

Prosocial Development and Achievement of Young African American Males in Southern California

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Literature addressing the Black male experience with regard to personal adjustment, family relations, and academic and career issues is replete with negative characterizations. The present study takes a strengths-based approach, exploring the positive educational and career experiences of participants in an effort to fill the gap in scholarly literature. Researchers utilize a qualitative grounded theory approach with a sample of twenty African American young adult males in San Bernardino, California. Prosocial Development and Achievement Theory explains the major social processes of participants. Three themes emerged from the data including Constructive Hardship and Counteraction, Conditioned Construction of Masculinity, and Community and Family Support. Important implications for future research, theory, and practice are discussed.

Keywords: African-American, Black males, academic achievement, education, career achievement

Introduction

There is no shortage of empirical and anecdotal literature highlighting the social and familial challenges of African American young adult males in the United States. Such experiences are thought to be hostile to the prosocial development and academic achievement of these young men, thus affecting the breadth of their present aspirations, and the hopes of future generations. Yet, the present study takes a more strengths based approach, exploring success factors that foster prosocial development and academic achievement in young adult African American males attending college in San Bernardino, California.

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The City of San Bernardino sits in one of the largest counties in the United States, which bears the same name and has been noted historically as one of the poorest, most deprived areas of the country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). It is a region marked not only by poverty, but also crime and a number of other social ills. These realities often present social, familial, educational, and psychological concerns that shape the pursuits of young adults in the county. Thus, San Bernardino, California appears to be a suitable context for studying young adult African American males. To live in the social context of this community with the ability to both navigate the outlined challenges and to demonstrate positive prosocial development and academic achievement would be a notable feat. The present study uses a qualitative grounded theory approach to explore the experiences of young adult African American men attending college, so as to uncover factors that allow them to run counter to the debilitating factors in their social environment.

The ecological systems theory is used to frame human development and to map the influence of interactions within and between specific environments on the academic and career trajectories of members of the target population. A theory of resilience is utilized at the middle range to explain the outcome and processes of successful academic and career pathways and positive life adjustment. A fundamental assumption of ecological systems theory is that individuals and families are not simply shaped by environmental influences and contexts, but that they also impact those contexts (Chibucos, 2005). A second assumption of ecological theoretical perspectives is that there are several levels of environmental context, or nested ecosystems in which the individual develops and interacts (White & Klein, 2002). These are referred to as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Within the different levels of ecology described in the ecological systems theory also exist protective factors that have the potential to foster resiliency.

Resilience and protective factors are conceptualized in a number of different ways. However, resiliency generally refers to the capacity to cope with one's setbacks and challenges (Moen & Erickson, 1995). As it relates to the present study, resilience is operationalized as the outcome and processes of successful academic and career pathways, and positive life adjustment among African American male collegiate students, despite factors that would otherwise lead to low achievement or failure, and poor overall adjustment.

Debilitating factors like those describing the sociocultural context of the City of San Bernardino have been noted throughout history. In fact, historic African American leaders often captivated audiences with their fiery and passionate speeches regarding the condition of Black America that reflected the institution of slavery, rampant violence, intimidation, oppression, segregation, and economic, social, and educational disadvantages. Despite these challenges, however, many of these leaders acknowledged education not only as an important element in the struggle for human rights, but also as a means for upward mobility (Brailsford, 2005). It is suggested that when young African American men pursue education, they are better positioned to be successful as citizens, husbands, and fathers (Hyman, 2006). Therefore, the development of successful academic and career trajectories for African American males is important to reaching conditions, opportunities, and states of achievement that can support their positive well-being, and that of African American children, families, and communities (Hyman). Since there is limited research on the experiences of African American collegiate students in general, in some instances the utilization of literature from K-12 studies was used to explore the state of knowledge as it relates to the population of interest (Harper, 2006).

Relevant Literature

The present study set out to explore factors that are associated with prosocial behavior. Prosocial behaviors are protective factors shaped by a combination of social structures and relationships, hypothesized to contribute to successful outcomes. Much of existing empirical literature describes this concept as resilience.

Researchers have explored relationships between patterns of resilience found in African American families and the personal resilience of African American youth. Various studies explain that the social support demonstrated in familial relationships contributes significantly to academic success and positive life outcomes of African American youth (Brailsford, 2005; Orthner, 2004; Williams & Bryan, 2013). For example, warmth, nurturance, and affection that exists in African American family networks assists in the development of individual resiliency characteristics, which have been identified among factors positively impacting achievement related beliefs and behaviors of the population of interest. Additionally, parents who express high expectations for their children help to instill the value of education, leading to more successful outcomes (Brailsford; Orthner).

