ABSTRACT

GENRIFICATION IN HARLEM, NEW YORK: EXAMINING THE PERSPECTIVES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS.

by Sandra Robinson

The purpose of this research was to examine how African American adolescents define and discuss the effects of gentrification occurring within Harlem, New York City. Smith (1996) defines gentrification as the “upgrading of housing and retail businesses in a neighborhood with an influx generally of private investment” (p. 30). This qualitative study sought to give voice to a highly misrepresented and misunderstood important group within America, African American adolescents about yet another deterrent found within their community. The study attempted to capture the adolescents’ ideas and feelings about their neighborhoods as a separate group distinct from adults. In the past, assessing neighborhood effects on children has been difficult primarily because the perceptions were gathered from adults rather than from the adolescent (Burton & Jarrett, 2000). The results, as analyzed from a focus group discussion are discussed to further understand the perceptions of African American adolescents from Harlem, New York about gentrification. Study limitations and directions for future research are also presented.
GENTRIFICATION IN HARLEM, NEW YORK: EXAMINING THE PERSPECTIVES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS.

A Thesis

Submitted to the

Faculty of Miami University

in partial fulfillment of

the requirement for the degree of

Master of Science

Department of Family Studies and Social Work

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2005

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to give thanks to the creator for providing me with strength, guidance and continued blessing daily. For my parents Donald and Mary Gaffney, thank you for teaching me the value of hard work and I render you a special thanks for your help and support with my children throughout my college career.

For Carl, my husband and childhood friend thanks for being an incredible role model of academic excellence for me. I am proud of your many accomplishments. They say, if you can make it in New York and then Oxford, Ohio you can make it anywhere. The best has yet to come for us. To my beloved daughters Dominique and Myah thank you so much for being wonderful children. You made the journey in Oxford worth living.

Dr. Joseph I thank you for your time and patience and I would like to especially thank you for not hindering my creativity nor my vision for this study. To Dr. Lloyd thank you for your time and patience, you were incredibly inspiring and encouraging throughout this endeavor. Dr. Evans thank you for your time and patience. I would also like to extend my gratitude to you for all of the support you provided to me and my family throughout our stay at Miami University. Finally, I would like to thank Rosalyn Mason and all of the other phenomenal women I met at Miami University for providing me with encouraging words of wisdom and a good joke when I needed it.
My Personal Narrative

During my undergraduate education, I took an urban studies course at Miami University. During the course, I learned about the process of gentrification. Instantly, I became interested in the process and passionate about the people affected by gentrification. During my senior year, I participated in a case study on Housing on the South side of Chicago, Illinois. The south side of Chicago was undergoing urban renewal, the initiative was to create a mixed community, combining low and middle class residents into one neighborhood. During the trip, we met with members of Chicago’s Housing Authority, community leaders and several members of various tenants associations. While meeting with the different groups, I learned what their roles and perspectives were on the process of urban renewal. Later that afternoon we visited the neighborhood high school, Dusable High School. Before arriving at the high school the professor explained to the class that the school was rated as one of the worst schools in the nation. Essentially, the ranking was based on the socio-economics faced by the predominantly African American families residing on the south side of Chicago.

When we arrived at the school we were greeted by the schools principal an African American woman, I am sorry but I can’t recall her name. The principal told us about the history of the school and the community at large. She told us that during the 60s and 70s the community and the school were once prominent with many successful African American residents. The building was old but the architectural design was intact, yet I noticed that most of the doors were locked with chains and huge padlocks. The principal told us that because of the severity of drug related crime and violence, safety was a huge concern for the school, so the doors were locked to keep the negative elements out. Afterwards she gave us free reign of the school for the remainder of the afternoon. After sitting in on two classes, I became thoroughly intrigued by what the teens might be thinking about as their neighborhood was changing. During the third classroom observation, I got an opportunity to have a discussion group with the adolescents. I asked the group of teens what their perceptions were of the process occurring in their community. Hence, my graduate thesis and life’s work began.

The adolescents gave their own clear and concise views of the process of gentrification without any prior knowledge of the term. The interaction was incredible. Immediately I thought about how important the information was to the African American community and society at
large, to discern the perspectives of a disregarded group within American society. As a society, more attention should be given toward generating dialogue that is inclusive of adolescent. Adolescents can vote, drink, drive and fight in a war by age twenty-one, yet their opinions aren’t considered valid. As a society we need to reexamine our perspectives of adolescents because we afford them with rights but yet, we do not respect what they have to say about issues.

I chose to do my graduate thesis on Gentrification in Harlem because I am a former resident of New York and I am familiar with the rich cultural history found in Harlem. As a result, I am interested in examining the perspectives of the Harlem adolescents. I hope this research will lead to dialogue that dispels the negative connotations associated with African American adolescents residing in Harlem and elsewhere. Last, I am very intrigued by the process of gentrification and I am thoroughly concerned about the people affected by the process.
Typically, policy makers and other professionals do not regard the perspectives of adolescents when making decisions. The emphasis is primarily based on adult’s viewpoints. Young adults are excluded from such discussions because of the overwhelming attitudes held by adult members of society about adolescents. Mathews (2001) explained how the attitudes of adults about young people are not positive perspectives. Adults feel that young people are not competent or productive citizens and suggest that adolescents should be sheltered as long as possible from adult pressures. According to Finn and Checkoway (1998), “adolescents are regarded as victims or problems in society or that they are bundles of pathologies threatening the social order” (p. 3). Because of these and other perspectives, young people are disregarded as valid or competent citizens of society. Essentially, young people will remain the passive recipients of services rather than active participants in the process of change. When young people are viewed this way, they feel as though they have a marginal role in the social political and economic structure of society (Finn & Checkoway, 1998).

Mathews (2001) notes, “like young people, adults also need training in order to understand the potential of others as equal and mutual actors in local decision making” (p. 155). Normally, there are not many opportunities in place in society for adolescents and adults to work together. One of the major concerns found in current literature is that adults are afraid of sharing or losing authoritative power to young people (Mathews, 2001). However, I believe that recognizing adolescents would not exclude adults, but rather would allow for a more inclusive society.

In American culture adolescents are allowed to vote, drive, work, drink alcoholic beverages, smoke, and get drafted all by age twenty-one, yet we do not value their opinions. I am not suggesting that adolescents be given sole authoritative roles, but that society and researchers becomes more inclusive of the perspectives of adolescents, especially when policies adversely affect their lives. African American and Hispanic adolescent perceptions are less likely to be regarded than white adolescent perceptions, because of negative stereotypes.
cultivated by negative images portrayed in the media. African American adolescent are portrayed as hopeless and devoid of any value to mainstream society. These negative images produces fear of adolescents, ultimately, leaving them silent without giving them any chance to tell anyone what they are thinking (Gonzalez, 1998).

**Statement of Problem**

Currently, several urban renewal processes are impacting African American adolescents residing in large metropolitan cities across America. Throughout the urban renewal process, the adolescents’ perspectives are not being regarded. Adolescents generally spend large amounts of time in their residential areas because their daily activities occur in their immediate environments. In my opinion, I think that the adolescent in the community would express some valid concerns about the process of gentrification.

Gentrification is one of the most commonly used urban renewal practices instituted in major urban areas. Gentrification has been occurring in Harlem, New York since the early 1980s (Smith 1996). Smith (1996) defines gentrification as the “upgrading of housing and retail businesses in a neighborhood with an influx generally of private investment” (p. 30). Glass (1964) stated, “once this process of gentrification starts in a district it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed”(p. 10).

Gentrification in Harlem is a redevelopment strategy that if implemented strategically could result in an economically integrated community for the current residents and the new incoming residents. Yet, the current focus of gentrification in Harlem has led to higher rent prices and lower paying jobs. Freeman and Braconi (2004) stated, “existing residents of inner-city neighborhoods could benefit directly from gentrification if it brings new housing investment and stimulates additional retail and culture” (p. 39). Throughout the process of gentrification, several attempts are taken to receive input from adults about the process. I have not come across any literature that represents the voices of adolescents about the process of gentrification.

For this qualitative study, I examined the perceptions of the African American adolescents residing in Harlem, New York in a focus group discussion. I examined how African American adolescents define and discuss the effects of gentrification occurring within their community. This qualitative study sought to give voice to a highly misrepresented and
misunderstood important group within America, African American adolescents about yet another deterrent found within their community. The study attempted to capture the adolescents’ ideas and feelings about their neighborhoods as a separate group distinct from adults (Perez-Smith, Albus & Weist, 2000). In the past, assessing neighborhood effects on children has been difficult primarily because the perceptions were gathered from adults rather than from the adolescents (Burton & Jarrett, 2000).

**Justification of the Problem**

Current research involving metropolitan inner-city African American adolescent tend to concentrate on the negative factors derived from social and economic disadvantages. Seldom do we find research opportunities that enlist the perceptions of African American adolescent on issues that severely affect their future outcomes. Increasingly, research could advance by discerning an honest account of the perceptions held by metropolitan inner-city African American adolescents. Through the increased understanding of the adolescents’ perceptions perhaps the policies and changes occurring in disadvantaged communities could efficiently reflect the voices of the adolescents in the community.

