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Tyson Beale
Northern Virginia Community College

LaVar Charleston
University of Wisconsin Whitewater

Adriel A. Hilton
Seton Hill University

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Black Male College Persistence: A Phenomenological Collective of Familial and Social Motivators

About the Author(s)

Tyson Beale serves as dean of students at Northern Virginia Community College's Alexandria Campus.

LaVar J. Charleston serves as Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Diversity, Engagement and Success at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

Adriel A. Hilton serves as dean of students and diversity officer at Seton Hill University in Greensburg, PA.

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BLACK MALE COLLEGE PERSISTENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL COLLECTIVE OF FAMILIAL AND SOCIAL MOTIVATORS



Tyson Beale, Northern Virginia Community College
LaVar J. Charleston, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater
Adriel A. Hilton, Seton Hill University

Abstract

This study examined familial differences between Black males not pre-categorized as high achieving or unprepared for college. The article highlights student persistence and examines the critical components in social and environmental arrangements. While there is evidence that some Black men never graduate college, this is not reflective of all Black men. Many do earn a baccalaureate degree, pursue graduate study, and diversify the workforce. This phenomenological study captures the voices of those who have persisted in higher education and concludes with implications for institutional practice and future research. Social capital, hyper-masculinity, and exchange theories guided this study.

Introduction

This study explored the familial dynamics of persistent African American college men. These students were typical Black males, not those pre-categorized as high-achieving or unprepared for college. The stories of participants revealed their strength, ambition, and intentions to gain a baccalaureate degree successfully. Throughout history, African Americans¹s have strived to achieve the "American Dream." Defined by notions of self-fulfillment, personal accomplishments, and freedom, this dream continues to seem an unattainable feat for Black males, who are stereotyped according to their perceived shortcomings, rather than their persistence. The portrayal of Black men as troublesome is a consistent theme within the media and social science literature (Dancy, 2012; Howard, 2013). Typical buzz words, such as "urban," "inner-city," and "at-risk," are often used as pejoratives in labeling Black men. In contemporary times, controversial media portrayals of Black males who faced deadly confrontations with police officers (Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Laquan McDonald, Walter Scott, John Crawford, III, and Freddie Gray demonstrate the misperceptions that loom within our communities. As such, enraged protests and political actions have sparked the modern "BlackLivesMatter" movement.

The headlines and disproportionate media coverage validate the need for more investigation (Robinson, Jr., 2014). Despite the size, age, height, or social-economic background, it appears that Black men are a consistent poster of marginalization. When Carter G. Woodson wrote "The Mis-Education of the Negro" in 1933, he pointed out racialization as an ongoing issue for Blacks. Woodson found that the mis-education was compound by issues of discrimination, racism, and the deliberate lack of resources. Inequitable practices in the early education systems and attitudes of Black inferiority were prevalent in the early 20th century (Woodson, 2008). Due to the stereotypes of Black culture, males are commonly prejudged by

those who fail to recognize essential factors that contribute to their success. Harper (2003) asserted that Black males have been dubbed "troublesome" and are thus often regarded adversely. When compared to White students, Black students depicted as inferior, based on attrition rates, enrollment numbers, graduation percentages, grades earned, and standardized test scores (Fries-Britt, 1997; Roach, 2001). According to Fries-Britt (1998), "The disproportionate focus on Black underachievement in the literature not only distorts the image of the community of Black collegians, but it also creates, perhaps unintentionally, a lower set of expectations for Black student achievement" (p. 556). Therefore, educational advocates who value social equity should work to counteract misconceptions.

Despite typecasts and negative press, all Black males are not incarcerated, impoverished, unemployed, or teenage fathers (Robinson, Jr., 2014). Research shows that Black male college enrollment increased significantly in the 1980s and 1990s. However, these enrollment percentages still struggle to align with those of other races (Cross & Slater, 2000). Today, various efforts have countered the lopsided perspective on Blacks and addressed the need for positive cultural shifts (Sawyer & Palmer, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012; Wood & Williams, 2013).

