

Successful Middle Class Black Males: Rejection of the Stereotype Threat Syndrome

Barbara Butler, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, USA

Abstract: This qualitative study explores the requirements for the success of eight middle class black male college students in attainment of their undergraduate degree whether attending an HBCU or a PWI. It explores the three main barriers to success and makes use of the community cultural wealth framework success in spite of any entrance deficits. The focus group in the study is middle class black males with low math SAT scores aligned with high GPA scores. The topic of stereotype threat is addressed and demonstrated, not to be a hindrance with adequate amounts of capital in place.

Keywords: Stereotype Threat, Black Undergraduate Students

Introduction

A plethora of research seeks to explain the educational failure of black males rather than reporting their successes. There are many black young men who were reported in the past as having truly beaten the odds (Harrington and Broadman, 1997; Hrabowski, Maton, and Greif, 1998 and Levine, 1996). Shifting the viewing lens for black male students away from a deficit lens to viewing these same students through a lens of success is the premise of this article. Studies suggest there are problems with engagement, high attrition and low graduation rates among black males (Carter, 2006; Cuyjet, 2006; Ishitani, 2006; and Warde, 2007). The purpose of this study was to demonstrate that the degree of success for black males is grounded in the amount of community cultural wealth available to the student in spite of deficits in math and low Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores. In order to explore problems related to success, one must first reflect on current college enrollment patterns for black males.

In 2009 the Associated Press published a report on the current state of enrollment at historically black colleges and universities (HBCU's). The report indicated, of the 83 federally designated four-year HBCUs only 37% of black students attending HBCU's finish a degree within six years. That's 4 percentage points lower than the national college graduation rate for all black students in America. More specifically, it was reported that 29% of HBCU males complete a bachelor's degree within six years. Lastly they reported women account for more than 61% of HBCU students. It is these statistics that encourage society and policy makers to address the disparity in black male enrollment at all colleges (Pope, 2009). The question becomes what are the causes of the disparity in the black male college graduation patterns?

There is extensive research (Berry, Thunder and McClain, 2011 ; Hines, Holcomb-McCoy , 2013) that because of a combination of an insufficient quality high school preparation and reading and math scores (NCES, 2005), most black males are significantly at risk for college attendance, retention, and graduation (Tinto, 2002; Yasso, 2005; and Young, 2007). Next a significant amount of past literature reports socioeconomic status (SES) impacts college success (Carter, 2006 and Ishitani, 2006). Lastly, current research reports teacher attitudes impact minority student self-confidence and college enrollment (Berry, Thunder and McClain, 2011 and Fischer, 2007). The findings from these studies are very significant; however there is a current population of successful black males that are not reported in current research participant pools. This underreported group includes the black middle class male, which includes black males that have attended urban schools, and graduate with basic to advanced reading scores but have below basic math scores and total SAT scores below 950 not including the new writing portion of the test. In spite of their college admission characteristics, significant numbers of black males

graduate from college in 5 years. This study explored the support from the family, the benefits from the high school, and the assets from the university that assisted the students in persistence through their university program.

Conceptual Framework: Community Cultural Wealth (CCW)

The Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework was previously used in the past by Anzaldua (1990) with research related to Hispanic women. More recently, Tinto (2002) and Yasso (2005) used the framework with studies related to retention of black college students. Recently, Butler (2009) aligned this framework with a study that explored success in medical school admissions among a sample of black college students. These studies all made use of a variety of forms of capital available to students which led to academic success. In the CCW framework capital is defined as forms of wealth, property, culture, language and education (Swartz, 1997 and Franklin 2002). Swartz summarized the writings of Bourdieu and concluded the middle class and wealthy with various forms of capital have the necessary resources for economic advancement and education. This article will attempt to shed light on the skills that are a part of the black middle class family and can be used by student members of this SES in the university community as well as members of other SES groups. The amount of capital available to each student will contribute to their success throughout their college years. The basic premise of the CCW theory is that students who have access to the various forms of cultural capital have enhanced opportunities for success (Butler, 2011).

The forms of capital in CCW as described by Yasso (2005) and Butler (2009) include the following: Aspirational Capital which refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams even in the face of real or perceived barriers. Familial Capital refers to cultural knowledge nurtured within the family unit that carries a sense of community history, memory, and cultural institutions. Social Capital refers to networks and resources with which to navigate through society's institutions. An example would include a Black campus organization or fraternity helping students acquire additional financial aid. Another example of community support is when Navigational Capital suggests skills for maneuvering through social institutions and barriers created without having people of color in mind. Lastly, Resistant Capital refers to knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges racial inequality.