Gentrification is a commonly used economic restructuring practice being instituted in major urban metropolitan areas throughout the United States (Smith, 1996). During the process of gentrification the current residents of the city face many challenges. The adolescents in these urban enclaves will undoubtedly experience challenges from gentrification but their experiences will go unnoticed because they are unrepresented throughout the process. Existing adolescent programs suggest that young people are welcoming of opportunities to participate in the social and political process (Carlson, 2004). Adult members of society have to become more willing to create more diverse and inclusive structural processes. I am inclined to think that young people could exercise a similar amount of zest as adults express when asked how they feel about the changes occurring in their communities.

In studies where adolescents were involved in community-based initiatives, it was concluded that adolescents were successful in playing a fundamental role in addressing the social issues that are destined to impact their lives and those of future generations. A community-based adolescent program located in East Harlem called “Youth Action Program” (YAP), offers personal guidance, academic assistance, and advocacy assistance in negotiating social services
systems and helping adolescents develop their own projects (Finn & Checkoway, 1998). In studies by Finn & Checkoway, (1998) and Carlson, (2004) adolescent participants concluded:

“Working with YAP we learned from the meetings, the discussions, the decisions we had to make. We learned group dynamics, how to deal with people and problems. We were empowered, because the program was based on our ideas. We got a sense of pride, of importance, something teenagers in East Harlem do not get anywhere else’ (p. 340).

“If I hadn’t gone to The City, (The City, Inc., Minneapolis a comprehensive service and action organization) I would have dropped out of school at the age of 16. That is why I appreciate what The City has done for me. After graduating from The City, I took some odd jobs that didn’t fit my job skills. So I thought I would put a resume in a The City for a position in the drop-in program. I started working in the drop-in program as the assistant supervisor. Now I am a supervisor and I am taking on some individual counseling responsibilities with some students in The City School which I like very much. My whole life changed because of The City” (p. 5).

“I wasn’t handed a fry cooker or a uniform with golden arches when I started my first day on the job. Instead, I was handed the opportunity of a lifetime” (p. 40).

In this and other programs throughout American cities young people are assessing community conditions, setting priorities, formulating plans and building support for program implementation. The results show that young people are ready and willing to participate in the community decisions that affect their lives. Adolescent development programs suggests, that helping all young people achieve their full potential is the best way to prevent them from becoming involved in risky behavior (Finn & Checkoway, 1997). Adolescent development strategies focus on giving young people the chance to build skills, exercise leadership, form relationships with caring adults, and help their communities. Further, adolescent development strategies acknowledge both that adolescents are resources in rebuilding communities and that helping young people requires strengthening families and communities (Swanson, Spencer, Dell’Angelo, Harpalani & Spencer, 2002).

Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis, and Trickett (1991) suggest that interventions designed to assist adolescents in making successful transitions to adulthood will need to provide adolescents with opportunities to engage in interactions that foster the development of a sense of
competency, connectedness, control and identity. The research also suggests that interventions must address children, families, and communities as a unit if they are to be effective for large numbers of children and families (Barone, et al., 1991).

In designing interventions to promote positive adolescent development, it also is important to recognize that even in the most ideal family and interpersonal situations, the experiences of poverty, prejudice, and discrimination are likely to have negative effects on developmental pathways. Eliminating poverty, prejudice, and discrimination requires social and institutional changes that are beyond the scope of social service programs or family services agencies. However, having a sense of competency, connectedness, control, and identity has been found to buffer many of the negative effects of these experiences (Barone, et al., 1991). As a result, providing economically or socially disadvantaged adolescents with opportunities to engage in interactions that foster the development of these characteristics may allow them to cope more effectively with social problems over which they in fact have little control.
CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

In this research, I used two theoretical perspectives, Uri Brofenbrenner’s Social Ecological Model and Richard Thompson Ford’s Critical Race theoretical perspective to examine the social ramifications of gentrification in Harlem, New York. Brofenbrenner’s model will be used to decipher the importance of the macrosystem, mesosystem and exosystem to individuals and their environments. Ford’s critical race perspective will be used to discuss political and racial space manifested within gentrification.

The Ecological Model

Brofenbrenner’s social ecological model best explains the implications of gentrification on its residents and the environments in which they live. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social ecological model is based on the proposition that development occurs through reciprocal and dynamic interactions that take place between individuals and various aspects of their environment. Neither person variables nor environmental variables are the primary basis or cause of an individual's functioning or development. Instead, the person and the environment simultaneously influence one another (Brofenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner’s social ecological model helps to understand human development demands. It scientifically looks at the developing human being and the ongoing challenges in the immediate setting in which the developing person lives. Through the process of gentrification the Harlem landscape has changed considerably within the last ten years. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory would suggest that these environmental events and conditions could have a profound influence on behavior and development on the African American adolescent residing in this community. Bronfenbrenner (1979) noted that, “Such external influences can, for example, play a critical role in defining the meaning of the immediate situation on the person” (p. 31).

Ecosystems theory offers a great deal of insight into exploring the attitudes and behaviors of urban African American adolescents residing in Harlem, New York. When examining texts about the African American adolescent the focus is usually on the characteristics associated with the adolescent and not about the settings within which he/she resides. Little is mentioned about how behavior evolves as a function of the interaction between people and their environment.
The environment is described as a static structure that does not regard the evolving and continuously developing interactions of its incumbents. This theoretical perspective focuses on the interaction between the adolescents and the various social contexts in which their development takes place.

In the ecological model, Brofenbrenner (1979) explained how societal systems are derived of three different distinct typologies arranged of concentric structures, each contained within the next. The innermost core of the circles is referred to as the Microsystems. Microsystems represent the daily life experiences for children and their families, such as their home, school, or neighborhood settings. The family is the most influential microsystem. The influences of the family extend to all aspects of the child’s development. The next circle represented is the Mesosystem which, comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates. It is formed whenever the developing person moves into a new setting. The enrichment program that the participants of this study attend could serve as a good example of a mesosystem. Because the enrichment program in conjunction with the adolescents home life simultaneously provides adolescents opportunities for social and personal development. The Exosystem refers to one or more settings that do not directly involve, but do affect individuals and families. The exosystem circle encompasses societal and community environments that are beyond an individual’s control, however decisions made within these environments does have direct affects on an individual or others with whom they interact. In fact, gentrification occurring in Harlem is a good example of an exosystem mechanism. The process is well beyond the African American families control yet it will have irrevocable affects on their entire community. The outermost circle found in the system is called the macro-system. The macro-system represents broad interconnected beliefs, attitudes, and social systems such as economics, media, immigration, or public policy decisions. Gentrification is economic restructuring strategy that benefits some members of society but disregards others. Gentrification is a good example of macrosystem. The members of the African American community might feel as though the changes taking place in the community are long over due and yet they are not for their benefit. The new incoming middle class Caucasian’s might also feel as though the changes are necessary and will definitely benefit them in their new environment. As Harlem changes and whites and African Americans are becoming temporary
neighbors, the transition will probably be hard for both groups because both groups would resort to the usage of negative stereotypes of one another (Sandstrom et al., 2003). If the stereotypes are used by both members of the community they will have an adverse affect on how the two groups will interact with one another. By using Brofenbrenner’s ecological systems as a framework to understand community systems, it may be possible to maximize the developmental potential of groups interacting in communities (Brofenbrenner, 1979).

In order to maximize the developmental potential between systems, it is necessary to ensure that the demands on individuals in different settings are compatible. When changes occur in systems, changes also occur in the individual's position or role in that new setting. Brofenbrenner (1979) referred to the changes as ecological transitions (Brofenbrenner, 1979). For example, a transition in roles will occur during the process of gentrification in Harlem, New York and other metropolitan cities across America. Roles must be in agreement with what the individual can manage.

**Critical Race Theory**

The second theory that informs my research is Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory sprang up in the mid 1970s with the early work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman who both discussed racial reform in the United States. They saw the need for new approaches to understanding varieties of racism and racial injustice that characterize our times. When discussing the process of gentrification occurring throughout several urban metropolitan American cities, critical race theory is helpful in examining the racialized issues within the context of the economic, legal, social and political dimensions (Ford, 1994). The geographical spaces in which gentrification takes place are primarily in African American neighborhoods in which the residents are operating with sparse resources and poor living conditions (Nobles, 1979).

Critical Race Theory could explicitly be used to expose the legal and moral ramifications present within existing gentrification practices and policies in inner-city African American communities. Critical race theory focuses on social inequalities arising through race and racism. Critical race theorist, Richard Thompson Ford, Assistant Professor of Law at Stanford Law
School eloquently yet honestly discussed how the impact of governmental policies are oppressive, disempowering and relinquish access to political influence and economic resources. Essentially, Ford examined two dimension of political space. The first analysis examines how racially identified space leads to racial segregation. Racially identified space is created by public policy and legal sanctions. During the process of gentrification public policy and private actors work together to create and promote racially identified space ultimately, sanctioning racial segregation. Public policy and legislative laws enforce political fragmentation and economic stratification along racial lines (Ford, 1985).

Ford’s (1985) asserts that:

“Political geography, the position and function of jurisdictional and quasi-jurisdictional boundaries helps to promote a racially separate and unequal distribution of political influence and economic resources. Moreover, these inequalities fuel the segregative effect or political boundaries in a vicious cycle of causation; each condition contributes to and strengthens the others” p. 450.

