

Low Socioeconomic Factors: Not a Limiting Factor for African American Men

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Abstract

A study on the lived experiences of 14 adult African American men, who grew up in low socioeconomic status (SES) households, was undertaken to determine factors that helped them overcome disadvantage and ultimately achieve positive life outcomes. Theoretically, the odds would seem to be stacked against them. Low SES is an especially difficult condition for many African Americans to overcome and may be a catalyst for under achievement in education, while fomenting antisocial behavior, and oppositional thinking. The reasons are manifold and complex; the literature graphically details social and economic inequities that occur in low SES environments. Through personal demographic data and verbal reflections, the participants provided insights of events that led to positive life outcomes. Keys to success were found in education attainment, athletic and extracurricular activities, and having at least one adult mentor/role model whose nurturing, guidance, and love kept them on a straight line trajectory toward adulthood. Their life stories were dotted with influences owing to adult norms whose example helped them overcome low SES quality of life issues including racially based contextual stressors.

Keywords: *low socioeconomic status; African Americans; quality of life; contextual stressors*

1. Introduction

In depicting obstacles that young African American males encounter while growing up in the United States, Hale (2001) postulated that their high rate of incarceration was, in effect, a modern form of slavery. Nealy (2008) added to this thesis positing that a cradle-to-prison pipeline existed for African American males because of a common thread that exists among them: a lack of education. In a continuum of findings, the lack of a complete education was found to be a major reason for the over representation of incarcerated young African American men (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009; Western & Petit, 2010). The participants, having achieved exceptional education credentials avoided such fate. A study on felony convictions of African American men showed it affected one third compared to 13% of all males in the United States (Uggen, Manza, & Thompson, 2006).

2. Literature Review

Each year thousands of African American men, many from low socioeconomic status (SES) environments, have their life chances diminished by making poor choices that often lead to their arrest and incarceration. From 2000 to 2008, African American males were estimated to be 6% of the total U.S. population while White males were estimated to be 36.7% (U.S. Department of the Census, 2009). The following table shows the disparity of inmates the government designated as White and Black who resided in state, federal, and local jails from June 30, 2000, to June 30, 2008 (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009).

Table 1. Total White and Black Inmates in the United States by Year

| Year | White ^a | Black ^a |
|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| 2000 | 663,700 | 791,600 |
| 2001 | 684,800 | 803,400 |
| 2002 | 630,700 | 818,900 |
| 2003 | 665,100 | 832,400 |
| 2004 | 695,800 | 842,500 |
| 2005 | 688,700 | 806,200 |
| 2006 | 718,100 | 836,800 |
| 2007 | 755,500 | 814,700 |
| 2008 ^b | 712,500 | 846,000 |

Note. Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (2009).

^aExcludes persons of Hispanic or Latino origin. ^bIncludes persons under 18.

A record of arrest exacerbates family dysfunction with concomitant effects that include risk factors such as exposure to violence, high portions of female-headed households, lowered self-esteem, and feelings of inadequacy (Dallaire, Cole, Smith, & Ciesla, LaGrange, Jacquez, . . . Folmer, 2008; Haynie, Petts, Maimon & Piquero, 2009). Those who drop out of school experience difficulty when competing with more qualified peers and often end up in jail (Stapleford, 2008). Many women do not deem school drop outs, or ex-felons, as good marriage prospects, which likely helps account for the growing number of single female-parented households.

An examination comparing African American and White family life revealed that significant amounts of disparity exist between the two groups. African Americans have to overcome an inordinate number of hardships and distractions in their daily lives. Results of a national survey conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (2011) for 2010, the U.S. Department of Commerce American Community Survey, revealed that 34.0% of African American children under 18, lived beneath the poverty line compared to 11.3% of similarly affected White families. Results for married couples living at the poverty level revealed that 12.0% were African American and 5.2% were White. The percentage of African American women householders living in poverty with no husband present was 47.6% compared to 32.7% for White women living in poverty with no husband present. Male African American householders living in poverty with no wife present (40.8%) were significantly higher than White male householders with no wife present (17.2%). African Americans also have a difficult task overcoming childhood poverty. Forty-two percent of children born to parents in the bottom 10th of income distribution remain in the same bracket upon reaching adulthood. Only 17% of Whites born into the same bracket are similarly affected (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009). In addition, many African Americans have often experienced instances of racially based contextual stressors in the form of disrespect, marginalization, segregation, and ridicule among others (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009). These events tend to strengthen perceptions of disparity by those who are targeted, while fomenting resentment toward those who demonstrate such behaviors (Lambert, Herman, Bynum, & Ialongo, (2009).