The community cultural wealth framework was used in this study to demonstrate the importance of the various forms of capital. The students in this study had increased amounts of capital due to parental influences and university experiences rather than success related to SES. In order to address the research question, this study first reviewed the literature to situate the findings related to enrollment criteria, SAT scores, and quality high school preparation. The study also explored teacher attitudes as they impact preparation for college acceptance and enrollment among middle class black males.

Literature Review

In 2001, the College Board, which publishes and distributes the SAT exam, funded a study to evaluate the predictability of the results as a forecaster of students remaining in college for four years. Their research concluded the SAT is a good predictor for freshmen year performance (Kobrin, Patterson, Shaw, Mattern, and Barbuti, 2006). As a result of SAT score reports, many selective universities have a limit on the number of black students (which include middle class males) that enter their pool of incoming freshmen. All schools in this study did not base their admissions decisions on SAT's alone. Geiser and Studley (2003) examined performance in college preparatory courses as a predictor of freshman grades. Geiser and Santelices (2007) further conducted a study to examine the relationship of SAT scores and high school grades to freshman year performance. Both studies concluded in relation to freshman year performance,

there is a need for greater emphasis on high school records and less on standardized test scores. From 1976-present, the College Board has collected data and reported a comparison of SAT scores for all ethnic nationalities.

In 1976, the College Board first published an analysis of data revealing the racial differences in SAT scores. Later, in 2006 the results were published and the average score for blacks on the combined math and verbal portions of the SAT test was 863. The mean score for whites on the combined math and verbal SAT was 1063, about 200 points higher. Not only are the scores of blacks on the SAT far below the scores of whites and Asian Americans, but they also trail the scores of every other major ethnic group in the United States including students of Puerto Rican descent. Despite the small overall improvement of SAT scores for blacks over the past years, the gap between black and white scores has actually increased (Cross, 2006).

According to the College Board and other researchers in education there are a several reasons to explain the continuation and growth of the black-white SAT scoring gap. Some of the reasons suggested are: sharp differences in family incomes, high school curriculum, teacher attitudes, and student perceptions of their abilities to learn. Each of these ideas have been extensively explored in the literature over the past decade (Hrabowski, Maton, and Greif, 1998; Oakes 1985, 2000; Ogbu, 2003; Steele and Aronson, 1995), therefore it is important in a review of the literature to explore and counter each of these ideas as they relate to middle class black males.

Family Income

The first rationalization presented as a deterrent for success based upon family income according to the College Board there is a racial SAT score gap which is aligned with differences in family income. In 2006, 24 percent of all black SAT test takers were from families with annual incomes below \$20,000. Only 4 percent of white test takers were from families with incomes below \$20,000. At the other extreme, 8 percent of all black test takers were from families with incomes of more than \$100,000. The comparable figure for white test takers was 31 percent. There are other factors to compare and consider in reference to income differences and explaining the racial gap. Cross (2006). White students from families with incomes of less than \$10,000 had a mean SAT score of 993. This is 130 points higher than the national mean for all blacks. In addition, white students from families with incomes below \$10,000 had a mean SAT test score that was 17 points higher than blacks whose families had incomes of more than \$100,000. Therefore middle class black males from a family with an upper income still perform with a lower score on the SAT.

High School Curriculum

Another factor related to the SAT racial gap is that many black students who take the SAT have not followed the same academic track as white students (Cross, 2006; Carter , 2006 and Young , 2007) Most students both black and white who take the SAT have studied algebra in high school. But few have taken trigonometry and pre-calculus. Also, white students are more likely than blacks to have taken honors courses in English and science. Given the huge differences in math preparation between black and white high school students, it comes as no surprise that white SAT scores are significantly higher than black SAT scores. It is this disparity in curricula that private and parochial schools have attempted to overcome. They generally provide academic paths to all students with the option of four years of math, science, foreign language, and English courses.

Along with the SAT scores there is also a problem in the lack of national black male participation in advanced placement (AP) courses. Statistics reveal almost a nonexistent minority participation in the AP Program. In 2009, 3,134,686 students sat for AP exams. Of this number

1,804,196 were white, 203,744 were Hispanic and 211,871 were black. In terms of the results the mean score for Hispanic students was 2.55 and the mean for black students was 1.92. For white students the mean was 2.99. Again the numbers infer black students fall behind all other ethnic groups in participation in a national honors program that can potentially lead to college credit (Solorzano, 2004 and Young, 2007).

Roman Catholic High School for Boys in Philadelphia is an example of urban parochial school attempting to address the needs of black males. Roman has a tradition of servicing the minority male populations in Philadelphia with a 24% minority enrollment (<http://www.romancatholichs.com>). The students are expected to enroll in four years of English and science and three years of math and language. The school also offers advanced placement courses in English, foreign language, history, Economics, Psychology, math, and laboratory sciences. Even with the strong curriculum the Roman Catholic High School average combined score is 900-1100 on the SAT exam. The minority student combined score is 850-950. As a result, their SAT scores are still less competitive.

