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## TRUTH IN LOVE

### Put Some Respect on My Name

By Parris J. Baker  
September 2022

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*Editor's note: Following is the sixth in a series of articles on violence in Erie, Pennsylvania*

Aretha Franklin, the Queen of Soul, sang the 1967 hit “Respect,” considered to be one of the greatest R&B songs ever produced. “Respect” earned Ms. Franklin two Grammy’s in 1968 for Best Rhythm and Blues Recording and Best Rhythm and Blues Solo Vocal Performance, Female. Excerpts of the lyrics of Respect, written by Otis Redding are:

*What you want, baby, I got it. What you need, do you know I got it? All I'm askin' is for a little respect when you get home. I ain't gon' do you wrong while you're gone. Ain't gon' do you wrong 'cause I don't wanna. All I'm askin' is for a little respect when you come home. I'm about to give you all of my money. And all I'm askin' in return, honey is to give me my propers when you get home. Ooh, your kisses, sweeter than honey. And guess what? So is my money. All I want you to do for me, is give it to me when you get home. R-E-S-P-E-C-T! Find out what it means to me R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Take care, TCB, oh...*

Fifty years later, respect remains a central, dominant variable in the culture and character of African Americans, especially with and for males. The definition of respect and its importance varies based on public or private environments and the social situations that require or demand respect to be given. Like the names of many high school college and professional sport teams, names of individuals, families, groups and communities conjure imagery that identify specific traits of

hypermasculinity, cool pose and posturing, predatory aggression, brute strength, and mental toughness.

There are numerous social science theories that help to explain the relationship and reproduction of violence and deviant behavior in certain African American communities. Cultural Transmission Strain Theory (Albert Cohen), Social Disorganization Theory (Cliff Shaw & Henry McKay), Dramaturgical Model of Social Interaction (Irving Goffman) and the Broken Window Theory (James Q. Wilson & George L. Kelling) all attempt to explain deviance, neighborhood and community violence in poor communities. Public policy issues, such as the creation of the welfare state, redlining, environmental injustices, and the abuse and misuse associated with the GI Bill and African American veterans, will be detailed in subsequent essays. These policies initiated and supported unethical behavior and the creation of poor, segregated communities conducive to violence.

In this essay, I discuss the critical importance of identity and image to African American males, particularly adolescent and young adult males. Respect in urban communities is one of the most valued and most fragile modes of currency<sup>[1]</sup>. As social currency, respect can experience extreme exchange rate volatility. Gaining respect for African American youth is acquired in five unique ways: (1) to look the part, dress the part, is to procure “swag” (2) to disrespect or challenge another “alpha male” in the community, (3) to engage in physical violence to demonstrate fidelity and piety to street codes, to avenge an act of disrespect, or as a test of courage, (4) to demonstrate hypermasculine traits such as physical and sexually aggression, rebellion against authority, and acceptance of punishment without complaint, and (5) to survive the daily hustle and dangers of the streets as an indication of intellect, grit, and self-efficacy that must be respected. Respect becomes the defining character trait of the young urban African American male’s self-image, self-esteem, and identity.

Identity is a set of meanings assigned to the self in a social role or situation that determines who one is and how one should behave (Burke, 1991). Identity theory began as a theoretical tributary that emerged from the work of George Mead (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000). The initial motivation behind identity theory was to build a model for observing the relationship between society and self. According to Stryker (1968), the fundamental proposition of identity theory is (1) identity commitment → identity salience → role choice. Identity theory posits the self is composed of multiple identities that occupy social position statuses and are hierarchal in their arrangement. These identities are the internalized set of role expectations and role choices associated with the number of statuses occupied by the self. An individual will select, from available role choices, the actions that are congruent with and reflect their degree of commitment and salience to a specific and valued identity. Other factors that

affect the manifestation of a particular identity are whether social structures or the social situation allow for a particular or related identity to be performed.

Identity commitment is defined as a person's recognition that a particular identity must be present in relation to another significant person or people who are dependent on that identity performance to facilitate interpersonal relationships (Stryker and Serpe, 1982). Commitment is calculated by the costs, personally and socially, of losing a particular type of relationship due to not performing behaviors specific to a role identity or choosing a different identity.

Identity salience is defined as the probability of a given identity being invoked in a variety of situations. When a particular identity is expected and must be present, it is the salience of the identity in the hierarchal organization that determines the manifestation of the identity (Stryker and Serpe, 1982). The probability that a particular identity will appear and be expressed is mediated by the degree of commitment one has to that identity.

Identity theory is a useful tool to help our understanding of violence in racially segregated African American communities. Moreover, comprehending the importance of the value of respect as social currency in African American culture is invaluable. However, there are several structural issues, far more destructive and pervasive, that need explication, if we are to pick up the proper pieces of the disassemble community puzzle.

1. Morgan Z. London (2015). A Case Study of Respect Among Young Urban African American Me. Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies Collection.

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Dr. Parris J. Baker is an Associate Professor at Gannon University, where he is the Social Work, Mortuary Science and Gerontology Program Director. An alumnus of Gannon, Baker received his graduate degree from Case Western Reserve University, Jack, Joseph, & Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences and his doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work. Presently, Baker serves as the Senior Pastor of Believers International Worship Center, Inc. He is married and has five children.



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