Examinations on the retention of Black college men disproportionately centers on maladjustment to society, institutional access, racism, stereotypes, and attrition rates (Bonner, 2000; Fries-Britt, 1997). These views provide an unbalanced perspective on the overall experiences of Black male college students (Harper, 2003). Although there are positive factors that have motivated Black men to persist to graduation (Brown, 2009; Dixon, 1999; Ellington, 2006; Harper 2003), the higher education literature has overwhelmingly reported negative items often associated with underachievement. As a result, negative reiterations work to produce stereotypes (Fries-Britt, 1998), as overtures like "drop-outs," "unprepared," and "endangered species" have formed the group-defining nomenclature. As such, this study explored the strengths of reasonably persistent students and underlined their resilience; countering stereotypes of previous research.

This revision intended to discover from college juniors and seniors their perceptions of the factors that influenced their persistence with emphasis on their familial background and mentorship structure. Previous studies have placed attention on the decline of Black undergraduate men. On the other hand, not enough attention is on the attributes that help them persist. In his examination, Bonner (2000) found a limited emphasis on African American men who maintained positive roles in academia, such as mentors, role models, student leaders, and academic peers. Cuyjet (1997) assumed that African American college men were more likely to persist if they had reinforcements that counteracted the harmful myths of the past. In his writing, he theorized the use of family support systems and supplemental institutional programs as avenues to retain aspiring African American college men.

The voices of black men were the focus of this study as they discussed their resiliency from the perspective of family life and its impact on college achievement. By speaking to the resiliency and the strides of blacks we can see "the strengths of Black youths lie in their abilities to resist the barriers that they encounter in the various environments in which they exist" (Nicolas et al., p. 261). Ultimately, the insight gained may provide firsthand information to administrators, parents, students, and scholars about which factors serve as predictors for African American college men.

Significance

The knowledge gained from six college men provided a more comprehensive approach to resurfacing family values, effective parenting, social supports, and provided useful strategies to encourage college matriculation. These strategies determined from the stories and experiences of each participant. This work reexamined the existing research and provided contemporary guidance on the necessary tools required to overcome obstacles and advance in college.

Literature Review

The retention rates of Black men at postsecondary institutions differ from those of other races, as their baccalaureate completion rates and levels of college involvement decline over the last several years (Goings, 2015). Black male college students constitute approximately 5% of the overall student population of U.S. colleges and universities (Seidman, 2019). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2012a), Black men earned approximately 43% of baccalaureate degrees awarded to all Blacks in 1977, but only 34% in 2011.

The retention of African American college men is essential to their collegiate success. In recent years, more African American men have pursued a college education in hopes of gaining a baccalaureate degree (Naylor, Wyatt-Nichol & Brown, 2015). However, the problem is their completion rate. While more African American males are attending colleges today, they do not perform at the same level as Black women. Black women received 66% of degrees earned among all Black students across all academic levels (Snyder & Dillow, 2009) and they continue to soar above Black men at the doctoral level (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

While a proliferation of literature captures ongoing challenges, the reality is that not all Black male college students drop-out. Family support, mentorship, and engagement are crucial to educational success (Albright, Hurd & Hussain, 2017).

Family Support

Studies have investigated the impact of parental influences on student persistence. Theorists agree that family intervention and support are fundamental components of student development (Hrabowski, Maton & Greif, 2002; Williams, 2003). Parental support and involvement provide a significant boost to the morale and persistence of a student (Ricard & Pelletier, 2016). Furthermore, Wibrowski, Matthews & Kitsantis (2017) suggested that household conditions predict student retention. Previous research asserts that children are more likely to pursue ambitious educational goals when their families are positively engaged in their lives (Khattab, 2002). For example, Henderson and Mapp (2002) found that households who stay involved in student achievement through home strategies (partnerships with school, verifying homework completion, in-home testing, dialoguing about school issues, discussing world news) were likely to perpetuate academic success.