Student Perception of their Ability to Learn

Several authors in the past suggested that black males chose to do poorly for cultural integrity. Ford (1995) uncovered a persistent rate in which gifted black males intentionally underachieved. Kohl (1994) claimed many disenfranchised students consciously made the decision “not to learn” when their identity was invalidated. Steele and Aronson (1995) present the stereotype threat model in their work. They administered a difficult verbal ability test. The black students performed less than white students, even though they statistically matched in ability level. The researchers questioned, did the black students perform less than the white students because they were less motivated, or because their skills were somehow less applicable to the advanced material of this test. Once the test accountability factor was removed the black students' performance on the test rose to match that of equally qualified whites. It is the result of this study that Steele has been credited with the subjective state called stereotype threat.

Another researcher, Ogbu (2003) believed that broad cultural attributes among blacks, — such as parental style, commitment to learning, and work ethic — bear a heavy responsibility for the black-white educational gap. He concluded that black students from affluent homes have the wrong role models expressing poor academic performance as projected from the media. He concluded parents that are too busy with their affluence are accepting low performance, and do not intervene in the education of their children. He believed that many black parents are not offering sufficient guidance, do not spend enough time helping with homework, and do not pay adequate attention to their children's educational progress. What is not being addressed is that much of Ogbu's work compares involuntary blacks (students born in the US) and voluntary blacks (students born in the Caribbean, Europe, or Africa) in relation to black student performance and parental influence (Ogbu, 2003).

This study attempts to counter the Steele, Ogbu arguments in support of stereotype threat and choosing to be a low performer. Today a significant number of the middle class black males are successful and do try because of three major variables; capital that comes from family, peers, and the university environment.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to the data collection and analysis process to answer the research question that addressed the factors presented above as influenced by the amount of cultural wealth available to the undergraduate student.

Research Questions

The two research questions for this study are: What are the perceptions of black college students, regarding the ways in which the college environment enhances or diminishes their success for remaining on track and graduating from college in four years? Did you have any particular person (adult staff, student mentor, or organization) that helped you stay on track?

Research Design: an Overview of the Study

Participants

The study included a sample of eight middle class black males as defined by family incomes of greater than \$50,000 with one participant from a family with an income greater than \$90,000. All participants were from families with at least one parent with a bachelor's degree and at least one parent having a graduate degree. The students attended Principally White Institutions (PWT'S) and HBCU's. Two attended a selective private white Catholic university with admission SAT requirements above 1100, one attended a selective large PWI state university with admission SAT requirements above 1200, and the other five were divided between two non-selective HBCU's that enrolled over 50% of their freshman with SAT's <950. All 8 students were second generation college students, and two were from single parent homes led by a female caregiver. All students were from middle to upper SES.

Data Collection

Eight students were followed from freshman to senior years with basic data collected at the end of each semester. All students participated in a private one hour interview to reflect and discuss their success over the past four years. Each student was interviewed and asked a series of questions. They provided oral stories that became narratives and journal entries which were used to generate eventual themes. All eight students graduated from college. Three graduated on time (four years), two in four and one half years and two graduated in five years and one in six.

Findings

The analysis of the student narratives also inferred a relationship between university role models and success as well as a strong rejection by all participants to the idea of stereotype threat because of the amount of cultural wealth available vs. SES. Student responses reported in the findings addressed all forms of capital and the research questions to support these findings is presented below.

Discussion

What Role Did Your Parents Play in Your College Success?

None of the parent influences and outcomes from the study were related specifically to SES. They were all related to parent support and family structure. All parents were involved with their children's education as early as elementary school and supportive of all activities. Constant positive re-enforcement and expectations of success were more important than their SES. Family support can begin early even in a lower SES family or a single parent family.

Parents in this study chose the opportunity to enroll their children in the best K-12 education program available to the family budget. These ranged from magnet public schools to charter

schools to parochial schools to private schools. Most important, they chose educational systems that welcomed parental involvement no matter the lack of or the inclusion of tuition and fees.

The students all stated that their parents started with the assumption they would attend college and become successful from as early as elementary school. All parents provided background knowledge related to college applications, tours and the importance of SAT prep courses. They all appeared to understand the importance of their sons applying to three categories of colleges: guaranteed acceptance, competitive acceptances and uncertain acceptances.

Once accepted to college all parents were supportive and attended the parent week held in the freshman year. The mother attended for the student with the disabled father. These students were always part of a peer group from early in their elementary education through middle school, high school and again in college. Even those in a PWI did not have to negate or hide their black identity for acceptance but instead served as role models of black success among the white students. This success was demonstrated as an academic student rather than as a student athlete. Throughout the four years the students were concerned with pleasing their parents with academic performance and they strived to earn GPA's of 3.0 or better. All parents remained actively involved throughout the four years in course selection. The students chose their courses and the parents served as advisors. As they approached their senior year they conferred further with their parents about potential job or graduate school applications. Four of the eight assumed they must eventually apply to graduate school within the next year.