Individual characteristics such as being goal-oriented, taking initiative and being motivated have been associated with support for academic achievement as well (Brailsford). Teti, Martin, Ranade, Massie, Melebranche, and Tschann (2011) explored the individual strengths of 30 low-income, urban African American men. The qualitative study uncovered numerous socio-structural stressors in the lives of participants including racism, incarceration, and unemployment. On the other hand, however, the men also identified individual resiliency characteristics including perseverance, a commitment to learning from hardship, as well as reflecting and refocusing to address difficulties as forms of resilience and contributors to positive life adjustment.

It is also suggested that interacting systems such as school, neighborhood, and community invite participation in various prosocial behaviors. These behaviors may consist of involvement in youth development programs and activities that contribute to the promotion of positive academic outcomes and life adjustment. Examples include involvement in community or service-learning programs, extra curricular activities, or other school based programs (Billig, 2000; Darling, 2005; Ungar et al., 2005).

School and community also play important roles in fostering resilience among African American males. Resilient African American males perceive their teachers and other significant school personnel as role models and a source of encouragement (Brailsford). Wood and Turner (2011) highlighted findings from a qualitative study of factors impacting the academic success of 28 African American male students in community college. They found that elements of faculty-student engagement positively affected academic success among students. Moreover, African American male students were able to perform better when they felt they received personal attention from faculty. This notion of personal attention referred to faculty members exhibiting a friendly demeanor towards students from the onset of their initial meeting, checking in on student academic progress, listening to student concerns, being proactive in addressing performance issues, and encouraging students to succeed.

Another important aspect of the school environment is the relationships students build with their peers. According to Noguera (2003) peer groups assume great influence and control on youth to conform to group values and norms. Therefore, opportunities for peer counseling, peer

leadership groups, and mentoring are significant. Resilient African American males not only feel supported in their schools, but in their overall communities (Teti et al., 2011). The community can assist students in developing positive feelings and attitudes toward school (Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006).

Many scholars have noted African Americans overall tend to have a strong religious orientation (Greene, 2002; Riggins et al., 2008; Teti et al., 2011). Moreover, resilient African American males reference religion as a source of strength to overcome adversities (Teti et al.). Riggins, McNeal, and Herndon (2008) explain that with regard to African American male collegiate students, those who capitalize and embrace their spirituality increase the likelihood that they will continue their collegiate experience.

A study by Cavazos, Johnson, and Sparrow (2010) reflected that overcoming personal and academic challenges through responses such as positive reframing, and using low expectations as motivation, could also lead to more positive academic outcomes. In their study, participants were able to remain positive in the face of adversity and were motivated to overcome perceived stereotypes that they would not succeed. Additionally, the use of negative role models has been used to harness motivation as it relates to success, achievement, and behavior change. Lockwood, Sadler, Fyman, and Tuck (2004) found among a sample of university psychology students that those considering abstaining from potentially deleterious activity were more likely to view negative models as effective motivators. Several of the aforementioned studies, however, do not explore the experiences of African American males.

While there have been qualitative studies conducted regarding the educational experiences of African American males, some of which were highlighted, rarely do these studies emphasize the experiences of collegiate students. There seems to be an emphasis on fostering resilience among African American male children and adolescents, but there is a significant gap in the literature as it relates to resilience among African American male collegiate students, and the ways in which they achieve and experience positive life adjustment. There is also a gap in literature explaining the processes of this population engaging positive adaptive responses to living in impoverished communities. There is a great need for research that aims to emphasize unique experiences of resilience and positive life adjustment among African American males, given their particular sociocultural context. The present study not only fills this gap, but also has the potential to inform the development of culturally sensitive curricula, programs, and interventions for African American males. There also exists the potential to influence policies geared toward fostering greater success and more positive outcomes for these young men, their families, and communities.

Method

This study utilizes a grounded theory approach. In grounded theory, theories are created that are empirically grounded in data, which in turn inform data collection. This approach utilizes a constant comparative method to establish analytic distinctions and to make comparisons at each level of analytic work. It involves continuous sampling and analysis, allowing researchers to gather the information needed to appropriately convey the experiences of participants (Charmaz, 2006; Daly, 2007). The present study maintains three basic principles important to grounded theory including theoretical sensitivity, sampling, and saturation. Charmaz (2006) explains that theoretical sensitivity is the process by which researchers move from the descriptive to analytic level of analysis, considering multiple vantage points, making

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comparisons, following leads, and building on ideas. Theoretical sampling is important to collecting additional data in relation to emerging core categories or subcategories. Further, theoretical saturation was achieved at the point whereby no new or relevant themes were emerging from particular categories.