For Black college students, Moody (2000) found that parental support is crucial for academic advancement. Participants in Moody's study revealed that the caring and nurturing characteristics of their parents were essential to their school matriculation. Hrabowski et al. (1998; 2002) further explored familial influences on both Black females and males. Participants in their project identified six aspiring principles that heightened academic fortitude: child-fostered love, limit setting and discipline, ethnic and gender identity, high standards, open communication, and open access to public resources.

Abel (2008) later found that parents who partner with their child's learning environment tend to reinforce learning patterns and establish academic norms. Additionally, she learned that school-based interaction, whether reporting good or bad behaviors, enhanced the students'

learning culture. While Abel's study explored the experiences of young African American boys, it also provided insight into the culture of Black youth as they develop into men.

Mentorship

Many academics stress the importance of a role model to support students through the educational pipeline. According to Chun and Evans (2018), there is a need to groom more Black male educators to diversify existing educational systems. They postulated that the lack of Black leaders in schools had supported the "glass ceiling" approach for males. Black youths do aspire to succeed, but more a dominant presence of males in their lives could further enhance their academic strides. The support of an academic mentor for Black male college students can increase college persistence (Brooms & Davis, 2017).

Mentorship for Black male college students is crucial as the deficiency of positive male connection causes some adult men to develop fears of social fanaticism and the inability to blend in among peers, causing difficulty to pursue and obtain college degrees, and subsequently obtain and sustain employment. Gadsden and Smith (1994) reported that unemployment rates for African American men are excessive for those who do not hold a college degree. By not completing a college degree, data suggested the consumption of Black men by the need to survive, with some resorting to drug distribution and other illegal methods to make ends meet (Ascher, 1991). As Pattillo (2017) notes, Black on Black crime is a significant problem in most urban communities because of this need to survive by any means necessary.

One such initiative that fosters academic persistence based on role modeling and cultural enhancement for Black males is the Morgan M.I.L.E. Program (Male Institute for Leadership and Excellence) at Morgan State University (Hale, 2006). The objectives of the Morgan M.I.L.E. program are that males at Morgan University will bond, share lived-experiences, engage in social networking activities beyond the classroom, and become role models in efforts to decrease male attrition and improve completion rates. To date, the initiative continues to grow and perpetuate a learning culture that does not accept the status quo.

Conceptual Framework

The researchers examined participants' narratives through multiple theories. No single theory captured the life cycle of the participants; therefore, elements borrowed from the familial and social bodies of literature considered persistence measurements. This study applied three driving theories (Social Capital Theory, Exchange Theory, and Hyper-Masculinity) to the investigation.

The first, Social capital theory, emphasizes the importance of collaborative social settings and positive reinforcements to support one's desired goal. Since its conceptualization by Hanifan (1916), social capital has involved the exploration of family income and parent education as predictors of children's educational potentials (Sandefur, Meier & Hernandez, 1999). Coleman (1988) re-conceptualized social capital when he found that family connectedness influenced a child's wellbeing. He argued that the quality of social capital was critical to a family unit's sustainability. Additionally, Sanderfur et al. researched the effects of social capital on the sustainability of traditional two-parent families and single-parent homes. They determined that the quality of social capital had a more significant effect than structural arrangement on family sustainability (1999).

The second theory, Exchange theory, asserts that family arrangements determine individual persistence or failure in secondary education (Homans, 1958). In agreement with Homans, Blau (1964) suggested that healthy nuclear family structures exist when family units provide regular positive reinforcements. For example, when a spouse recognizes the

accomplishments of his or her partner, value is added to that relationship. Blau (1964) linked family arrangements to internal stability, cohesiveness, and communication within nuclear families. Also, he suggested that nuclear families divide when negative reinforcements (abuse, infidelity, financial hardship) are present.

The third theory also used to review the behaviors of men was Hyper-Masculinity. This concept traces male identity patterns from adolescence to manhood (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984). Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, and Maton (1999) suggested that hyper-masculinity occurs when boys gain their interpersonal strength through phases of competitiveness, tenacity, and the willingness to succeed. This psychological term is associated with aggravated bouts of male aggression; often attributed to minorities and oppressed individuals (Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005). According to Zaitchik and Mosher (1993), this aggressive form of behavior links to persistence within higher education institutes. Finally, several secondary social and cultural factors helped conceptualize college student persistence: peer support (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), role models (Martin & William-Dixon, 1991), and parental involvement (Hrabowski et al., 1998, 2002; Williams, 2003).