Parents and family approval are critical to the success of black males in college. Parents become a major force to influence academic performance. All students in the study believed their parents cared about their success. Although the students were of a higher SES they were still from urban settings and urban high schools. This counters any concerns about apathy on the part of these urban parents.

What Role Did the Faculty Play Directly or Indirectly in Your Success?

All students spoke of the positive re-enforcement they received from faculty in their majors. Students persistently mentioned how good they felt when a professor said, "good job". Directly, one senior student mentioned being the representative for the "black perspective" (instead of ethnically faceless), in his sports management class. He felt proud that he was the "go to student" (unique individual) by the professor because the other white students had no frame of reference to answer some of the racially driven questions. Instead of feeling singled out and the "token" (as he did in his freshman year) he now felt like the expert to add to the lesson. The professor was placing the student in the consultant role rather than assessing if the student had read the assignment. Black students need to feel their opinion and knowledge is equal and valued.

All students in the study spoke of a faculty member that served as a career advisor or internship advisor. The student in sport management developed a mentee relationship with his internship boss. After she left and went to graduate school they remained in contact and she wrote a glowing letter of recommendation for him for both future jobs and graduate school. He also received an excellent recommendation from one of his professors that he had taken for three different classes.

Indirectly, out of the classroom, the student that interned for the university radio station was able to obtain several recommendations for and contacts to possible radio jobs in his neighboring city. This student eventually secured a broadcasting internship with a National Hockey League franchise. Another student who was enrolled in the business program at his respective institution was placed in the community by the faculty for his senior year internship. This placement evolved into a fulltime job after graduation.

Finally one student was flattered that in his freshman year his work study staff gave him a surprise birthday cake. They said he was the most conscientious work study student they had

ever had. He was far from home and this personalization made him feel valued and helped him to build his self-esteem as a black male in this mostly white university.

Did You Have Any Particular Person (Adult Staff, Student Mentor, or Organization) that Helped You Stay on Track?

All participants spoke of campus organizations that served as social, emotional and career outlets. These groups helped the students mature and develop their career pathways. Participation in these organizations helped all students with self-esteem. Within the groups they discussed the importance of language, attire preparation and presentation of black males when entering the job market. One student in the study chose to pledge a black Greek lettered organization for his main social outlet. This group provided for him a feeling of racial solidarity and prevented him from feeling socially and culturally isolated. It is for these reasons many black males pledge fraternities (McClure, 2006).

Did You Ever Feel You Should Not Try to Succeed in Any Particular Class?

When each participant was asked this question as well as a follow-up question related to do you ever stop or fail to try, they appeared shocked at these questions. They all acknowledged “not trying” would not sit well with their parents, and they would not do that because they liked making their parents proud and happy. They stressed that they were raised to believe they could succeed and explained their low math SAT scores were indicative of the fact that they never did well in math from as far back as elementary school and they never liked math. They did not believe they had a math difficulty because they were not as smart as other students (black or white) but because it was a problem related to them.

One student in the study assumed as a freshman, he would not have to take developmental math but he was required to take developmental reading and writing. He also assumed he would pass the math portion of the Praxis I teacher exam and not the other sections. He spent several weeks studying to prepare and he retook the Praxis I exam and passed all three sections. There were three education majors in the study. All three passed the Praxis II exit exam on the first attempt as seniors. The students were motivated because they understood the benefits of a good GPA to acceptance into graduate school or for a job application. They believed they were smart because they were in college and all had good GPA's.

Conclusion

Although this study was designed to demonstrate the motivation and performance of middle class black males the results can be transposed to black males of any SES. The students in this study made it very clear that the family unit provided the majority of capital required for acceptance and success at college. Summer vacation and time with the family unit proved to be very important to the participants in this study. The family unit can be structured in a variety of ways that also include single parent households. The main goals for the parent(s) include belief in your son, active in his education, and your ability to be there for the K-12 years and the 4 years of college. It is this belief on the part of the student that you are behind him that means more both directly and indirectly to his success. Finally out of school engagement throughout the K-12 years at the family and community level will prepare your son for engagement in the college environment. For black males campus engagement makes a difference for short term gains semester to semester and long term outcomes at the end of the four years. With extensive use of aspirational and familial capital the black male can build his self-esteem and not be threatened or succumb to the stereotype threat syndrome.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Barbara Butler: Assistant Professor, Curriculum and Instruction, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, Greensboro, North Carolina, USA

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