Sample

This study examined twenty African American males in undergraduate programs at a college or university in San Bernardino. Participants were graduates of a San Bernardino high school and lived a minimum of two years in the city. They were between the ages of 18 and 24, and had the ability to communicate in English. The size of the sample was determined on the basis of saturation as previously discussed. The focus group was made up of 8 collegiate students who engaged in a discussion regarding the familial and contextual factors impacting their academic and career trajectories. A sequential method was used where results from the in-depth interviews informed questions for the focus group. In an effort to protect the identity of those involved in the research, pseudonyms are utilized.

Data Collection and Analysis/Coding Procedures

The present study used a convenience sample. Students were contacted on school grounds and invited to participate in the study. Informed consent was signed and structured interviews lasted about one hour. A snowball sample of elicited referrals from persons with whom the researcher was familiar was utilized in recruiting African American collegiate students. Data collection consisted of autobiographical narratives, in-depth interviews and focus groups with study participants.

All interviews were conducted face to face, audiotaped, and did not exceed ninety minutes. Sixty to ninety minute focus group interviews were also utilized wherein participants shared their views in a group with others, exploring the ways in which their experiences corresponded. The researcher acted as a moderator, making a public request for confidentiality, establishing ground rules, posing questions and probing as it relates to the current study. Like the in-depth interview, the focus group interview was also audiotaped and used for the purposes of data collection. An additional source of information included autobiographical narratives. Prior to beginning the in-depth interview, and at the end of the focus group, a written narrative response was requested of African American male collegiate participants, which did not exceed ten minutes. This data collection strategy assisted in obtaining information regarding students' educational and related experiences. Participants listed their answers, or responded in two to three sentences. The triangulation method outlined, which included in-depth interviews, focus groups and narratives, was employed in an effort to increase validity and reliability of the study.

The analytic strategy in the present study included line-by-line, open, axial and selective coding procedures. Additionally, journaling and the writing of analytic memos began during the process of open coding, where notes and ideas were recorded about emerging ideas in the data.

Results

Upon the analysis of interview data, three overarching themes emerged and were identified to explain participant experiences as it relates to their academic and career trajectories. These include: (1) Constructive Hardship and Counteraction (2) Conditioned Construction of Masculinity and (3) Community and Family Support. Following is a more detailed explanation of these themes and the ways in which they positively influence the trajectories and adjustment of participants in the sample. A diagram (Figure 1) is presented to illustrate the core category and emergent themes. Prosocial Development and Achievement Theory explains the major social processes of participants.

Constructive Hardship and Counteraction

Constructive Hardship and Counteraction is a theme that emerged to explain how African American male collegiate students utilized hardship experiences in the present study. Hardships consisted of adverse or unfavorable circumstances that participants were dealing with in their everyday lives apart from their schooling experiences. These challenges occurred in the context of work, family, neighborhood, and/or the overall community. It seemed that adverse or unfavorable experiences were critical to most participants developing motivation to achieve, and to the development of successful academic and career pathways and positive life adjustment. Participants also utilized the hardship experiences of others around them, and overall poor images of African American males as motivation for success. They sought to avoid undesirable behavior or characteristics and the recurrence of negative patterns. Participants were deliberate also in counteracting negative stereotypes of African American males, which positively influenced their trajectories.

Following is a more detailed description of these nuances, and the ways in which they contributed to the prosocial development and achievement of participants. Further, the following six factors or subcategories outlined more clearly describe *Constructive Hardship and Counteraction* as an emergent theme.

Financial hardship. Among the hardship experiences participants utilized as motivation to succeed was financial hardship. It is important to note that participants linked financial struggle with a lack of education. On the other hand, they viewed attaining education as a means for upward mobility. This led them to perceive education as important, and in turn motivated them to pursue college degrees.

One participant, Trey, explained that he learned the importance of education “the hard way.” He was a student who decided to return to school after taking time off and having been in the workforce. He went through a number of challenges, including unstable employment and financial hardship. He was opposed to returning to a lifestyle of living paycheck to paycheck. Therefore, college seemed to be a better alternative:

Trey: “Working, getting fired, getting laid off, getting a car note, struggling to pay that, and insurance, and going to nobody to get help. I didn’t have no mom or pops really help me so, I do it on my own so, I learned the hard way, not the easy way like the rest of these kids do.”

