature search was conducted from June 22 through June 26, 2022. Searches were conducted through The University of Alabama Library SCOUT database and EBSCOHost via The University of Alabama. The publication dates were limited to the last twenty years (2002-2022) and yielded articles from various journals such as *Society for Research in Child Development*, *Child and Adolescent in Social Work Journal* and *Journal of Black Psychology*.

#### ***Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria***

To limit bias, the systematic review of the literature was selected based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. Literature that included the following: (a) majority of participants are self-described as Black adolescent (e.g., African American, Afro-Caribbean) through the developmental ages of 10 through 19, (b) Black adolescent experiences of identity (e.g., gender, cultural, racial) development and wellbeing (e.g., emotional, mental, psychological), (c) empirical research described as focusing on Black identity and/or wellbeing and (d) scholarly and peer reviewed articles within the United States were reviewed. Literature that contained keywords and/or focused on the following were excluded: (a) grouping experiences of historically marginalized groups using terms as all ethnic minorities, people of color or multiracial identities and (b) Black experiences of wellbeing and identity in adulthood and/or past the age of 19, (c) parent focused interventions and (d) research focusing on substance abuse, AIDS/HIV and/or STD/STI prevention in Black adolescents.

#### ***Search Terms***

In conjunction with the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the databases were searched three times using similar terms:

1. For interventions with Black adolescent, terms included: “intervention” OR “strategies” OR “best practice” AND “black youth” OR “black adolescent” OR “African American youth” OR “African American Adolescents” AND “identity development” OR “identity formation” OR “identity construction”
2. For theories and models focusing on Black adolescent similar terms were included: “framework” OR “model” OR “theory” AND “black youth” OR “black adolescent” OR “African American youth” OR “African American Adolescents” AND “identity development” OR “identity formation” OR “identity construction”
3. Lastly, in finding topics targeting Black adolescent wellbeing, the following terms were included: “wellbeing” OR “well-being” OR “well being” AND “black youth” OR “black adolescent” OR “African American youth” OR “African American Adolescents” AND “identity development” OR “identity formation” OR “identity construction”

## ***Results***

Each search result yielded individual results with a small amount of duplicated literature over search terms. After duplications were removed, interventions with Black adolescents yielded 126 results, for theories and models focusing on Black adolescents 242 results, and for Black adolescent wellbeing 60 results. In total, 428 studies abstract, and titles were assessed. Fourteen articles were screened to match search terms and only eight studies met the inclusion criteria for review.

## **Review of the Literature**

For this review, the overwhelming research on racial and ethnic identity were limited within the study to allow review of other intersecting identities and factors of wellbeing.

## **Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity-Teen (MIBI-T)**

Many of the literature used the multidimensional inventory of black identity-teen (MIBI-T) as the intervention measurement of choice. MIBI-T arose due to the lack of adolescent developmental representation in models and theories of racial identity. Derived from the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) (see Sellers et al., 1998 for more information), MIBI-T focuses on three dimensions: centrality, regard and ideology. Since its origins are rooted in MMRI, MIBI-T uses the same dimensions descriptions excluding racial salience (Scottham et al., 2008):

In contrast, racial centrality refers to the extent to which an individual normatively emphasizes racial group membership as part of his or her overall self-concept. The third dimension, racial regard refers to whether an individual feels positively or negatively about African American group membership and is divided into two subdimensions: public and private. Public regard is defined as the extent to which an individual feels that others view the African American community in a positive or negative manner. Private regard is defined as the extent to which an individual feels positively or negatively toward the African American community as well as how she or he feels about being a member of this community. The final dimension, racial ideology, refers to one's philosophy about the ways that members of the African American community should act. It comprises four subcomponents: nationalist, oppressed minority, assimilationist, and humanist (Sellers, Smith, et al., 1998). The nationalist ideology emphasizes the uniqueness of being African American and is characterized by the support of African American organizations and preference for African American social environments. The oppressed minority ideology emphasizes the similarities between African Americans'

experiences and those of other oppressed minority groups. Assimilationist ideology emphasizes the similarities between African American and mainstream American society. Humanist emphasizes the similarities among all people regardless of race (p. 297).