When examining the Harlem neighborhood from the 1930s – 1980s it is quite easy to see the damaging social consequences of racial segregation. Increasing poverty was spatially concentrated creating a disadvantaged environment that became progressively isolated geographically, socially and economically from the rest of society. Explicit governmental policy at the local, state and federal levels has encouraged racial segregation. According to Ford, (1994) “the federal government not only channeled federal funds away from black neighborhoods but was also responsible for much larger and more significant disinvestments in black areas by private institutions” (pg., 1848). Although the federal government ended most of these discriminatory practices after the 1950s, nothing has been done to eradicate the subsequent effects experienced by the African American communities (Ford, 1994).

The ramifications of Ford’s assertion leads to important legal and moral consequences for the many inner city metropolitan neighborhoods and the entire fabric of American society. Today private investors are using their economic and social capital to dismantle urban enclaves and revitalize them into new upscale sanctuaries for the wealthy, further creating segregated and
racialized spaces elsewhere (gentrification). Racial segregation continues to play the role it always has in American race relations, to isolate, disempower, and oppress. Racial segregation is more than a social distance it is political fragmentation and economic stratification along racial lines (Ford, 1994).

**Review of Literature**

In the following sections, I will review the literature on African American adolescents, their families, and their communities. This literature provides the knowledge base upon which my research questions are built. I first use the ecological model to organize this literature and emphasize the influences of the individual, family and structural processes and how they each are interrelated to one another. I then use critical race theory to frame a discussion of gentrification, racialized spaces, changing U.S. city structures, employment/unemployment and education. The literature review concludes with a discussion of the importance of studying the perceptions of African American adolescents and understanding these perceptions within the context of Harlem, New York City.

**Adolescent Development: The Role of Ontologic Influences**

According to Baumrind (1987), in contemporary American society, the transition from childhood to adult status is delayed until well after individuals have attained biological maturity. This transition period, commonly called adolescence or adolescent era, is currently perceived as extending from approximately ages 11 to 21 and incorporating specific developmental eras often referred to as "early adolescence" (approximately ages 11 to 14), "mid-adolescence" (about ages 15 to 17), and "late adolescence" (approximately ages 18 to 21) (Baumrind, 1987).

Development of a stable identity during adolescence has been found to be associated with positive interpersonal relationships, psychological and behavioral stability, and productive adulthood (Grotevant, 1996). During the identity development process, adolescents' sense of competency, connectedness, and control is brought to bear on the task of unifying their sense of self into a stable and consistent identity and integrating this self-concept into their understanding of society, so as to feel a part of the larger culture (Erikson, 1968; Grotevant, 1996). Identity
development is fostered when adolescents are provided with the opportunity to become involved in community service, when they receive support for their future goals from family members, teachers, and friends, and when they have opportunities to express and develop their own points of view in their families (Cooper, Jackson, Azmitia, Lopez, & Dunbar, 1996; Yates & Youniss, 1995).

A striking transition that occurs during adolescence is the shift in cognitive development from concrete to formal-logical thought. With formal-logical thought, the individual moves from thinking about real or known objects to "thinking about thinking." This enables an individual to construct various logical possibilities (e.g., "what if...") or formulate cause-and-effect hypotheses (e.g., "if...then...then...what") about possible relationships in the physical or social world (Furth, 1969; Piaget, 1965).

Formal-logical thought is important not only in the development of problem-solving and negotiation skills and the ability to perform in academic settings requiring abstract thought, but also for development of a sense of competency, connectedness, control, and identity (Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis, & Trickett, 1991). Full development of these psychosocial characteristics is predicated on individuals' abilities to reflect on their interactions with others and construct meaning from these interactions based on logical possibilities.

Overall, the shift to formal-logical cognitive abilities during adolescence has implications for almost all areas of functioning, ranging from performances on academic tests to relationships with mothers and fathers. Although it generally is agreed that this shift in thought processes is universally experienced at some time during the adolescent period, the direction in which formal-logical thinking will develop in children is primarily shaped by the society and culture in which they live (Grotevant, 1996). When a society or culture provides adolescents with experiences that expose them to ideas and ways of thinking that require formal-logical thought, then adolescents will have more opportunities to develop these processes.

The Role of Microsystems and Mesosystems

Throughout this section, I will discuss the importance of the Microsystems and how these Microsystems are interrelated and form the Mesosystem. According to Bronfenbrenner’s
framework, family would exist at the mico-system level. It is within micro-system level that a child experiences immediate interactions with other people. Initially, the micro-system is comprised of the home, involving interactions with only the people in the family. As the child ages, the micro-system is becomes more complex, involving more people such as attending church and social and enrichment organizations. The Mesosystem incorporates the family, church and social and enrichment organizations in which the adolescents actively participates. The stronger the links among setting the more powerful an influence the resulting systems will be on the child’s development (Brofenbrenner, 1979).

**African American Families.** The family is often perceived as having the strongest influence on adolescent development. Aspects of the family context that have received considerable research attention are the quality of parent-child relationships, parenting styles or practices, family structure, and family dysfunction. Although the influences of family structure, particularly single-parent or divorced families, on adolescent development have received extensive attention from researchers, politicians, and the media, recent research findings demonstrate that it is family process rather than structure that influences adolescent developmental pathways. If positive parent-child relationships, including relationships with non-custodial parents, are maintained after divorce or separation, and if single parents manage to exert appropriate levels of behavioral control, the association between divorce or single parenting and adolescent behavior problems all but disappears (Barber, 1994; Barber & Lyons, 1994; Fergusson, Horwood, & Lynskey, 1994; Forehand, 1992; Hetherington, Cox, and Cox, 1982).

Family has always been an integral part of the African American culture as is the case with most groups of peoples (Billingsley, 1988). The strength that is fostered within the family has led to the survival of the race, throughout the course of history. Throughout the tumultuous times of social injustices brought on by enslavement, there has always been a reliance on the family structure to overcome many challenges (Billingsley, 1988). The future of African American families will be determined by their ability to improve the situations of African American children, poverty, and inadequate education. These are major concerns for people who are serious about the welfare of their children. Despite living in poor living conditions,
many African American children manage to rise above the harsh limitations of their environment (Ardelt, 2001).

African American parents care a great deal about the future of their children and try to do their best at providing them with support and encouragement (Billingsley, 1988). Efficacy beliefs tend to encourage parents to engage in activities that are in fact beneficial for the development of the child. Parents used different strategies to promote their children’s development and to shield them from the dangers of the negative urban pressures (Ardelt, 2001). One effective way of doing this was by pointing out bad examples of people living in the neighborhood and explaining how the danger of the streets had destroyed their lives. Rather than giving up or doubting their own capabilities, efficacious people interpret failure as temporary and that anything can be overcome with enough effort. Parents with a strong sense of efficacy are determined to overcome the barriers that prevent success. Ardelt (2001) discussed how, “children who observe their parents succeed and overcome difficulties in their lives are most likely to develop a strong sense of self-efficacy themselves and to prevail, for example, academically, even under adverse circumstances” (p. 949).

In inner city communities, most of the family are living at or below the poverty line, with a small percentage representing middle class homes. Low income inner city African American families are more likely to be comprised of single parent homes, consisting of women and their children (Bolland, McCallum, Lian, Bailey, & Rowan, 2001). Historically, African American women have always played a major role in the family. Unlike the white family which are patriarchal, African American families tend to be more equalitarian in which women play a major role in sustaining the family economically (Staples, 1981).

African American men have the least amount of access to resources and opportunities (Hare & Hare, 1993). In fact, African American men residing in inner city neighborhoods have the highest unemployment rate. African American men have the highest rates of incarceration per capita. Life chances for the African American male are considerably lower than the average white male. Their children face the greatest amount of disparities compared to middle class white children. African American children residing in Harlem, N.Y are receiving disproportionately lower educational opportunities. The community in which the children reside in are usually lacking social and recreational outlets for their children and all residents.
Essentially the quality of life for African American families residing in Harlem, N.Y. is quite low, they face many uncertainties in the future (Smith, 1996).

**Religion and the Church.** To a great extent, African Americans are deeply religious people. Their spirituality is reinforced through common history and life experiences and Afrocentric ideals centering on family unity. The black church has historically been a major source of education, inspiration, and liberation (Cook, 2000). The church offers spiritual hope to many persons who live in oppressive environments. Religion was a key component of survival within in many aspects of African American history such as slavery and the Civil Rights Era. The church is particularly important in the lives of African-American adolescent, helping them to combat negative urban pressures that exists within their communities. They live in neighborhoods in which the average income is low, the unemployment rate is high, and families experience a great deal of instability. Cook (2000) delineates some of the important roles of the church by stating:

“The church also assists adolescents and families in developing their self-regulatory abilities (i.e., the ability to refrain from negative behaviors and to engage in positive activities). The church helps them self-regulate in multiple ways: it sets standards they should strive toward; offers reassurance when they have made a wise decision; provides clear guidelines distinguishing between right and wrong, desirable and undesirable behaviors; and provides a reference point outside their own experience” (p. 10).

**Adolescent Organizations.** In this section I provide literature that discusses the important of social organizations on adolescent development. Adolescent organizations would also be found in the meso-system. High-quality, adolescent serving organizations are those in which activities are deliberately structured to provide a set of operational procedures, values, and mores that teach and encourage pro-social behavior (Larson, 1994). These organizations include extracurricular, school-based organizations as well as broad-based community organizations such as Boys and Girls clubs, 4-H clubs, church groups, YMCAs (Young Men's Christian Associations), and sports leagues. In some communities, the churches and church-sponsored adolescent organizations often are the primary organizations serving adolescent. In these communities, the church acts in an instrumental as well as a spiritual role to provide adolescent
with alternative coping mechanisms and experiences that foster the development of connectedness to community and society, competency, and identity (Winfield, 1995).