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Another participant, Derrick, shared a similar experience in that he and his family struggled financially to meet basic human needs. This initially deterred his focus from school, leading him to enter the workforce. Over time, however, Derrick became a father, and education became more of a priority. Fatherhood is another important subcategory of *Constructive Hardship and Counteraction*.

Fatherhood. The transition into fatherhood led to an important shift in the mindsets of participants like Derrick, causing them to consider the well-being of their children, and in turn making the decision to pursue higher education as a means for providing their children with greater resources and opportunities. The financial difficulty they experienced taking care of their children served as a source of motivation to advance their education. Derrick felt having a college degree would not only increase his sufficiency and diminish stress related to finance, but would also better position him to provide for his young daughter: “I have a daughter, so that is my motivation. I want her to live a better life than me,” he said.

Jerrell, who also became a father at a young age, was working three jobs to make ends meet and care for his son while attending school. He explained that his three-year-old son suffered from cerebral palsy (CP). Jerrell not only felt responsible for providing financially for his son, but for also providing appropriate medical care. This motivated him to pursue a degree in physical therapy. Participants who were fathers were able to utilize their experiences as motivation towards their academic and career trajectories. They felt having an education would better position their families to achieve more positive outcomes.

Absentee Fathers. While hardships associated with the role of fatherhood contributed to the prosocial development and achievement of African American male collegiate students in this study, participants were also motivated by hardships related to relationships with their own fathers, particularly absenteeism. Participants described the ways in which their fathers’ lack of involvement in their lives negatively impacted them. However, they used those experiences as motivation to be better men, they said. This vision of a *better man* seemed to develop from participants’ disappointing relationships with their fathers and the qualities that they felt their fathers lacked. However, as a result of their experiences, they felt motivated to not repeat patterns of absenteeism. Corey explained: “For me it was always the thought of being a better man than my dad was.” And Anthony echoed those thoughts, saying: “I told my father at a young age that I wanted to be better than him.” Participants who experienced father absenteeism developed prosocial ways of coping. They were able to reframe their experiences with hopes of breaking negative patterns and achieving positive adjustment, which was important to their academic and career trajectories.

Justice System. For other participants, hardship experiences involved run-ins with law enforcement or the justice system. These events triggered participants’ motivation for change and positively influenced their academic and career trajectories and life adjustment, since they did not want to lead lives that would land them in prison. Andrew credited his experiences with the justice system as having been his motivation to turn his life around. When asked what triggered a wake up call for him, he responded that he “didn’t want to go to jail. I saw what it was like in there. I don’t want to live there for the rest of my life. He was eventually enrolled in military school, which he credited for changing the direction of his life.

Similarly, Trey was arrested for charges he chose not to disclose. His legal troubles were grounds for dismissal from school and caused him to lose this athletic scholarship. As a result of this experience, he lost his enthusiasm for school and entered the workforce. However, after experiencing financial hardship, he later returned to college, viewing it as a means for upward mobility and a way to ensure a more positive life adjustment. Participants seemed to fear the consequence of permanent jail time, and as a result of their experiences with the justice system shifted their attention to their education, which contributed to their prosocial development and achievement.

Eluding Negative Experiences of Others. Participants who did not describe *personal* hardship experiences did reflect on the hardship experiences of others as motivation for success. They may have witnessed the experiences of family members, friends, or co-workers who endured hardship due to a lack of education, and therefore desired to avoid those patterns. Derrick explained: “It makes me wanna try harder to succeed so I don’t fall into that same hole. It doesn’t make sense to repeat some of the things you’re not supposed to repeat.”

Counteracting Negative Stereotypes. The final subcategory of *Construction Hardship and Counteraction* that contributed to prosocial development and achievement for participants was their ability to counteract negative stereotypes. Rather than detailing the hardship experiences of others, or personal challenges like financial hardship for example, these participants discussed hardship in the context of the larger society. This included having to endure being stereotyped as African American men. Participants explained that African American males are often categorized as uneducated, hyper sexualized, deadbeat fathers, criminals, and drug dealers by the wider society. As a result, they deliberately sought to counteract such stereotypes through the pursuit of higher education and positive life adjustment. Participants felt motivated to achieve and were disinterested in perpetuating negative perceptions of African American males as a whole. For instance, John stated,

I’m not going to prove you the way you want me to. Imma prove you based off these academics. Imma prove you based off inspiring others who are African American to come into a four year university and make something of yourself; who can be just like me, if not better than me. You know, instead of accepting it and running away from the challenge.