Due to the adult racial identity focus of the original psychometric properties of the MMRI, Scottham et al. (2008) sought out how to encapsulate black adolescence and simplify the language to be relevant to Black youth. Utilizing a tiered approach, researchers sampled 489 self-identified African American teens from the Midwest ranging from ages 12 to 16 years old to participate in the 50-60-minute questionnaire. Concurrently, researchers utilized a focus group of 18 adolescent boys and girls (excluded from the sample) to collect data and determine age appropriateness of the MIBI-T language and applicability of the MIBI dimensions (Scottham et al., 2008). The study results showed gender and grade level (early vs late adolescent) were unchanging factors in racial identity and that MIBI-T demonstrated construct validity. Scottham et al. (2008) states:

Thus, the MIBI-T seems to be appropriate for use with both early and middle adolescents as well as African American girls and boys. The present results also suggest that the subscales of the MIBI-T are related to race-relevant phenomena in ways that are consistent with what one would expect, given the constructs that they measure. These results provide limited evidence of the predictive validity of the MIBI-T within our sample (p. 303)

### **The Intersection of Wellbeing in Race, Ethnicity, and Gender Identity**

Several studies within this review focus on the impact of race, ethnicity and/or gender on the developing Black adolescent. Race and ethnicity are used as distinct terms of identification to describe similar physical characteristics (race) versus cultural derived and shared traditions and

attributes (ethnicity). Seaton et al., 2006 states:

The distinction between race and ethnicity is particularly difficult for African Americans due to historical circumstances such as force slavery and the forced severance from their indigenous African culture. We contend that it is the concept of racial membership in American society that provides the primary psychological connection among African Americans (see Sellers et al., 1998 for further discussion) (p. 1416).

This does not include the construct of race or impact of cultural assimilation. DeCarlo (2005) sought out the correlation between Erik Erikson's ego identity, racial and ethnic identity for the Black adolescent. DeCarlo (2005) explored the three identities for intercorrelation and states the purpose of exploration as the following:

First, the aim was to explore the interrelationships between ego, racial, ethnic identity development for African American adolescents in an effort to inform social work intervention strategies. Specifically, the study sought to empirically investigate how dimensions of well-developed ego identity were associated with mature racial and ethnic identity. Conversely, we were interested in how underdeveloped dimensions of each form of identity may be related. Second, we explored the extent to which African American identity status was predictive of aggressive behavioral characteristics to highlight the usefulness of identity assessment in prospective treatment/intervention plans (p. 40).

DeCarlo (2005) sampled a random population of 110 self-identifying African Americans in a mid-west city between the ages of 14 to 16. Of the randomly sampled population, 59 identified as male and 51 identified as female across six schools. Additional characteristics were

examined including parental level of education and employment; however, these characteristics were not made to be significantly impactful in the study (DeCarlo, 2005). Four different Likert scales were used to measure the interconnection of ego, race and ethnicity: (1) Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (EOM-EIS) to assess the domains of ego identity, (2) The Racial Identity Attitude Scale-Long Form (RIAS-L) to assess the development of racial identity through four stages, (3) Phinney's Multiethnic Identity Model (MEIM) to confirm ethnic connection and belonging (see Phinney, 1992), and (4) The Aggression Questionnaire (AQ) to assess the presence of how aggression is manifested with an individual (review DeCarlo, 2005 for further details on scales and their validity). For the results and purpose of this review, the focus will be on the results of ethnicity and racial identity. DeCarlo (2005) finds:

However, we also found positive significant correlations between racial internalization and ethnic achieved ( $r = .39, p < .01$ ) and immersion/emersion and ethnic behaviors ( $r = .36, p < .01$ ). Hence, while Phinney (1992) does not place race at the center of achieving an optimal identity, the relationships found in this research may suggest that racial matters may play a significant role in the identity development of African American adolescents (p.47).

Similarly, Seaton et al. (2006) used Phinney's 1992 Multiethnic Identity Model (MIEM) and Marcia's 1966 model of ego identity development in their research on the correlation of psychological well-being, racial socialization and racial identity development within group context of African American adolescence. In their 3-year longitudinal studies using cluster analysis, Seaton et al. (2006) sampled 224 self-identified African American adolescents (81% identified as Black/African American). The sample was majority 60% female recruited from school districts in a Midwestern city and ranged in age from 11 to 17 years old (See Seaton et al.