Low socioeconomic status (SES) detracts from a child's chance to fully partake of what has, up to this time, been a bastion of American culture for generations, free public education, because they are confronted daily with issues generally not found in more affluent neighborhoods. Children raised in disadvantaged neighborhoods experience high levels of crime, delinquent activity (Hart & Marmorstein, 2009), inadequate public transportation, limited recreation resources, limited business services (Yoo, Slack, & Holl, 2009), and where vacant, dilapidated, and boarded up buildings prevail (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009).

Many children in low socioeconomic status (SES) households find it difficult to concentrate on school or get help with homework assignments. Dallaire et al., (2008) opined that other deleterious factors included, but were not limited to, frequent domicile moves, close family members yelling at each other, and the arrest and incarceration of a close family member. The cumulative effect of these factors has had a devastating effect on African American children residing in low SES communities. Whenever children internalized these conditions they often developed into depressive symptoms, marked by low self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy, academic difficulties, and conduct problems.

Risk factors observed in some low SES neighborhoods included peripheral community-level unemployment and proximal harsh-negative parenting behaviors (Dallaire et al., 2008). Unemployment contributed to disruptive, nonnuclear African American families and often resulted in violence, delinquency, and crime (Boxer, Huesmann, Bushman, O'Brien, & Mocerri, 2009; Haynie et al., 2009). These factors were often associated with negative outcomes of children based in part on the effects of violence and poverty leading to depressive symptoms. Stress of this sort can undermine a child's sense of safety and slow his or her psychological and educational development. Paradoxically, however, the results of this study revealed that some young African American men, despite being raised in low SES households, many lacking either a mother or a father, do manage to avoid incarceration, become educated, earn higher than average incomes, lead productive lives, and become respected members of their community.

3. Methods

The 14 participants of this study were recruited primarily from the greater Washington, DC, metropolitan area. Three referrals resided in cities located in Alabama, Florida, and Missouri respectively. Phenomenological methodologies fit the requirements and purpose of the qualitative study based primarily on the potential richness of verbal reflections and demographic data of lived experiences that each could provide. Phenomenological techniques provided participants the opportunity to describe their experiences openly, and confidentially, in terms that helped the researchers understand underlying motivations for their actions and behaviors.

Well-known African American service organizations, public and private businesses, government entities, and others were contacted to locate potential study participants. Solicitations were made at all organizational levels; owners, managers, and non-managers, employed by universities, churches, service organizations, and various types of business enterprises. To ensure potential participants met the study criteria of being raised in a low socioeconomic (SES) household and achieving positive life outcomes, they were asked to provide personal demographic data relating to childhood, adolescent, and early adult life experiences. Those who met the qualifications and agreed to join the study participated in an in-depth private interview where verbal recollections of their early life experiences could be expounded upon while replying to the following baseline questions:

- Q1.** How did factors attributable to culture, family, mentors, teachers, role models, friends, and institutions influence your eventual positive outcome?
- Q2.** What role did preparation gained from a specific curriculum at school or vocational training and part-time employment play in your eventual outcome?
- Q3.** What characteristics and traits did you develop as skill-sets to cope while growing up in a low socioeconomic status (SES) household that helped you achieve a positive outcome?

4. Results

The average age of those who participated in the study was 51.1 years ranging from 34 to 81. A composite profile of the participants revealed that one-half (50%) held graduate degrees and three were in the latter stages of pursuing doctoral degrees, which when completed would bring the group total of doctorates to five (36%). The average income of the participants (\$97,143) was significantly greater than the average for all U.S. wage earners (\$45,230) (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Home ownership of the participants (79%) exceeded the average for both African Americans (49%) and Whites (76%). The average percentage of married participants (64%) was greater than average for all African American couples (48%). One-hundred percent currently had health insurance and 93% maintained active retirement plans. These results exceed the averages for those in private sector employment (48%) and state and local government plans (84%) (Stapleford, 2008).

Ninety-three percent of the participants reflected on the significant effect on their lives made by family members, mentors, role models, friends, schools, institutions, and culture, during their childhood years. The roles played by individuals were not mutually exclusive, some were influential because they simultaneously fulfilled a combination of functions; family members and others could also be role models and mentors. The participants spoke with grateful appreciation for their contributions. Efforts made on their behalf by individuals who influenced the positive life trajectories they took in life were not forgotten. The participants described these character molding individuals in glowing terms; caring, friendly, talented, professional, demanding, positive, giving, encouraging, inspirational, nurturing, moral, loving, and ethical. They also described these persons as multiracial, mixed genders, youthful and

elderly. Mentors instilled lofty values; integrity, hard work, loyalty, self-reliance, confidence, character, respect, courtesy, appreciation, duty, and religion. Their efforts helped broaden horizons and they seemed to have an innate ability to recognize potential in young men who they did not want to see fail. The achievements attained by the participants speak for themselves.