Further, participants used negative stereotypes as a model for what they did not want to become. They deliberately made conscious choices that were opposed to what they described as broad opinions about African American males, particularly the notion of African American males being uneducated. By pursuing higher education, participants felt that they were overcoming the threat of stereotypes, proving them false. This contributed to their prosocial development and achievement.

Detrimental Effects of Hardship. Although 17 participants in the present study discussed the significance of *Constructive Hardship and Counteraction* to their prosocial development and achievement, not all participants in the study described their experiences in this way. Other participants may have identified adverse circumstances they encountered, or what they considered normal struggles living in the San Bernardino community. However, they did

not utilize those experiences as motivation for their education or adjustment. In fact, hardship experiences damaged the trajectories of participants in some cases, leading them to find little interest or value in education despite being college students. For the majority of participants, however, hardship experiences typically fueled a level of motivation and desire for personal and academic success. Participants' experiences seemed to foster growth and change in their lives, where they were able to take adverse situations and produce positive results. They also sought to learn from the experiences of others and to avoid both negative cycles and stereotypes. Participants acknowledged that despite their hardship experiences, they were determined to move forward with their goals. John said:

You can grow up in the rough areas, you can grow up in hardships, and you know, it's a struggle but at the same time you can challenge that negativity to positivity; you know a positive outlook and actually make something of yourself. All it takes it just one narrow path and honestly strive for success.

Conditioned Construction of Masculinity

Conditioned Construction of Masculinity is the next overarching theme that emerged from the data. This refers to the idea that African American male collegiate students in the present study were able to come to terms with issues associated with the construction of their masculine identities. Moreover, in the interest of their educations, participants demonstrated an ability to overcome pressures to adopt a veneer of toughness that is demonstrated often through violence, dominance, and fearlessness in the interest of warranting respect and negotiating threatening circumstances. In many instances, however, participants exhibited what they deemed a reasonable amount of toughness to survive the social and contextual challenges of the San Bernardino community. It is important to explore concepts of toughness as it relates to participant experiences.

Toughness for Survival. Participants in this study were able to maintain balance between their collegiate and neighborhood/community experiences. While they were not advocates for unnecessary violence or intimidation, they explained that the nature of the San Bernardino community required them to exert a level of toughness to survive. Cordell explained,

You have to adopt that toughness or you could get beat up, or you could find yourself in the wrong neighborhood, and if you are in a neighborhood that's not your friend, it's sink or swim. So, a lot of us, because we're trying to get our degree it's like okay if we're in the wrong neighborhood we have to figure out how to fight our way out cause' at the end of the day I have to keep going to school, keep taking the same road to school all the time.

Tough Façade. Toughness is both uniquely defined and contextualized for members of the target population. In the present study, participants described toughness in two distinct ways: (1) a tough façade or (2) a tough mentality. The tough or masculine façade was used to shield vulnerability, and to send an important message to those in the community who posed a potential threat to the personal safety and security of participants. The message they hoped to send was that they would not be bullied or pushed over and would go to great lengths to protect

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themselves as well as their families. In the event that participants felt threatened, they explained that the exertion of power and domination was both necessary and justifiable. Yet, they described toughness as being something they only had to resort to under such circumstances. The following from Nathan is an example:

Situations involving my family where I have to stand up for, let's say a little sister, little brother, and I see somebody trying to get at them, I can't just back down and say that's your business. So, situations like that I do get involved.

Another participant, Corey, said that the notion of toughness was contingent upon the community environment. However, he explained that his true sense of identity was not reflected in his tough façade.

Tough Mentality. Although the tough façade has more of a physical connotation, other participants in the study described toughness as a mentality or way of thinking. Mental toughness seemed to replace the need for a tough façade. Similar to others in the study, these participants acknowledged that they encountered several challenges in their community. However, they felt those challenges required them to be mentally tough, rather than to adopt a masculine façade. For example, Darren described,

Hard on the inside, soft on the outside. That's how I feel like you have to be. Some people feel like you have to be both. I feel like, I don't have to be both, if anything, mentally. Mentally tough, San Bernardino makes people mentally tough.

This mentality seemed to also influence the way in which participants perceived threatening circumstances. Demarcus explained that he initially felt pressured to adopt a traditional veneer of toughness that included dominance and violence. However, through growth and experience he learned that if he showed respect to others, in most cases they would reciprocate that respect and consideration. He went on to explain that no longer having to demonstrate a tough façade alleviated stress and tension, allowing him to focus more of his attention on his education.