The availability of these organizations in a community provides support to parents by engaging adolescent in structured activities that endorse parental values (Connell and Walker, 1994; Larson, 1994). They also provide support to adolescents by creating points of contact between adolescents and other adults in the community who may serve as sources of encouragement and advice. This promotes the social integration of adolescent with their community (Larson, 1994). Studies have found that involvement during high school in organizations related to hobbies and interests is associated with diminished delinquent behavior during adolescence for both girls and boys and predicts continued involvement in similar organizations in adulthood. In addition, involvement in these groups and organizations provides adolescents with the opportunity to engage in productive activities and win recognition for their productivity, thus fostering the development of a sense of industry and competency (Larson, 1994).

When communities provide high-levels of support for parents (both formal and informal), the ability of parents to effectively monitor and control their children's behaviors is enhanced (Sampson & Groves, 1989). The presence of community support factors has been found to buffer the negative effects of other community dimensions, particularly poverty, on adolescent's developmental pathways (Sampson, 1992; Sampson & Groves, 1989).

The Role of Exosystem and Macrosystem Factors

In this section, I will discuss the role of exosystem and mesosystem factors and how they affect the African American adolescent. The exo and mesosystem, are represented as the socio-economic disparities that permeate throughout metropolitan urban enclaves within American societies. I will be discussing the challenges African American adolescents face living in urban metropolitan and how negative perceptions of African American adolescents have a profound affect on their outcomes.

African American adolescents residing in urban metropolitan areas throughout the U.S. are more likely to encounter several obstacles throughout their lifetimes. Countless research studies, books and reports have all documented the numerous challenges faced by African
American adolescents residing in Harlem, New York and other inner city neighborhoods throughout the U.S. face. The following social, cultural and economic realities represent what many urban adolescent are forced to contend with: exposure to crime/violence, homelessness, drugs, alcohol, poverty, abuse, neglect, unemployment, low educational attainment, chronic health problems, imprisonment, teen pregnancy, negative stereotypes and inadequate housing along with other structural contexts (Perez-Smith, Albus, & Weist, 2001; Sheidow, Gorman-Smith, Tolan, & Henry, 2001; Huston, McLoyd & Coll, 1994; Ginsburg, Alexander, Hunt, Sullivan, Zhao & Cnaan, 2002). Given the socio-economic factors presented above, it is clear that inner city adolescent have bleak futures (Bolland, McCallum, Lian, Bailey & Rowan, 2001).

Many of the children residing in Harlem live in poverty. Poverty hurts children socially, emotionally, and physically (Brooks, Allison, & Obeidallah, 2000). Poor children, especially poor children of color, are assigned to the worse schools, housing and medical care (Brooks, et al., 2000). Research has shown that such poverty and inequity is exacerbated by various economic restructuring practices. Numerous structural changes within postindustrial societies have led to the increase in the number of poor and jobless people in many urban environments (Brooks-Gunn, Dcan, Klebanov & Sealand, 1993).

Another important component of the macrosystem for African American adolescents is the stereotypes and cultural attitudes they encounter. The news media has done a great job of shaping the publics fear of African American Adolescent (Hancock, 2000). African American adolescents are portrayed as prone to violence and criminal activity, they are less likely to graduate from High School, attend college, and worse of all they are expected to be incarcerated at alarming rates (Bell, 2000). African American and Latino kids are the forgotten generation (Gonzalez, 1998). Gonzalez (1998) added, “Were taught to fear them without giving them the chance to tell us what they’re thinking”.

The media does a great job of tarnishing the images of many less fortunate groups in society. Throughout the history of television the focus of programming has gone from entertainment to a display over sexed, violence, materialism and the ever so popular “reality T.V.” programs. The programming produces a culture of over sexed and violent adolescent seeking instantaneous gratification in every endeavor. In order to change the negative images the entertainment media has to stop perpetuating images that influence negative behaviors. Society must also take a stand and demand more from the entertainment media. Also, society
must recognize the perils that some children face and the unscrupulous realities they encounter in their daily lives.

**Gentrification and Racialized Spaces**

In this section, I will review literature that discusses gentrification and the perpetuation of racialized space and how it influences every aspect of the urban environment and especially the families that live there. I will begin by defining gentrification and the implications of it. Afterwards I examine the connection between gentrification and racial segregation, changing U.S. cities, employment/unemployment and education.

**Gentrification.** Smith (1996) defines gentrification as, “The upgrading of housing and retail businesses in a neighborhood with an influx generally of private investment” (p.30). Private investors assume abandoned buildings, rehabilitate them and then charge rents far above what the current residents are able to pay. Retail chains (i.e., Starbucks, Marshalls, Barnes & Nobles) also move into the area to enhance the neighborhood appeal to new residents (Smith, 1996). As a result, many of the current residents of Harlem will not be able to remain in the community.

Gentrification has been viewed as the solution to reversing urban economic and social decay that dominates the inner cities (Freeman & Braconi, 2004). Yet there is the belief that gentrification also leads to vast amounts of displacement for low income residents. Reports have suggested that as many as 23 percent of departing residents in gentrifying neighborhoods are displaced (Schaffer & Smith, 1986). Legates and Hartman (1981) reported in their displacement survey that, “government figures themselves indicate that 500,000 families are displaced annually from their homes and that gentrification accounts for a sizable minority of these” (p. 23). The low-income residents are displaced to another location, usually another economically distressed area. In most instances, these low-income residents are African American families (Furstenberg, & Hughes, 1997).

**Racial segregation.** Housing and employment discrimination significantly affects the social and economic conditions of African Americans (Yinger, 1995). Racial prejudice within the U.S. housing market has led to urban residential segregation by race (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan & Aber, 1997). According to Collins, Wrigh and Sklar (1999) the FHA administrators sanctioned residential developers to create restrictive convenants against nonwhites as a condition of obtaining FHA insured financing. The governments role in housing discrimination
provided nonwhites with an unfair advantage in purchasing homes and strengthening the asset
gaps between whites and people of color (Collins, Wright, & Sklar, 1999). Research indicates
that racial segregation among African Americans leads to further poverty by limiting access to
economic opportunities (Massey & Denton, 1993; Massey & Eggers, 1990). One major cause of
segregation occurs as a result of white flight, the unwillingness of white people to live in
neighborhoods with significant populations of African Americans or Hispanic populations
(Yinger, 1995). Members of gentrification or gentry residents are usually middle-upper class
white people.

African Americans have been overtly segregated on several levels, indeed more than any
other group in American society (Denton, 1994). The term “hyper-segregation” was coined
by sociologist to describe the patterns and trends of residential segregation found in the U.S. census
tracts of 1980 for African Americans residing in metropolitan cities in the Northeast and
Midwest. Hyper-segregation refers to segregation that occurs on several dimensions that creates
deep cycles of isolation and concentrated poverty (Cashin, 2004). Hyper-segregation statistically
measures five levels of residential segregation: evenness, isolation, concentration, centralization
and clustering (Denton, 1994). Evenness refers to the number of African Americans residing in
each census tract in comparison to the numbers of African Americans living in metropolitan
areas. Isolation looks at the lack of diversity that exists within a metropolitan area. Clustering
measures the level of contiguity in the African American community. Concentration is the
measurement of density, measuring the groups share of the urban environment. The final
dimension is centralization which looks at the proximity of the urban metropolitan area to the
central business district. Living in segregated neighborhoods restricts opportunities to improve
personal status characteristics such as jobs, school quality, and income.

When looking at the Harlem community I would say that hyper-segregation exist.
Harlem has the highest concentration of African Americans within the borough of Manhattan.
The percentages are consistently lower in other areas of the borough.

Changing U.S. city structures. As major cities within the U.S. experience economic
restructuring processes cities are changing drastically. The traditional forms of political and
economic organization which enabled previous waves of expansion have been superceded by
new institutional configurations, economic arrangements and areas of growth. At the urban
level, a decline in industrial activity in older centers have left many inner city areas
economically, socially, and fiscally debilitated. As local governments desperately seek to revive and regenerate their depressed older urban environment, the role of cities seems to be changing in fundamental and irrevocable ways (Knox, 1993). The city has transformed from the service sector to expansion of financial, commercial and cultural functions which have led to a growing sharp juxtapositions of poverty, unemployment, decay and prosperity (Hubbard & Hall, 1998). As local governments desperately seek to revive and regenerate their depressed older urban areas, the role of cities seems to be changing in fundamental and irrevocable ways. Nevertheless, African American and other low-income families have felt the brunt of industrial displacement.

**Employment and Unemployment.** Wilson (1996) identified the disappearance of work in many economically disadvantaged minority communities as a problem that has reached "catastrophic proportions." Traditionally, African American adolescents have higher rates of unemployment than white adolescent. In the inner cities the jobless rates are as high as 60 percent (Taylor, 1995). Typically, the rates for African American men is higher than the rates for African American women. Within the last two decades there has been a sharp decline in employment among African American adolescents, attributed to both social and economic factors. Taylor (1995) described the reasons for this rise as including,

"changes in job market and the physical locations employment opportunities, increased job competition between African American males and white adult women, continued racial discrimination and negative stereotypes held by white employers, and increases in the minimum wage, lower educational achievement and lack of marketable skills among black adolescent continue to limit their job prospects" (p. 72).