2006 for in depth methodology). Three different scales were used to measure (1) racial identity (Multiethnic Identity Model), (2) depression (The Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D), and (3) psychological well-being (Psychological well-being scale). As Seaton et al.'s (2006) focused on Phinney (1992) and Marcia (1996) identity theories the results correlated as such. The findings concluded that African American youth who had achieved racial identity had higher psychological well-being and few depressive symptoms. Depressive symptoms were not significant by age or gender ( $p > .05$ ) but were significant for wellbeing ( $p < .01$ ) (Seaton et al., 2006).

Rogers et al. (2015) sought to understand the connection of racial and gender identity in the development process of Black adolescent males and its impact overtime on psychological wellbeing and educational outcomes. The sample population consisted of 183 students from an all-male charter school in the Midwest between the ages of 13 to 16 years old. Additional demographics such as parent education, income level, and family structure were also examined, as a control point, however, were not the focus of the study. Rogers et al. (2015) collected data over the course of two academic years and three waves utilizing multiple scale measurements (Rogers et al., 2015). The following Likert scales were used: (1) Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity-Teen (MIBI-T) to measure centrality and private regard for race and gender, (2-3) Rosenberg self-esteems scale and the Children's Depression Inventory-Short Form (CDI-S) to observe psychological wellbeing, (4) an undisclosed scale for measurement of school engagement and (5) a subscale of Walton and Cohen's measure of race, social fit and achievement. The results were varied at an individual level, but overall Black males believed both race and gender were impactful parts of identity. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) test showed that individual significance within gender centrality and gender private regard ( $p < .001$ )



rated higher than race centrality and private regard ( $p < .01$ ). Discussing the higher significance, Rogers et al. (2015) states:

The incongruent pattern for racial identity is intriguing because it suggests that while the importance of racial identity increased over time, how positively boys feel about their membership in that group decreased. The decline in positive regard raises questions about how boys interpret their racial group membership. Observational data gathered by the first author documents the considerable socialization within the school surrounding the history and social significance of race, including critiques of race and racial stereotypes in the media. Such conversations seemed to provide youth with explicit and tangible ways to think about how race was important in their lives, thereby strengthening the centrality of race. At the same time, these conversations were laced with a narrative of being an “exception,” being separate and different from the Black people in their everyday lives, being independent. Thus, implicit in the strategy of providing students with successful Black male role models is the message that the Black males they typically see are not worth emulating. This message may foster more negative racial group evaluations. An important question then, is how to support positive racial identities that are inclusive and relational rather than autonomous (Perry, 2004 as cited in Rogers et al., 2015).

Both identities were found to correlate to self-esteem and psychological wellbeing, but “a joint effect was not detected (Rogers et al., 2015).”

### **Systems of Oppression and Development**

Black adolescents remain vigilant in their experiences of racism and racist encounters. The anticipation of these experiences cause increased psychological and physiological stressors

that drastically affects their wellbeing (Hope et al., 2021). Hope et al. (2021) assessed the experiences of racism and stress responses in a sample 442 Black adolescents ages 14 to 17 years old. Of this sample, 70% self-identified as African American (remaining participants were Afro-Latin, Caribbean, or multiethnic) and 14% identified as a sexual minority (queer, lesbian, gay, transgender or bisexual). Using Qualtrics Panels, a survey was administered to participants that used the following measures: (1) Prolonged Activation and Anticipatory Race Related Stress Scale (PARS) for stress induced racism responses, (2) Index of Race-Related Stress (IRRS) to examine the levels (individual, institutional and cultural) of racism experienced and (3) Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity-Short (MMBI) to measure centrality, private and public regard (Hope et al., 2021). Black adolescents who experienced all levels of racism showed significance; Individually ( $p < .001$ ), institutionally ( $p < .001$ ), and culturally ( $p < .001$ ) with variability on centrality, private and public regard (Hope et al., 2021). The comparison in experiences of Black adolescent who identify with a sexuality minority identity was not further explored outside of gender comparisons.