Toughness and Student Trajectories. While participants acknowledged the need for either a tough façade or mentality in specific situations, they explained that those experiences typically did not negatively influence their academic or career trajectories. Although they had to deal with neighborhood/community pressures and challenges, they still persisted with their educational goals. Devin explains that in educational settings his focus is not on being tough: Devin: "...When I'm at school it's not about that. It's about learning, making sure I do right on this test, getting this paper done. Being tough don't really affect me in my school and stuff like that, just my neighborhood, I would say that."

Avoiding a Veneer of Toughness. Although a veneer of toughness was essential to most participants, there also existed participants who, for varying reasons, rejected the notion of toughness all together. James explained that he thought survival overall was a difficult task, but that toughness was not something that needed to be exerted to others, not even in the San Bernardino community. Moreover, Jerrell explained the way in which the nature of his neighborhood influenced his experiences regarding a veneer of toughness. He did not find it

important to the construction of his masculine identity. When asked whether a veneer of toughness was necessary to survive in the San Bernardino community, he replied: “No. I live in Highland and it’s like a White washed neighborhood.”

Here, this participant was insinuating the exertion of toughness was not important or vital to his survival because he lived in a predominantly White neighborhood. It is also important to note that Jerrell’s parents were highly educated, and of a higher socioeconomic status. This afforded his family the opportunity to live in a more affluent part of the community. Based on these findings, participants who found it necessary to exhibit a reasonable amount of toughness to negotiate the social and contextual challenges in the San Bernardino community were still able to successfully navigate their academic and career trajectories. They were able to maintain balance between their educational and neighborhood experiences, and demonstrate a conditioned construction of masculine identity. In turn, this contributed to the prosocial development and achievement of participants.

Community and Family Support

From the data emerged a third overarching theme referenced here as *Community and Family Support*. It seems that some level of community or family support impacted participants’ choices to pursue higher education, as well as their ideas about its importance. This in turn assisted in the development of successful academic and career pathways, and positive life adjustment. For participants in the present study, community support was comprised of mentoring or shadowing programs, extracurricular and recreational activities, clubs/organizations, as well as support from coaches, teachers, and members of church communities. Eighteen participants described community support as having been important to their prosocial development and achievement. It was not necessarily the source of support itself, but the kind of support that participants received, that positively influenced their trajectories and overall adjustment. Participants gained positive role models, inspiration, confidence, and a sense of accountability from the various sources of support outlined.

Mentorship. Participants like Anthony were involved in mentoring programs that positively impacted their academic and career trajectories, and life adjustment.
Anthony:

My senior year in high school I happened to receive a scholarship through Young Scholars by a brother by the name of Tyrek Stevens. Seeing how successful he was and also being around other African American successful men, it just gave me that extra push that told me I can do it. It felt like they all were lending a hand in their own individual ways. So, it’s moreso seeing men of color progress is what actually gave me more confidence that I can also be there one day if not farther than that.

Extracurricular and Recreational Activities. Opportunities to participate in extracurricular and recreational activities also served useful for participants in this study. Participation in school sports is usually subject to certain academic requirements, holding participating athletes accountable for maintaining passing grades and an acceptable grade point average. Derrick said: “...basketball was really the way I passed all of my classes. If I didn’t play basketball, I probably would have failed. I probably wouldn’t have got the grades that I did

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if it wasn't for basketball." He also explained that his basketball coaches pushed him very hard academically. Having to uphold such standards placed these participants in a position where they were eligible for college admittance.

Clubs and Organizations. While mentorship and extracurricular activities have undoubtedly been instrumental to the academic and career trajectories, and life adjustment of participants, opportunities for involvement in clubs and organizations have also been significant. Greg explained that involvement in organizations helped to ensure that students performed well academically.

Teacher Support. Community members, such as teachers, also provided encouragement to participants, positively influencing their trajectories and life adjustment:

Anthony: "Hearing from multiple teachers that I have the potential beyond means, that I can do anything that I would like to, that I have talent in multiple areas, and facets of life, and hearing that over and over and over and over again" had a tremendous impact on his life.

Spiritual Support. Support from religious or spiritual communities were also beneficial for participants. These communities offered encouragement to participants in pursuing their goals, and sent positive messages regarding the importance of education. Demarcus explained that members of his church including the pastor, first lady, and church deacons encouraged him to stay in school. When asked about the messages his church community expressed to him regarding education he replied:

To stay wit' it, to get your degree. At least get a B.A. [bachelor's degree] out of it, you feel me? Cause an AA [associates degree] is really not nothing nowadays. [They tell me] to stay in school, if you wanna work then you can work but stay in school while you doing it cause that's like the only way to get out really, to be positive.