Essentially, economic restructuring practices have had an impact on African American adolescent employment opportunities. Simultaneously all of the combined factors mentioned above can have an adverse effect on the employment trends for African American Adolescent. Also, the obvious role played by the systems of power in our society that are mandated by the intersectionality of racism, classism, and sexism. Within the dynamics of the employment trends mentioned above the intersections can operate independently or simultaneously, profoundly causing a multitude of effects (Bograd, 1999). A reduction in a family's financial resources has been found to be associated with increases in abusive family processes, parental depression and stress, and disruptions in care-giving, all of which have negative implications for adolescent
development (Brody, Stoneman, Flor, McCrary, Hastings, & Conyers, 1994; Conger, Conger, Elder, and Lorenz, 1993; Conger, Elder, & Lorenz, Simons, & Whitbeck, 1992). Similarly, living in poverty for extended periods of time has been found to have potentially adverse effects on adolescent development through its impact on the ability of parents to monitor and discipline their children effectively (McLoyd, 1990; Sampson & Laub, 1994).

Education. African Americans are the third largest racial group in the United States making up 12 percent of the nation’s population. While African Americans were approximately 15 percent of the 18 to 24 year old population in 1990, they were only 13 percent of high school graduates and about 10 percent of first time college freshmen in 1988. The rates of African Americans college graduates appear to be declining. In fact, 65 percent of recent African American high school graduates were enrolled in postsecondary education in 1978, compared with 52 percent in 1987 and only 45 percent in 1988 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1979 and 1990c). Consequently, while 64 of every 100 African American 18 year olds were high school graduates in 1988, only 29 of every 100 enrolled in college (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990c). Currently, the representation of African Americans in higher education remains well below their representation in the college age population (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 1991).

Currently, African Americans still have higher school drop out rates than whites and Hispanics (Matute, 1986). School drop rates are affected by several factors, including family income, residence, school experiences and non-school related experiences (Jaynes & Williams, 1989; Taylor 1991; Wetzel, 1987). In addition, schools in some communities will need to recognize that the adolescents they serve may not experience adolescence in the same manner as adolescent in other communities (Burton et al., 1995; Matute-Bianchi, 1986). For example, some researchers have suggested that in disadvantaged African-American and other minority communities, adolescence may not be a clear developmental stage (Burton et al., 1995). Although these adolescent may be viewed as adolescents by society, within their communities they often have already assumed the roles and status of adults (Burton et al., 1995). This is because many adolescent in these communities grow up in "age-condensed" families (families in which parents are only 14 to 16 years older than their children), shoulder heavy family responsibilities such as child care and contributing to family finances, compete with older residents for available employment opportunities, and experience early parenthood. Adolescents
who experience these events in their lives tend to view themselves as adults and to perceive schools as treating them like children (Burton et al., 1995; Connell et al., 1994).

Now more than ever education can be used as a tool to empower the African American family. Education of African American children they may be able to ensure economic stability for future generations. According to Squire (1994), “Not only will the individuals receiving these service benefit by accumulating more human capital and becoming more competitive in the labor market, society will benefit as well by the increasing productivity that results from a more highly skilled work force” (p. 26).

Understanding the Context of African American Adolescent Who Live in Harlem, N.Y.

This final section of the literature review emphasizes the importance of understanding the specific context for African American adolescents who live in Harlem New York, with a particular emphasis on youth culture and experiences. African American adolescents residing in metropolitan areas are often misunderstood by members of mainstream society. As I mentioned at the beginning of the study African American adolescents have been disregarded in mainstream society. I would argue that adolescents are disregarded because of the negative stereotypes associated with them. With the help of the literature I will elucidate to some stereotypes held about African American adolescents. This section will also examine Harlem and contributions made by the adolescents of the community past and present.

African American Adolescent and Stereotypes. African American adolescents residing in Harlem and other metro urban areas throughout the U.S. have been labeled with several negative stereotypes throughout the years. These stereotypes will have a profound effect on their employment opportunities. Employers may look at the adolescents and determine whether or not they are worthy of work based on their appearance (Newman, 1999). If adolescent are adorned in hip hop fashion, including baggy jeans, braided hair, elaborate jewelry accompanied by urban slang, a potential employer is a lot less inclined to interview such adolescents to identify whether or not they are capable of performing the responsibilities of the job (Jackson, 2001).

Research suggests that race relations have improved between African American and Whites since the Civil Rights Era. Yet, as Harlem changes and whites and African Americans are becoming neighbors, the transition will probably be hard for both groups. Symbolic Interaction theory would suggest that both groups will resort to the usage of negative stereotypes
African Americans have several negative stereotypes (symbolic racism) associated with their ethnicity; unintelligent, lazy, and shiftless just to name a few.

People’s physical appearance can be represented as a symbol (Sandstrom, et al. 2003). Physical appearances can become the attribute by which people decide the amount of morality to afford to another person. Basically, as human beings people give a substantial amount of attention to the way a people look. It is through symbolic aspects of human perceptions that people determine the level of treatment (good, bad or indifferent) they will give to someone based solely on the images that they have of them (Sandstrom, et al. 2003).

**The Context of Harlem New York City.** Harlem, New York is preeminently and nationally known as the symbol for black culture. Harlem stretches for more than four miles north of Central Park in Manhattan. During the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, Harlem was represented as an artistic and political movement for Black Americans. Harlem helped revolutionize jazz, blues, rap poetry, literary thinkers and writers of the twentieth-century. By the 1960s, Harlem changed from a white urban enclave into an overcrowded, underserved black slum (Jackson, 2001). Today, Harlem is comprised of a predominantly African American population consisting of over 200,000 low-income and working class residents (Smith, 1996). Though the area has been hard hit with economic disinvestments and high levels of poverty, black culture remains prominent in the area. Jackson (2001) noted, “Harlem is famous because of its history – a history that shows how today’s Harlem was created through both race-specific actions (restricted covenants, white-flight, segregation) and class-inflected interests (of realtors, of the black press, and of northern blacks themselves) that materially and discursively constructed the black Harlem we know today from the many Harlem’s of yesteryear” (p. 28).

**African American adolescent culture in Harlem.** Understanding the African American adolescent’s culture in Harlem, New York is pivotal to this paper and the world at large. Black adolescent culture is not a new phenomena. The 1920s, 1930s and also 1960s Black culture was prominent amongst Black enclaves, yet during each of the these periods black adolescent were more inclined to adopt values and identities from such traditional community institutions as family, church and school (Kitwana, 2002). Today, African American adolescent have strayed from their traditional value system holders, instead they turn to themselves, their peers, global images and materialized products. Despite the new world view held by African American
adolescent today, black pride is still an important part of African American cultural identity (Kitwana, 2002).

During the 1960s – 1970s Black pride was a movement established in urban inner-city neighborhoods of New York City and many other major cities in the United States (Kitwana, 2002). Throughout the Black pride movement African American adolescent paid homage to their culture in several creative ways from music, hairstyles, and clothing styles just to name a few. Today, the same creative expression could be seen among urban African American adolescent in the Hip Hop genre (Kitwana, 2002). Hip Hop is a rap phenomenon originated in 1979 in the Bronx, New York (VH1, 2004). Hip Hop has transcended from an art form to a culture. The art form developed from the urban decay found present in the Bronx, New York. During the inception of rap the Bronx, New York environment was overwhelmed with drugs and poverty. The cultivators of Hip Hop created a unique art form devoid of mainstream influence aimed at self expression derived from their social interaction patterns. The art form also existed as an escape from poverty, drug addiction, and crime that existed in the environment. For the adolescent in the community Hip Hop represented a way out or an alternative from the hopelessness of their environment (VH1, 2004). It also served as a source of fun for the adolescent. Parties or battles were held in city parks and household basements where the adolescent could convene devoid of their many inner-city pressures.

By the 1980’s Hip Hop had became a universal language among urban adolescent in the five boroughs of Brooklyn, Bronx, Queens Manhattan and Staten Island. Today, Hip Hop has become an international phenomena yet it has also received political and social pressure for the highly sexual and violent explicit lyrics featured in the music (Jackson, 2001). Regardless of the negative press associated with Hip Hop, the art form has transcended globally, and currently white suburban adolescent are the number one consumers of Hip Hop music. Despite its popularity Hip Hop remains socially unaccepted with some members of the middle and upper class community.

**Summary and Research Questions**

Research indicates that the challenges that young urban African American adolescents face are numerous (Ardelt, 2001). Exposure to crime, drugs, unemployment, poverty as well as other social problems creates an environment in which these adolescents are destined for failure. In addition, research has shown that the implications of economic restructuring practices like
gentrification will also become a hardship for inner city African American adolescents and their families. The unfortunate reality of many urban areas is that a decline in industrial activity in older centers has left numerous inner-city areas economically, socially and fiscally debilitated. The city has transformed from the service sector to expansion of financial, commercial and cultural functions which have led to a growing sharp juxtapositions of poverty, unemployment, decay and prosperity (Hubbard & Hall, 1998). As local governments desperately seek to revive and regenerate their depressed older urban areas, the role of cities seems to be changing in fundamental and irrevocable ways. Little is known at this point about adolescent’s perspectives of the process of gentrification. Previous studies suggest that adolescent development programs provide African American adolescent with the necessary skills to address social issues that are destined to impact their lives. In the next section a series of hypotheses are presented that will examine the African American adolescent perceptions of gentrification.