Formal education and other useful training were paramount for the 14 participants. Their mentors encouraged, insisted on, and expected results. The minimum education level attained by any of the participants was two years of college, however, some received on-the-job training and learned vocational skills that ultimately proved to have lifelong benefits. Most of the participants liked school and excelled in an assortment of solid curriculum choices; fine arts, English, history, mathematics, biology, government, geography, psychology, computer science, marketing, industrial arts, military science, political science, athletics, and others. Extracurricular activities included multiple sports, student government, band, academic and social clubs, scouting, Civil Air Patrol, National Honor Society, science fairs, religious and others. A side benefit of participating in these types of activities outside of the home, likely helped to enrich their social skills.

One-half of the participants earned athletic and academic scholarships to institutions of higher learning. Their education experiences from kindergarten through college and beyond, were imbued with self worth, respect, adulation, popularity, achievement, good study habits, useful knowledge, confidence, and positive outlooks. Along the way, mentors encouraged them to engage in wholesome, fun, productive pursuits, in safe, secure environments. For some, school even provided them with the best nutrition they received each day and possibly the most positive, predictable environment.

Vocational training, while not a universal endeavor among all the participants, was helpful for those it did affect. They cobbled together solid careers and gained experience they would later add to college credentials which proved to be of great value by future employers. Learning from all sources proved beneficial for the participants during their maturation process. Part-time employment was another factor that helped 70 percent of the participants supplement and eased their family's financial struggles. Part-time employment also taught them early economic lessons on what it entailed to earn wages. A few gained a small measure of independence, others developed work ethics, some selected their eventual career field, and a few learned that hard manual labor was not an endeavor they wanted to pursue as a lifetime career.

5. Discussion

The participants described their childhood cultural experiences generally in practical terms and acknowledged the disadvantages of growing up in a low socioeconomic status (SES) environment. Most of their friends and neighbors experienced nearly the same set of shared values and circumstances which likely helped reduce class envy. Several praised the positive nature of their cultural experiences which for many, included community pride. They recalled positive examples of people, places, and events that provided them with hope of a better future. Despite growing up in low SES households, the participants' total life experiences allowed them to achieve high levels of self-efficacy, inner strength, willpower, and faith that helped them gain the confidence they would need to grow and prosper.

The 14 participants were an erudite group of men who had held paid positions in nearly 100 occupations; had resided in 25 states; and experienced travel to 72 countries for business, pleasure, and military assignment. A partial list of fields in which they held positions include: legal, sales and marketing, electronics, defense, education, accounting, government, pharmaceuticals, real estate, health and wellness, engineering, computers, and religion. A partial list of their job titles include: Chairman, CEO, president, vice-president, commanding officer, senior military officer, director, project manager, senior accountant, city councilman, assistant dean, senior pastor, regional manager, senior consulting manager, paralegal, and department manager.

An evaluation of the study findings strongly suggested a distinct value of having the constant presence, involvement, and guidance of a caring adult authority figure early in their lives. These roles were generally filled by both parents, single parents, grandparents, single grandparents, older siblings, teachers, coaches, employers, and businessmen. Many of these individuals directed, encouraged, and also participated with the participants as they engaged in a wide assortment of wholesome youth activities. The participants seemed to respond positively to these activities when they sensed acceptance; encouragement; appreciation, and recognition from people they trusted.

Results achieved by the participants tend to debunk many negative stereotypical images suggested by some research (Boxer, et al., 2009; Dallaire et al., 2008; Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009; Haynie et al., 2009; Lambert, Herman, Bynum, & Ialongo, 2009; Stapleford, 2008; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011; Western &

Petit, 2010) regarding, the dearth of achievements by African American men who grow up in low socioeconomic status (SES). The difficulty of doing so was real, however. Aspects of literature theorizations regarding the reason for the over representation of incarcerated African American men because of a lack of a complete education is confirmed. The study revealed no evidence suggesting that any of the participants were ever side tracked by any activity other than normal child mischief.

What appears to be unique to this disparate group of 14 men was their apparent acceptance of guidance and the ability to recognize and seize upon opportunities that helped them prepare for better lives. They, along with their mentors, seemed to have had an innate understanding that success is not dependent on conditions of inheritance, social, or economic inequities. The life experiences of the participants provide living proof that positive life outcomes are possible, even for the needy, when caring and dedicated adults provide positive guidance and influence on malleable young minds yearning for someone to care and appreciate them.

6. Future Research

Opportunity to expand upon the results of this research is evident. Suggested topics might include the effects of urban versus rural environments by geographic region on child rearing; the effects of racial diversity of neighborhoods; the number and quality of schools, churches, businesses, recreational amenities; and the effects of immigrant influences. Such efforts might serve to inform educators, school board members, sociologists, government officials, public policy administrators, business leaders, clergymen, law enforcement, and the general public, that being poor and of African descent need not be synonymous with preconceived stereotypes of mental deficiency or lack of motivation.

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