### **Connectedness as a Developmental Buffer**

Connection to various interrelated support networks can be beneficial to the development of Black adolescents. According to a secondary analysis of the National Survey of American Life-Adolescent (NSAL-A), well-connected Black adolescents who have meaningful familial network, school support, social peer connection, religious leaders and spaces of worship and community care experience optimal psychological wellbeing and development “despite broader systems of oppression as outlined in the integrative model [of development for minority children] (Rose et al., 2019).” Rose et al. (2019) analyzed data from 1170 self-identified African American and Afro-Caribbean adolescent ages 13 through 17 to explore connectedness,

wellbeing and development, and if these factors varied by gender and ethnicity. Utilizing several domains of connectedness (family, social, school, religion, and community care) and their respective scales, Rose et al. (2019) concluded that there is no significant variance in ethnic experiences of African American and Afro-Caribbean youth regarding connectedness and wellbeing, however there were gendered variances. The sampled Black female identifying youth had higher connectedness to social peer networks ( $p < 0.001$ ) and lower hedonic wellbeing ( $p < 0.01$ ) compared to their male counterparts.

Similarly, Rose et al. (2020) utilized the NSAL-A to explore how nonorganizational religious involvement (NRI) impact the psychosocial functioning and development of African American and Caribbean youth ages 13 to 17 years old. NRI's are classified as religious practices and belief systems that function as a coping system for life's stressors (Rose et al., 2020). Utilizing a cross-sectional survey and multiple scales including an undisclosed Likert scale to measure hedonic wellbeing, the study concluded that having religious connectedness was significant for both Caribbean ( $p < .01$ ) and African American ( $p < .001$ ) youth hedonic wellbeing and development (Rose et al., 2020). However, the correlation between ethnicity (African American versus Caribbean youth), wellbeing and development remain unclear.

### **Discussion**

This systematic review sought to answer the following question: In what ways do interventions target the nurturance of Black identity and wellbeing? After setting the criteria and reviewing the literature, eight articles were selected and then within review were narrowed down to seven. Several quantitative articles discussed the impact of racial identity as a key component in Black adolescent development and how the level of connection to racial identity either hinders or propels individual, group and societal acceptance. Of these studies, gender, ethnicity and

sexual identities were covariates. The intersection of identities and its effects on Black adolescent development and wellbeing were not further explored. However, since there are no direct studies that explore nurturing Black identities, this review adds to the dearth of literature that explores nurturing Black adolescent identity versus conceptualization.

### **Limitations**

This study had several limitations. One of the major limitations is that a study had to be removed after the selection was narrowed down to eight. The study consisted of Black adolescents who identified as a sexual minority (e.g., bisexual, lesbian, gay); however, the range expanded into adulthood with a median participant age of 20, which prompted removal due to the 19-year-old criteria restriction. This made the literature pool smaller and removed a body of work that explored racial and sexual identity. Of the remaining literature, the research findings showed significance, but remain difficult to generalize as most literature only utilized (1) secondary data, (2) took place in the Midwest and/or (3) focused on racial identity as the primary developmental aspect. Ethnic identity as a covariate in Rose et al. (2019, 2020), was utilized in comparison to African American and Afro-Caribbean, but the variance of cultural identity within this was not further explored. Similarly, in Hope et al., 2021, the population sample consisted of 14% Black youth identifying as a historically marginalized sexual minority, however the intersection of sexual and racial identity as it related to anticipatory stress was not explored. Lastly, the validity of numerous measurements scales was questionable by the authors and could not be considered beneficial in measuring constructs. This makes it difficult to apply to Black adolescent experiences across the United States.

### **Implications**

Black adolescent development has long been studied in relation to racial identity and how

to navigate associated stressors (Rogers et al., 2015; Rose et al., 2019; Scottham et al., 2008; Seaton et al., 2006). The continuous threat of psychological stressors such as racism impacts the developing youth. Connectedness to varying support levels such as school, community care, and religion may buffer these experiences. However, the ways in which theory explores Black adolescent identity should consider expanding past racial development and focus on care for additional intersecting identities. Black adolescents' development should not be defined solely by their experience of race. Exploration of other cultural identity concepts (not as covariates) such as sexual identity, gender expression and how developing optimal wellbeing is achieved would benefit the literature. Interventions seeking how Black adolescents get to experience joy in the background of such a complex time of development is critical.

## **Conclusion**

Black adolescent identity is complex and expands beyond racial identity development. Interventions within this review did not target nurturance of Black identity and wellbeing, but instead explored its potential impact on racial identity development as an individual and within a group. Furthermore, interventions and theories of Black adolescent development and wellbeing need to be more robust in their approach. How researchers and mental health professionals alike perceive the development of Black youth relay in how adolescent development is taught as universal truth. Black adolescents should be able to reach Ross et al.'s (2020) definition of optimal wellbeing during their development.

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