It is the purpose of this research project to explore the perceptions of inner-city African American participants in a community based adolescent development program about the process of gentrification. In addition, this study will examine the social impact of the process of gentrification on African American adolescent and their families. To this end, the following research questions are presented:

• Are African American adolescents from Harlem familiar with the term gentrification? How do they define and understand the concept of gentrification?
• What do these adolescents see as the primary impact of gentrification on their community? What do they name as the benefits? The costs?
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Overview

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of inner-city adolescents residing in Harlem, New York about the process of gentrification. The study participants were African-American adolescents ranging from 13 – 18 years of age attending an adolescent mentoring program in Harlem, New York. Participation was on a volunteer basis; subjects were allowed to decline to participate at any time.

Past and current literature commonly concentrates on perspectives held by adults, however, with this study I was seeking to give voice to adolescents. As a graduate student in Family and Child Studies, I am genuinely interested in the perspectives of the African American adolescent regarding the issue of gentrification. To accomplish this goal, I spent time observing and interacting with adolescents at a Harlem youth organization through a focus group discussion. While talking with these adolescents, I gained insight into the life experience of African American adolescents who participate in a community based program designed to cultivate those aspects of their character development that produce positive behaviors and attitudes among urban African American adolescents.

Recruitment and Selection of Subjects

The sample used for this study consisted of two male and eight female adolescents between the ages of 13-17 from a youth organization in Harlem New York. These adolescents all reside in the gentrified area of Harlem, New York. It was anticipated that there would be an equal number of male and female subjects participating in this study, but this goal was not realized due to the fact that there were too few male subjects in the program.

I worked with the Program director to select the adolescents who participated in the study. We informed the adolescents about the study and asked that all interested participants call the Director’s office at a specified date and time. Once the adolescent had expressed an interest in participating in the study, he/she was provided with a letter of informed consent, parental consent form and an adolescent assent form. The adolescents returned their parental consent forms to the center Director. On the day of the focus group discussion, I introduced myself and
told the adolescents that I was from Miami University, Oxford, OH. I then explained that I was at the Center to observe and gain an understanding of their perceptions of gentrification in Harlem, N.Y. Afterwards I began to explain the attached Focus Group Procedures. After explaining the rules, I asked the adolescents if they understood before proceeding with the focus group. I also conducted a practice discussion with the adolescents to familiarize them with the rules. We then proceeded with the focus group discussion, which was tape-recorded.

**Measures and Method**

I elected to use qualitative methods to examine the perspectives of an underserved population within American society, African American adolescents, about the process of gentrification in Harlem, New York. Qualitative methods were used to give credence to the complexity of their perceptions; a focus group discussion was used to examine what the adolescents think and how they feel about the process of gentrification. Grounded theory was applied to discern the contents of the adolescent’s perspectives of gentrification occurring in Harlem.

**Coding the Data**

The narrative data from the focus group discussion were analyzed with topic coding and analytical coding techniques. Topic coding was useful in identifying categories found within the data and how the different categories of data were connected to one another. Analytical coding helps the researcher to develop themes (Morse & Richards, 2002). First, I transcribed the contents of the tape-recorded focus group discussions into typewritten documents. Once the transcription was completed, I sifted through the data and wrote notes in the margins. The notes in the margins were used to identify important themes found within the data. Common themes were then developed and assembled into thematic units. Reliability checks were performed with Dr. Lloyd, a member of my committee. Dr. Lloyd assisted me throughout the entire transcription process with insightful suggestions on the best ways to convey the information. Together we analyzed the data, making consideration of words, context, frequency, extensiveness, intensity, specificity of responses and big ideas (Krueger, 1994). We then examined their words and their meanings in order to provide a clear understanding of their perceptions. Afterwards, the themes were described using the words of the participants, and discussed in terms of ties to previous literature.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following analysis is based on a focus group discussion consisting of 10 adolescents from a Harlem youth organization. The purpose of the focus group discussion was to afford an opportunity to African American adolescents residing in the Harlem, New York community to share their views about the process of gentrification occurring in their neighborhood. Throughout the discussion, the adolescents clearly and concisely expressed an understanding of gentrification and the impact it is having on their lives and their community. In fact, the last admission shared by one of the girls on the tape was, “we wanted to say this all a long but nobody wants to listen” (Tape 2). This and other statements made throughout the discussion signify the need to give voice to adolescents on this and other important topics.

Throughout this section, I will present the results of the focus group discussion. I describe the common themes found within the data using the adolescents’ narratives. The common themes found in the data were Definitions of Gentrification, Benefits and Costs of Gentrification, Combating Gentrification, Racialized Space, Social Interaction Patterns, Stereotypes, and Some final Thoughts.

Definitions of Gentrification

At the beginning of the discussion, the adolescents spent time discussing what gentrification was, why it was happening in Harlem, New York and what the implications would be for them and their community. When asked why gentrification was occurring in Harlem the adolescents gave various reasons. While the adolescents did not define it in the same way that does Smith (1996), “the upgrading of housing and retail businesses in a neighborhood with an influx generally of private investment “ (p. 30), their descriptions do suggest that they are capable of understanding the process. One participant defined gentrification as,

“gentrification is when you have a certain type of one ethnic group living in a area and another different ethnic group opposite from the other ethnic group is moving into that area buildings are being renovated and everything is being changed to fit the other ethnic group” (Tape 1).

Though only one person gave a definition the other participants described the process as accurately as possible by giving various examples of the process,
“I think that after 911 all the people from downtown might be afraid to stay down town and they might want to come uptown to be safer because the terrorist won’t come uptown”

“A lot of black people when they start making money they pack up and leave and go somewhere else, or when people go to college after they are done they don’t come back and help the others, I think that this is a big problem in our neighborhood, I don’t think that white people do that, they stay in their own neighborhoods and fix them up we need to do that too, I think that black people can do the same thing”

“I think the white people want Harlem and they always get what they want so I guess that means we have to move” (Tape 1).

“if their purpose is not to live with us then why move into our area when you are living luxurious downtown, why leave that to come to a suffering well not suffering but a low income, low class, it doesn’t make sense to me”.

The answers given were absolutely great. I think their opinions are representative of what they have experienced from living in social isolation in Harlem (Cashin, 2004). Yet, they display the unique ability to derive thought provoking answers to any given question once engaged. When asked about the implications for them and their community, they responded,

“Harlem is changing, I guess they want us out, I don’t think they are coming up here to share with us.”

“All of a sudden there is so much construction going on all over Harlem more and more old abandoned buildings are being fixed and more and more white people are moving in all the time, the prices of the apartments are too high for us to pay so sooner or later we will have to leave Harlem.”

“All of a sudden after treating us like garbage now they want to come and take everything that we own”.

Benefits and Costs of Gentrification

The adolescents talked about the benefactors and losers found within gentrification and what they could do to prevent future situations. When asked if gentrification could be beneficial to them and their community the adolescents responded,

“For the middle class and high class and there are not many benefits for us”,


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“it’s good because we get to take advantage of all of the stores, but why wait until somebody else moves here to put up all the new stores, why didn’t this happen along time ago, we have to wait until somebody can come and pay more to move in to put in stores and stuff”

“Its like, wow that building looks nice now that they are all fixed it up but they are not for us some of us are living on the streets” (Tape 2).

According to the answers given, the African American residents of Harlem would not be benefited by the changes. The new incoming gentry residents would reap the benefits of gentrification. The adolescents’ ability to express their fears and concerns throughout the discussion represents an overwhelming understanding of the process of gentrification. Furthermore, the adolescents’ ability to engage in the dialogue and present their perceptions supports my claim that adolescents are capable of engaging in the social and political process with adults. In interpreting the data, I clearly saw that the adolescents demonstrated their ability to problematize the process of gentrification.

The participants are describing a catch 22 scenario. Gentrification has been viewed as the solution to reversing urban economic and social decay that dominates inner city communities such as Harlem (Freeman & Braconi, 2004). Private investors assume abandoned buildings, rehabilitate them and then charge rents far above what the current residents are to pay. As result many of the current residents of Harlem will not be able to remain in the community. Essentially, gentrification leads to a catch 22 situation because it restores communities yet displaces the current residents (Smith, 1996).

**Combating Gentrification**

When asked about the future efforts to combat further acts of gentrification the adolescents readily voiced their plans,

“Make sure that my children have a good education, so that no one can throw them out of their communities”.

“I am going to talk to my kids and tell them about my experience and what I did here, also I will explain to my kids that they have to go to college and learn about different things and how to change things in their own community”
“For my kids I don’t want them to grown up in a neighborhood like this because it’s to hard for kids they have to experience to many things, I would raise them some where else, so that they can start off with a good life”.

The adolescents generated some good suggestions for future action. They demonstrated that they could implement plans that effect change. The adolescents were able to assess the limitations of gentrification and formulate plans for the future. Their perceptions show that young people are ready and willing to participate in community decisions that affect their lives (Finn & Checkoway, 1998). They were actively thinking about what they could do, some of them even expressed the need for immediate action:

“Before I can think about my own children I think that I should be doing something to stop it from happening right now”

“I agree, that something needs to be done right now”.

“It’s not right for anybody to kick anyone else out of their community, maybe we could march”

“I am going to get help from organizations and sponsors, somebody will want to help me”

“I am going to talk to the people that are making the gentrification happen, and try to make it stop, I will try and negotiate with them and if that don’t make it stop, may try talking to the president and if that don’t work then maybe try to pass my own bill or something to make sure that it wont happen again”.