This study sought to explore family social elements and their impact on Black male college students. Duneier (1992) argued that present studies illuminate “most of what we know about what it means to be a Black man in America, but they tell far too little about the Black man’s inner strength, his resolve, his pride, and his sincerity” (p. 26). As Harper (2006) suggested, there is a need to document the contemporary issues relevant to Black college men. Much literature on Black males has focused on motivational factors that contribute to baccalaureate completion (Fleming, 1984; Schwartz & Washington, 2002). However, there is limited research that explores the persistence factors of African American men with varied family arrangements.

According to Bryant and Coleman (1988), Black family relationships tarnishes throughout the education literature with narrowed concepts. They explained:

Instructors of introductory courses in marriage and family at the college level need to be aware of the treatment of Black family live in textbooks they select for their classes.

Often, students come to classes with stereotypes and prejudices about blacks and other racial/ethnic minorities. These stereotypes may or may not be harmful.

On the other hand, students may assume that everyone's family is like their own.

Students must realize that many kinds of families and relationships are valid though they may differ from their own. It is also important to eliminate negative stereotypes students may have of black people and their family life (p. 255).

Researchers who claim to add nonbiased contributions to the literature rarely seek insight into traditional and nontraditional African American male students (Allen, 1995). Several theorists (Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996; Harper & McClure, 2002; Mow & Nettles, 1990; Sedlacek, Helm & Prieto, 1998; Fries-Britt, 1997; Nettles, 1987) have focused on the experiences of traditional high achieving students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). However, there is much to be learned about the typical student not classified as high achieving or underprepared. Harper (2003) argued that a way to better understand the role and history of minority men is to investigate their family values, culture, and ideas.

The basis for this research links to positive family reinforcement and the quality of those family relationships. Reports suggest that Black children reared in nontraditional families experience diminished lives due to the lack of social capital the father can provide (Beale, 2010).

The benefits of traditional families and drawbacks of father-absent homes were examined. Additionally, the researchers examined how and why positive reinforcements, support, and connectedness might influence persistence throughout college.

The significance of the family as a socializing factor in advancing college participation as documented by (Warde, 2007), however that factor for Black males, especially in families with maternal heads of households, have not been thoroughly vetted. Theorists have asserted, "investigations of family process factors across different types of family structure are relatively rare" (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001, p. 842). Despite this notion, this qualitative study sought to understand how various personal and societal influences may impact the pursuit of higher education among African American men.

In contrast to studies on motivational successes, this project investigated the experiences of men in a narrative format. These elements consisted of both academic and non-academic factors relevant to policy, faculty mentorship, supplemental instructional programs, student engagement, peer groups, and family systems.

Social Capital Theory, Exchange Theory, and Hyper-Masculinity were used to structure all inquiries and accounted for the influences that ultimately encouraged Black male college students to pursue higher education. Theorists identify research questions aligned with the familial, cultural, and environmental aspects:

RQ1: How do Black males account for the factors that motivate them to persist in college?

RQ2: How do Black males describe the family and social influences that affected their motivation to succeed in college?

Method

The story presented here is rooted in the phenomenological methodology. Phenomenology, credited as "the study of how people describe things and experience them through their senses" (Patton, 2002, p. 105). It is a developmental approach that captures one's background, development, and personal accounts to inform a broader culture. In this discovery, phenomenology was instrumental in noting the sensitive and reflective accounts of participants. Whereas a biography focuses on an individual's lived events and occurrences, phenomenology digs deeper to gain up-close interaction to learn history through direct interaction. In this examination, the mentors worked with former students to get inside the phenomenon and uncover the measurable approaches which are beneficial to Black student persistence, particularly from a male perspective.