Threatened Academic and Career Trajectories. While community support systems discussed were useful for the majority of participants in this study, Jerrell explained that extracurricular activities posed a threat to his academic and career trajectory since he was mostly partying with his teammates and not focusing on education. Rodney had similar feelings.

Family Support. The importance of family support was expressed by 17 of the participants. Participants explained that members of their immediate and extended families provided encouragement and support with regard to their education and career, which shaped their ideas about its importance, and motivated participants to attend college. Family members may have had educational aspirations for participants, provided specific resources, or assisted them in gaining a sense of accountability for their education and decisions. Family members may have also modeled the importance of academic related achievement through their own experiences with education. Varying methods of family support provided to participants ultimately assisted them in attaining more positive outcomes as it relates to prosocial development and achievement.

Parents. As an example, parental expectations seemed to be important to Darren's experience:

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My mom, when it came to education, she was very strict on it. She would always tell me that she didn't mind if I brought home a C, if it was the best I could do. But, half the time it wasn't [laughter] so, she just really wanted me to be the best at whatever it is I'm doing when it came to school. So, I would say that's the biggest thing. And also, college wasn't really an option. It was more of where I'm going vs. if I'm going.

In addition to parents, extended family members played important roles, providing resources, holding participants accountable for their education, and for making choices that would contribute to positive life adjustment. This may have included grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Family Members' Experiences with Education. Another family factor that influenced the prosocial development and achievement of participants was the college experiences of their family members and friends. Participants discussed following in the footsteps of those who had attained college degrees. Steven said: "Yeah, college is kind of a big thing in my family. All my elder siblings, they went to college." In other instances, participants felt encouraged to pursue higher education because of their family members' lack of education. Witnessing the various challenges and struggles they dealt with inspired participants to attain better for themselves: Cordell: "I would say their experiences impacted me, because I can see what they don't have as a result of not going to college. And so, I have pretty much a road map of okay, if I don't go then I may end up like this."

A Lack of Family Support. While most participants in the study received some level of family support that contributed to prosocial development and achievement, participants like Trey did not receive a great deal of family support. He said: "You know what? None of them graduated, so they never pushed me in front of education. I did it on my own, actually." Overall, however, community and family support as outlined helped to inspire students, and shape their ideas about their futures and the importance of education.

Discussion

This study responds to a call for research that examines African American males from a strength-based approach. The researcher explored the various personal, social, and contextual factors that positively influenced the academic and career trajectories and life adjustment of participants in accordance with an ecological systems perspective. This analysis signifies the importance of prosocial development and achievement among African American male collegiate students in the sociocultural context of San Bernardino, California.

Four important points were raised as it relates to the findings from the current study. First, when African American male collegiate students have the ability to reframe adverse experiences and use them as motivation for success and opportunities for growth, they are more likely to have more positive trajectories and life adjustment. Second, when members of this population are motivated to negate negative patterns, and to counteract negative stereotypes associated with being African American males, they tend to achieve better outcomes. Third, African American males who overcome pressures to adopt a veneer of toughness apart from its potential use to survive the challenges of the community are more resilient. Finally, African

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American males who receive forms of community and family support are more likely to view education as important, and in turn have more successful academic and career trajectories, and life adjustment.

This study adds to efforts to explain the importance of adversarial growth to success and behavior. It demonstrates how hardship experiences among African American males can be used as motivating factors for academic and career success, and positive life adjustment. Similar to Cavazo, Johnson, and Sparrow's (2010) qualitative study that explored adversarial growth among collegiate students, participants in this study were able to reframe their negative experiences or circumstances, and utilize those hardships as motivation and opportunities for growth, which was important to their prosocial development and achievement.

This study does not necessarily reinforce typical ideas regarding masculinity among African American males as it relates to academic resilience. Past researchers explain that typically a veneer of toughness negatively influences the academic performance of African American males, since it causes them to perceive schooling as contradictory to their masculinity (Dancy, 2012; Hall, 2009; Majors & Mancini Billson, 1992; Noguera, 2003). However, participants in the present study demonstrated a conditioned construction of masculinity, where a veneer of toughness did not significantly influence their trajectories. A veneer of toughness did shape participants' sub-cultural response to some degree, where it may have been necessary for survival in their community. Yet, participants were able to set those experiences apart from their schooling experiences.