Racialized Space

The adolescent’s recognition of racialized space or political geography was also present in the data. I found it quite interesting that the adolescents described political geography in their own words. Political geography exists as a function of jurisdictional and quasi-jurisdictional boundaries that help to promote racial inequalities in the distribution of political and economic resources, ultimately creating segregated environments (Ford, 1985). Thus, these adolescents were using a form of critical race analysis, although they did not use that specific term. The following are responses held by the participants,

“I think that there is enough space for everybody nobody should not have to leave their neighborhood if they don’t want too”
“like how back in Africa when white people would come over to get the Africans and take them to a different land but instead its like a modern day way, they are looking at the buildings that they want to take”

“I think the more white people come to this neighborhood there will be more problems between the two races, because I think that the white people will jump to conclusions whenever something happens in the neighborhood because they are already scared of us, like one time this lady said that this black guy was following her so she called the police and first their was one cop car and then the next thing I knew there was the s.w.a.t. team on the block just because the white lady said something happened, when we call the cops they take their time coming and nothing every happens when they come”.

When asked if integration would be possible between white and black people the adolescents voiced their concerns and opinions about it. Research has suggested that African Americans have been overtly segregated on several levels more than any other group in American society (Denton, 1994). Segregation leads to social isolation. Social isolation restricts opportunities to improve personal status such as jobs, school quality, and income and limits access to diversity (Cashin, 2004). Because the adolescents have only lived in segregated communities they are expressing their apprehensions about integration:

“I think because of our histories with each other it will be hard because we will say that we are friends but it will always be in the back of our minds what happened in the past, so no I don’t think that the two different races are not supposed to live together, I’ m not saying that diversity isn’t good but, I think it’s too hard for people to change their mind sets maybe we should start with the younger generation, we can’t change peoples mind sets over night we need to have a step by step process and that has to be started before the two groups can live together we have to do some work to fix the bad things that happened in the past”.

“I don’t know, but I do think it would be hard, because white people don’t like us and they are scared of us, so I don’t even think that they want to live with us. I think they want us to move out, I don’t think they came here to be with us, I think that after some time has passed black people would get used to them and be nice to them but I don’t think they will do the same”.
“I don’t think the new people coming into the neighborhood will get along good because we don’t even get along with ourselves so I don’t think we need any other people coming here making it even harder for us, before we can get along with other people we have to get along with ourselves first”

“I think it could work over time, but everybody would need to be patient”.

Research suggests that race relations have improved between African American and Whites since the Civil Rights Era (Cashin, 2004). Yet, as Harlem changes and whites and African Americans are becoming neighbors, the transition will probably be hard for both groups. Tensions will probably be quite high in the initial stages of gentrification.

When asked what could be done to improve race relations between White and Black people the adolescents said:

“I think it would be a good idea to get people to talk to one another and understand each other”

“Maybe have some meetings with people from both groups so that they can talk things over before living together”

‘I don’t know, well because we are so different from them, I can’t just see them watching us all the time and they will be like what are they doing?’

“I think both groups would feel more comfortable being around themselves than with other groups, I think that’s why we live separated from each other now, so in order for us to be able to live together it would take some work form both groups to learn how to understand each other.”

**Social Interaction Patterns**

During the focus group discussion and after transcribing the data I realized that the adolescents were describing social interaction patterns that are explicitly explained by symbolic interaction theory. Symbolic Interaction Theory helps recognize the importance of communication in people’s lives. Through the delineation of communication, people become more aware of themselves and others (Faules & Alexander, 1978). Yet, even though people share a common language, it does not come with a guaranteed cohesiveness because people and their roles are ever changing throughout the daily process of life. However, through the usage of language people can develop an understanding that can lead to an increased level of inter-subjectivity of other’s viewpoints as well as a better sense of self (Prus, 1996). Despite human
cognition (ability to learn, think and create), the ways in which people define or develop a worldview are reliant upon social interaction found within the community (language) (Prus, 1996). With the use of a common language, people can adapt and survive in their community (Klein & White, 1996).

I think that Symbolic Interaction theory was very instrumental in explaining the conflict or strained process of communication that could occur in gentrifying communities. Symbolic Interaction theory is useful for describing the meanings ascribed by different groups of people for events in their lives and how the meanings are exchanged in the newly developing community. Ultimately, members of different groups can perceive behaviors and activities differently, which can result in heightened tensions amongst both the African American and White residents of Harlem. Simultaneously, both of the residents could elect to change or negotiate their interaction patterns. By increased interaction with one another they could create new meanings together in order to coexist in a temporary integrated environment (Sandstrom et al., 2003). Here are some examples of symbolic interaction from the adolescents:

“We always think that we have so many differences but something’s we do are the same”
“They just want to look down at us because of the way we live’
“They don’t like us because we had strong African culture and they didn’t have the same kind of culture they tried to take ours away from us, now we don’t have anything and lot of us act ignorant because of that”.
“White people just don’t understand us”

Throughout the data the adolescents mentioned several different stereotypes held by white people about black people. My literature review addressed the issue of stereotypes in gentrified neighborhoods. Stereotypes can have adverse affects on interactions among different groups of people. Symbolic Interaction would suggest that both groups would resort to the usage of negative stereotypes of one another (Sandstrom et al., 2003). African Americans have several negative stereotypes (symbolic racism) associated with their ethnicity; unintelligent, lazy, violent and shiftless just to name a few. Whites also have negative stereotypes associated with them such as white woman are docile, white men are evil, their children are all spoiled brats with no manners, white people cannot be trusted, and they are all racist, just to name a few. These stereotypes, if accepted and used to forge interaction patterns, will have an adverse affect on how the two groups will interact with one another. The two groups will use accessible negative
stereotypes currently in place for each group, because in most cases they will not have had a
direct experience with one another (Massey & Denton, 1993). When asked what stereotypes
exist for African American adolescents they said:

“Black boys are not mature, they are not smart, all black girls are loud, they are whores
and sluts and they don’t go to college, they depend of men, and most of the males end up
in jail because they sell drugs and they don’t take of their children”

“Just because we wear baggy jeans and listen to rap music they think we are dumb, or
because we don’t have a lot of money and we speak slang don’t mean we are ignorant it
just mean that we are different, now a days white kids are listening to rap and they do
drugs and they also get into trouble just as much as we do but because they are white they
are treated different from us”

“White people think that all black girls want to be teenage moms”.

“They think we are all bad kids they think black boys steal, rob or want to rape their
women”.

“When I watch the news they only have bad stories about black kids they don’t show a
lot of bad news about white kids, like when the two white boys killed those kids at
Columbine everybody said it happened because they played video games, but it didn’t
seem like people paid enough attention to the killing”.

The common themes found within the data clearly illustrates the adolescents ability to the
understand and describe the interconnectedness of communities, families and gentrification
representative of the ecological model.

Some Final Thoughts

I thought that it was equally important to give the adolescents the opportunity to express
their opinions of the process of gentrification. When asked about how they feel about the
process of gentrification the adolescent gave their opinions,

“I think it’s messed up because we don’t take anything from them why do they always
take from us”.

“I remember on my block the building on the corner burnt down and the people had to
move out and they were told after the building was renovated they could move back in,
the building was fixed up really nicely and Caucasians moved and the other people
weren’t allowed to move back in”
“Nobody really knows what happened to the people that used to live in the building”
“In Harlem we always had messed up buildings and nobody has ever done anything about it, it always been that way and nobody has ever done anything about it, now somebody else is coming in and doing stuff that needed to be done and because we couldn’t do it for ourselves now they get to tell us what to do.”

Based on these responses, the adolescents think the process is unfair to them and the other members of the African American community. Also it appears to me that they might also feel like they are powerless under the process of gentrification.

By the end of the session I wanted to know how successful I had been as a facilitator throughout the session. I asked the group had they felt as though I had forced them to say anything. I think that I can gauge the success of my participation in the group discussion based on their answers. When asked does anybody feel like I made them say anything during this discussion, they said,

“No”
“No”
“No”

“You asked us a few questions and then you let us have a discussion
“We wanted to say this all a long but nobody wants to listen”.

I was pleased that they all agreed that I had not coerced them into saying anything that they did not want to say. Also I think it is a clear indication that the focus group produced qualitative data that provided insight into the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of the participants (Krueger, 1994). I tried my best to convey their thoughts and feelings about an issue that will affect their lives.
Limitations of the study

One of the biggest limitations found was that there were only two males in the group. I had hoped for a balanced group of males and female participants. The males in the group were not as vocal as the females in the group. I think the males were a little uncomfortable with the process. The females in the group dominated the discussions. Perhaps if there were an equal number of males to females the discussion might have been balanced. Also there was only one group discussion held. I intended on having at least two sessions but I ran into difficulties with my study. The size of the group was good yet the focus group should have been repeated several times with different groups. Typically focus group studies will consist of at least three focus groups but could involve as many as several dozen groups.

A further limitation of this study is that it does not include information from African American adolescents who are not participating in the youth organization. This group’s perceptions could be different from other groups of African American adolescents living in other communities. Therefore, there may be a number of African American adolescents who could have provided insight on the process of gentrification, but had no means of being included in this study.