The researchers interviewed six males classified as either a junior or senior. The participants were undergraduates who professed a passion for enriching the academic lives of potential students. The participants were not limited to pre-existing groupings as typically seen in other studies by campus involvement, leadership roles, or academic levels. Although the participant pool was small, it is consistent with small sample sizes presented in other qualitative research (Spradley, 1996). According to Marshall and Rossman (1989):

To justify a sample, one must know the universe and all its relevant variables, an impossible task. Generally, the best compromise is to include a sample with the widest possible range of variation in the phenomenon, settings, or people under study (p. 55).

The current study used a convenience sample. The researchers sought the expertise of colleagues within the University to identify prospective candidates.

Upon receiving the University Institutional Review Board's approval, prospective students were invited to participate. After extending the initial invitations, nominees were phoned or visited to discuss the processes of the research project. The timetable of nominee notifications and research parameters assured structure and validity. After institutional IRB approval, participants were nominated, briefed, completed appropriate consent forms, and interviewed on multiple occasions.

Participants

All participants attended the same northeastern Historically Black College and University (HBCU). During the data collection period, each student earned between 60 and 110 college credits. As such, all participants had completed two full years or a minimum of four semesters of college. The sample included three juniors and three seniors, some of whom were older than traditionally aged juniors and seniors. The ages ranged from 18-22 years, with two self-reporting as having daughters as dependents and the remainder as having no dependents. Most participants grew up in nontraditional family settings. One was adopted by an older male and female whom he referred to as 'Grandma' and 'Granddad.' Two reported having been raised by their biological mother and stepfather; a biological grandmother and grandfather raised another; one grew up with his biological mother and knew of his biological father (although the father did not join the family until after being released from incarceration after the participant's 10th birthday); and one was raised exclusively by both biological parents until that relationship ended one month prior to the completion of the study. The grade point averages (GPA) of these students ranged from 1.7 to 3.0, collectively giving this group an average GPA of 2.5. The researchers used pseudo names to maintain the anonymity of all participants. The upcoming Findings section features recommendations from participants based on their realities. As the men shared their stories, several reiterations emerged to shape thematic categories.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Data

Pseudonym	Classification	Age	Major	GPA
Trevor	Senior	22	Accounting	2.8
Donte	Junior	20	Business	3.2
David	Senior	22	Business	2.3
Roy	Senior	22	Marketing	2.4
Steve	Junior	21	Info. Sys.	2.4
Isa	Junior	21	Finance	1.7

Phenomenology as an approach is well suited for documenting the past behaviors and histories of African American men because it intends to liberate the storyteller. Nash (2004) postulated the importance of those who "have been traditionally underrepresented, marginalized, and disenfranchised in higher education...to free themselves by sharing their stories. Furthermore, the telling of these accounts has the potential to spiritually reduce guilt, hurt, and perhaps ownership of past experiences uncontrolled by the storyteller. Importantly, the sharing of these circumstances may provide insight to others as they seek to comprehend the struggles of Black men and moreover how to engage and provide relevant support systems on campus. We intend that the narration and discussion here provoke new ideas and campus-wide approaches to retention and orientation strategies to challenge this subgroup and further develop existing research.

Data Analysis

“Analyzing data is a dynamic process of continually refining the discovery of relationships among the data as they are collected and compared across the emergent categories” (Langram, 1997, p. 193). The scholars studied the underlying components that contributed to college persistence and resilience. To gain insight, the researchers became immersed in this group through observations, interviews, and conversations. Subsequently, all dialogues were transcribed and each participant portrayed in the text.

Qualitative data are often analyzed using smaller populations of participants. The academics assumed Stelmer's rule of coding to find recurring themes and patterns systematically. Stelmer (2001) found that reducing categories into meaningful themes in an organized format was helpful to segment text content. With this approach, the text was narrowed and transcribed to ascertain the frequency of themes. Per Palmquist (1997), this study identified relational analysis to determine overarching categories; subsequently, smaller reoccurring texts helped formulate topical headings. These headings documented the experiences and most common expressions voiced by the males. The outcome of this protocol resulted in 11 themes. To assure validity, the researchers manually segmented, bracketed, and coded the data with the guidance of senior academics.