Findings from the current study seem to be in line with empirical research that suggests the importance of community and family support to academic achievement. Extracurricular activities, such as sports, were an essential means of community support. Past studies discuss the overemphasis of sports in the socialization of African American males and it having negative implications in terms of academic success (Beamon, 2010; Beamon & Bell, 2006; Bierman 1990; Braddock, 1991). However, in many instances, the African American males in the present study utilized extracurricular activities like sports involvement as motivation for academic success.

Other studies demonstrate the importance of familial relationships by emphasizing the importance of parental expectations. It is suggested that students tend to value education more and have more successful outcomes when parents express high expectations for them to pursue academic success (Brailsford, 2005; Froiland & Davison, 2014). In the present study, academic and career trajectories and life adjustment of participants were influenced by familial relationships in a number of ways. Family members provided encouragement and support for African American male collegiate students. Family members tended to verbally emphasize the importance of education for upward mobility, and to widening the opportunities available to students. Participants' family members also made them aware of the aspirations and expectations they had for their educational attainment. Educational expectations for participants in this study were supported by action and modeling as well.

Research for the present study was subject to limitations. The construction of the Prosocial Development and Achievement model is limited to data obtained from a selected group of African American male collegiate students, which cautions transferability to African American collegiate students in other contexts. Additionally, while this study is effective in providing insight into the factors influencing the academic and career trajectories and life adjustment of African American male collegiate students, it does not measure the degree or weight of such factors.

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Limitations notwithstanding, this study's qualitative design calls for in-depth examination, details the process of participant experiences, and provides a rich description of those experiences. The use of direct quotes was not only illustrative of the research findings, but allowed participant voices to be heard. Additionally, while qualitative research is not as concerned with sample size as quantitative methods, a total of twenty collegiate students participated in this study. Theoretical saturation was achieved with this sample suggesting that no new theoretical insights or properties were emerging from the data. Finally, considering that much of past research utilizes quantitative methods, or studies the target population from a deficit-based perspective, the present study's contribution to existing literature is an additional strength.

While the present study increases our understanding of ways to improve academic and career trajectories of African American male students in the San Bernardino community, it can also inform interventions and programs that target African American males of similar sociocultural contexts, particularly communities largely impacted by poverty. Other research has identified severe and enduring poverty as one of the most deleterious factors impacting student success, causing African American males to enter the school system at both economic and educational disadvantage, and leading to a number of debilitating outcomes (Bodenhorn, 2007; Boyd, 2007; Noguera, 2003). This research provides a framework that will assist African American males overall to engage better adaptive responses to living in impoverished communities. Additionally, this study increases our understanding of the experiences of African American male collegiate students, a population underrepresented in the area of academic research. Further, the Prosocial Development and Achievement Theory described provides an approach to understanding factors that cause academically successful African American males to resist challenges and barriers they may encounter, and outlines dimensions that facilitate their academic success.

This research can be utilized in professional development and cultural competence training for educators. Moreover, the factors outlined should be considered in the development of programs and curriculum design geared toward the population of interest. It will be especially important for programs to encourage and validate family participation. Families should also be encouraged to partner with programs to create consistency in practices at home and in the community that will sustain learning and behavior.

In addition these findings can be beneficial to family life educators, leading them to provide resources and information regarding effective tools and strategies for fostering academic resiliency based on empirical evidence. This can, in turn, lead to more successful collaboration between families, schools, and community-based organizations. The present study also has important implications for counselors or marriage and family therapists (MFTs), as well as policymakers and family advocates. Findings can aid in raising the critical consciousness of MFTs, making them more aware of hardship and other factors that have the potential to limit the development and adjustment of their African American male clients. The methods of resilience demonstrated by participants in this study are important considerations for policymakers seeking to improve college opportunities and postsecondary degree attainment rates for African American males. Finally, family advocates can act as mediators between the system and the family. They can help to educate professionals on the strengths and needs of African American males as a means to improve well-being of African American families overall.

This study contributes to research that has begun to move beyond deficit perspectives of achievement and has placed emphasis on the important factors that positively contribute to

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prosocial development and achievement among this population. Future studies might consider eight researchable dimensions important to an anti-deficit achievement framework: familial factors, K-12 school forces, out-of-school college prep resources, classroom experiences, out-of-class engagement, enriching educational experiences, graduate school enrolment, and career readiness (Harper, 2012). The more we understand about the successful processes of African American males, the better positioned we are as scholars, educators, and practitioners to assist this population and their families to engage better adaptive responses. This study accounts for several of the factors positively influencing the achievement and adjustment of African American male collegiate students in San Bernardino. Mitigating issues of achievement among this population provides an opportunity to address attendant community and family problems, which is important to the field of Family Science.

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