Future Implications

Future exploration into this topic could go in a variety of directions. Given what we know about African American adolescents living in Harlem and their ability to perceive and understand the process of gentrification, future research could explore the various levels of neighborhood transitions faced by the residents of Harlem, How their experiences may or may not have changed after the focus group discussion, What if anything the adolescents are doing to affect change in their community, and if they would or have changed their responses to any of the questions asked in this study. All of these areas of exploration, whether explored separately, or combined, could provide valuable insight into African American adolescents residing in Harlem enduring gentrification.

As a future Family Life Educator, I am concerned with the process of gentrification and the impact it will have on current and new incoming gentry families. The findings from this paper could also provide further insight into interactions among African American and White families. I think it’s important for Family Life Educators to understand the future implications that gentrification will have on the African American urban family structure.
Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the information yielded from this study has the potential to increase awareness into the lives of inner city metropolitan African American adolescents abilities to affect positive change in their communities. The information in this study proves that African American adolescents and all other adolescents can be positive resources within the social and political arenas.

**Conclusions**

This qualitative study sought to give voice to a highly misrepresented and misunderstood important group within America, African American adolescents, about yet another deterrent found within their community. The study attempted to capture the adolescents’ ideas and feelings about their neighborhoods as a separate group distinct from adults (Perez-Smith, Albus & Weist, 2000). The data found in this study challenges public assumptions that youth are unwilling or unable to assume roles with high levels of responsibility in organizations and communities. African American adolescents residing in Harlem, New York are aware and understand the process of gentrification. The adolescents in this study proved that adolescents residing in inner city metropolitan enclaves are eloquent in their discussion of actions that affect change in their immediate environments. Ultimately, the study challenges the perceptions that adolescents are only victims and not critical resources.

What can be concluded from this study? I draw five major conclusions. First, adolescents in Harlem New York know what is going on with respect to gentrification. According to the responses yielded in the focus group discussion I think the participants displayed a clear and concise understanding of the process of gentrification occurring in their community. Though only one of the participants in the group was familiar with the term gentrification, the entire group was capable of thoroughly describing gentrification in their own words. The adolescents’ ability to generate a discussion with one another about gentrification indicates that they are well aware of what is going on in their community.

Second, these African American adolescents were eloquent when giving their perceptions. The adolescents were able to communicate their feelings in a presentable manner. Throughout the process they respectfully listened to one another and continuously contributed to the ongoing dialogue. The data yielded in the focus group discussion challenges popular negative assumptions that youth are unwilling or unable to assume roles with high level of responsibility in organizations and communities.
Third, these adolescents are willing to be a part of the social and political process. Past and current research reports that adolescents are uninterested in social and political matters. However, the responses of the adolescents in my study show that they able and willing to participate in the social and political process. It is my belief that like adults, adolescents need to be given more opportunities to showcase their talents and abilities. Essentially, if society presents adolescents with more opportunities to engage in other initiatives such as this one adolescents could become recognized as competent community builders and not as vulnerable victims (Finn & Checkoway, 1998).

Fourth, these adolescents want to be heard. Because of negative stereotypes associated with inner-city African American adolescents they are less likely to be engaged in the social and political process than white adolescents. There is a common belief that African American adolescents are neither interested nor capable of making valid contributions. From my experience alone, I am convinced that the adolescents want to be heard but they are not given ample opportunities to participate in meaningful discussions.

Fifth, we need more inclusive discussion for all adolescents. After my valuable experience with the Harlem adolescents I think society would benefit from increased opportunities for adult-adolescent initiatives that lead to change. Mathews and other researchers have documented the benefits of youth centered programs as important to healthy adolescent development. I think adolescents are under estimated in our society; adults from all professions could learn from such discussions.

As I conclude this project, I do so with questions and concerns. I have questions and concerns about the future of community based adolescent initiatives in the U.S. in which adolescents are active participants in the social and political process. The findings of this research suggest that society attitudes about young people are in need of change. Are adults up for the challenge? Are adults ready to question their beliefs, expertise, pathology, interventions and other inhibitions that deter them from creating adult-adolescent partnerships that foster healthy adolescent development (Finn & Checkoway, 1998)? This study and others like it demonstrate that inner-city African American adolescents along with other adolescents are capable of participating in community decisions that affect their lives.
REFERENCES


VH1 producers (2004). And You Don’t Stop: 30 years of Hip Hop.


LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

Hello:

I am currently enrolled as a graduate student at Miami of Ohio University, Oxford, Ohio pursuing my Master’s Degree in Family and Child Studies. As part of my degree requirement, I am conducting a research project examining the impacts of gentrification on African American youth from Harlem, NY. Gentrification can be defined as an economic tool used to move middle class families into inner-city neighborhood causing rent prices to rise and poor families leaving the neighborhood. While children will not immediately benefit from taking part in this research project, the information they provide may be useful in helping generate further important research.

My project involves obtaining information through the use of a focus group discussion, exploring the aspects of gentrification on African American youth in Harlem, N.Y. A focus group is a group of people who share their opinions in a discussion for a research study. Your child will be asked some questions to generate a discussion with a group of their peers during lunch. The children’s discussion will be tape-recorded. The tape recording is important because it will be easy to copy their opinions directly into the research study. The completion time for the meeting should last no longer than two hours. At no point during the focus group discussion are the children obligated to participate and each child will have the freedom and opportunity not to participate without penalty. There will be no change in the services provided to your child at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture if he/she chooses not to participate in the study. The responses to the questions provided by the researcher will be kept confidential and the identity of the child will not be linked to his/her answers or released in the study’s findings. Please see the attached copy of the focus group procedures for further information of the child safety procedures.

If you are willing to grant permission for your child to participate, the attached consent form must be signed and returned to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture before
your child will be permitted to participate in the focus group discussion. Please place the signed form in the attached envelope. The consent form can mailed or returned to:

Sandra Robinson
C/o Mr. Leach
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture
Harlem, N.Y.

You should be aware that there is little physical, psychological, social, or legal risk associated with your child’s participation of this study. Any stress caused by your child’s participation in the survey is no more than would be expected in the course of a normal day. In the event that your child should experience any psychological discomfort or distress intervention counselor will be available to speak to the participants throughout the duration of the study. If your child should become uncomfortable during the focus discussion he/she may stop at any time.

Thank you advance for time and cooperation in helping me explore this important issue that exists within your community. I will be happy to share the results of the focus group discussion with all of the participants who are interested. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me, (513) 523-2100, my email address is gym66@aol.com or you may contact my thesis chair, Dr. Alfred Joseph at (513) 529-4290. If you have any questions about your child’s rights as a participant in this research project, you may call of the Office for Advancement of Research and Scholarship and Teaching at (513) 529-3734, e-mail address HumanSubjects@muohio.edu. We will gladly answer any questions you may have regarding the study. Thank you again.

The following are questions that I would like to ask you.

1. How many of you are familiar with the term gentrification?
2. Who can explain/define gentrification?
3. What are impacts of gentrification on the African American youth?
4. What are the benefits to gentrification on the African American youth?
Sincerely,

Sandra Robinson
Miami University
Graduate Student
FOCUS GROUP PROCEDURES

1. The Miami University researcher will hold one focus group meeting with the children from Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Junior Scholars Program. (A focus group is a group of people who meet and share their opinions in a discussion for a research study). The focus group discussion will be tape-recorded. The tape recording is important because it will be easy to correctly copy the participant’s opinions directly into the research study. Only the researcher and its committee members will have access to the recording.

2. The researcher will ask the children some questions about the study (as indicated in the consent form). The questions will be used to get the children to voice their opinions about the questions. The children will be told that their opinions are very important. The researcher has a responsibility to ensure the safety of the children throughout the focus group discussion. As a safety precaution for the children they will be instructed not to say one another’s names throughout the discussion. In the event that someone mistakenly says a name the session will be immediately stopped and the tape will be edited before proceeding with the discussion. Also because the research will be put together in the form of a book and will be displayed in the library, it is best to keep their identity confidential.

3. The children will be informed that the discussion will take place one afternoon, at lunchtime for approximately 2 hours. (Date will be established after human subjects application approval)

4. The children’s discussion will be tape-recorded. Again the children will be told not to address one another by name. The children’s opinions will be placed in the research study. The tape recording is important because it will be easy to correctly copy their opinions directly into the research study. The children’s responses will be assigned coded identification numbers (ex. Debby could by GGS1, girl wearing the green shirt) in order to secure their identities.
5. The children will also be told that they should not repeat what was discussed by any one in the room after leaving the discussion. They will be told that the meeting must remain between the people in the room to secure their identity. Also the children will be told that the researcher can't guarantee that the others in the group will not report what someone else says in the focus group meeting.

6. The group's tape-recorded responses will be kept confidential and their identity will remain anonymous.

7. If the children agree to participate in the study they will receive consent forms for both themselves and their parents to sign.
RESEARCH PROJECT CONSENT FROM
Parent/Guardian Consent

—Has my permission to participate in the research described in the attached letter. I understand that my child will be asked to answer questions and that they may choose to stop participating at any time. I also understand that his/her response will be completely confidential, and that no information will be collected that would permit him/her to be connected with his/her answers. I understand that whether my child participates or not, the services he/she currently receives from the Schmoburg Center for Research in Black Culture will not change.
I am willing to participate in the research study described in the attached letter. I understand that I will be asked questions while participating in the focus group discussion at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. I also understand that the Mr. Leach will be present to talk to if I feel any negative feelings I might have related to the questions on the survey. I understand that my responses will be kept confidential. I also understand that I will not be punished for my answers and that the services I receive from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture will remain the same whether I choose to participate or not.

Participant’s Signature

Date