Interpreting, as indicated by Creswell (1998), involved the orderly processing of participants' discussions in their own phrasing to ensure accurate reflection. By listening to the interview audio continuously and hearing the conversations led by the participants, the researchers grasped a more realistic view of how each man developed academically and socially.

The participants' profiles were detailed replicas of the environmental setting, observations, gestures, body language, and emotions expressed by each participant during his interview. Summaries provided a snapshot of each man's family arrangement, his obstacles, his strength, and his pursuit of higher education. These textural portrayals established the framework of the study and helped to outline the intensity of the phenomenon regarding Black college men. Furthermore, conceptually, the descriptions helped to group each individual, explore his uniqueness, and understand his perspectives.

The participants met with the researchers during initial interviews, second interviews, and, in some cases, third and fourth interviews. The research questions provided a framework to analyze the data using three lenses: Social Capital Theory, Hyper-Masculinity Theory, and Exchange Theory. Eleven themes emerged from the analyses of interviews. The themes are: (a) Enduring Hurt and Sadness; (b) Generational Curses No More; (c) I Didn't Wanna Live Like That (d); It Takes a Village; (e) Where Is Daddy; (f) They Were Harder on Me; (g) Motivation: I found My Way; (h) I Learned from The Best; (i) Black In America The Reality of it All; (j) Me, Myself, and I; and (k) Hear Me Now. The concluding analysis aligned with Tisdale's (1999) viewpoint on forced themes.

Tisdale (1999) suggested that forced themes are essential to the analysis of data from the collection processes. All themes evolved from the commonalities expressed by the participants. Much of the communications in the findings are presented verbatim as spoken by the participants. The researchers captured the dialogue at different intervals during the data collection process. In order to grasp the rich experiences of each student, the participants themselves led the researcher in conversation, and all inquiries centered on the participants' responses.

Discussions gained from the findings began as 11 themes and emerged into three categories. The participants expressed their experiences in over 20 hours of combined dialogue with the researchers. The descriptive narratives offered insight into the biological and adoptive family arrangements that merged to develop each man over time.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) explained that "during open coding, data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences" (p. 102). This method allowed the researcher to review the various data excerpts verbatim carefully. Although the open coding approach was time-consuming, it helped to frame the themes and categories more efficiently.

Enduring Hurt and Sadness

Family cohesiveness was a much-desired attribute. Although some participants' family arrangements were unconventional, they wanted to emphasize the importance of family partnerships. As Steve and Donte explained, guardians must speak well of each other or at minimum, think enough of their children to support each other in the presence of their children. Also noted by Steve, "At no point, should any parent or family member excludes the child from spending time with another parent." The worst mistakes any guardian can make are instilling feelings of strife, separation, and division within the home.

It Takes a Village

The 'village' rearing approach is beneficial to the success of emerging men. The participants explained that they benefited from having multiple people committed to their development. According to the participants, varied elements within society can empower the advancement of Black men in college. Trevor mentioned that "mainstream society could learn from the Black race and come to know what the culture endures and feels from day to day."

According to David, "It is not only what you do inside the classroom that shapes the man, but also outside influences." The men at this HBCU seemed to contradict the notion that campus involvement beyond the classroom heightened their academic persistence. Instead, the men believed that God, families, role models, mentors, educators, and their intrinsic willingness to succeed motivated them most to persist. One of the six men (Trevor) reported involvement in campus organizations beyond the classroom. All six participants voiced that their priority to work part-time jobs superseded their campus involvement. Although each desired to be involved in campus organizations and participate in student organizations and fraternities, their financial demands did not allow for that. Therefore, each refrained from voluntarily joining campus groups.

The participants in this study did not reveal the same reactions to campus involvement as the men in Harper's (2003) study. The researchers expected that, like the participants in other studies, referenced their GPA as a barrier to fraternity involvement; however, they mentioned no such barriers. Overall, the men did find campus involvement meaningful, although none took a firm position to join student groups. Considering these factors, the researchers found that while campus involvement may increase student collaboration, social integration, and satisfaction, a lack of campus involvement was not a predictor of attrition. Isa commented, "Everyone's involvement on campus is different . . . Finances are different, and lifestyles are different. People cannot continue to lump Blacks in the same pool as everyone else. It is not a true reflection of who we are."

Collectively, the students felt it was best for him to individually assess his goals and make the appropriate decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis. Trevor stated, "No student

should be expected or pressured to join anything unless he is ready . . . otherwise, he is setting himself up for hardship."

Although contributors expressed the unlikelihood of campus involvement, they felt valued when advisors set expectations, pushed them to participate in regular dialogues throughout the semester, and kept records of their well-being. In sum, students appreciated the feeling of being home away from home and connected to the campus community. Trevor indicated a sense of pride when his advisor visited his residence hall, phoned him periodically, and connected him with resources on campus without him always having to have face-to-face interactions. He mentioned, "My advisor felt more like an uncle and less of an employer. He made me feel comfortable and remembered my goals and our conversations".

Generational Curses No More

Generational patterns are often referred to by some in the Black community as "generational curses." A 'generational curse' is best described as a pattern or lineage of setbacks that have plagued the success of existing family members. Sometimes considered setbacks, generational curses can be as common as daily habits that are perceived by the individual or by an outsider as unfavorable. In this study, all the men articulated generational patterns that have haunted them from birth. It was found that generational patterns can be passed on by biological family members or those that the men identified as family.

According to the participants, family arrangements are less important than family relationships. Everyone overwhelmingly agreed that successful household settings are contingent on strong relations within the home, regardless of biological lineages. Each man articulated various struggles but found inspiration through faith, themselves, or someone who instilled hope. Steve mentioned that "trust is a large component to relationships." Likewise, Donte suggested, "Family bonds are relationships that should not be broken." Overall, the notion of preserving relationships was a sign of true love and commitment. Each student felt blessed to have strong supporters and believed that negative influences within the home slowed down his progress. Trevor exclaimed, "Thank God for my Grandma and Granddad - they are not my biological family, but without them, I would not be where I am today."

Black in America: The Reality of It All

The participants agreed that societal stereotypes and misgivings are hurtful and negatively impact students. The men overwhelmingly emphasized the need to end racialization. Trevor explained, "If society would eliminate stereotypes, ridicule, and misperceptions, the world could be a better place." Each man emphasized various degrees of frustration regarding mainstream society's view of them as Black college men. Some articulated that they felt their White counterparts expected them to fail, questioned their ambition to pursue big dreams, or limited their worth due to historical views of Black men. At times, the researchers observed real emotions of stress from some men, and others wiped tears from their faces during the conversations. Each took a stance to not succumb to misperceptions and to do his part to educate others. The men did not display negative sentiments toward other peer ethnic groups; instead, they vowed to help change peer perceptions of Black men. The next section will expound on implications within the research.

Discussion

Black men are diverse and exude tremendous differences as an evolving subgroup (Harper & Nichols, 2008). As such, six males in this analysis provided relevant and comprehensive notions on approaches they have combined to create impactful support systems.

The students highlighted family values, effective parenting, social supports, and active engagement as predictors for success. Admittance to a college is a significant accomplishment for one who never imagined he would experience such a milestone. Participant testimonies revealed motivators and factors (internal and external) that Black men found most useful to pursue a college degree successfully. These factors were driven by three primary theories: Social Capital Theory, Exchange Theory, and Hyper-Masculinity Theory. Each framework provided a unique lens to investigate this phenomenon.

The combined narratives revealed that persistence of Black college men was inspired by supportive family, positive social interactions, mentors, stable finances, and spiritual connectedness, to name a few. Also, intrinsic factors were found to motivate Black college men: Godliness, self-hope, self-discipline, optimism, and resiliency. The findings add to the literature by revealing ongoing factors that facilitate and impede Black men in persisting in higher education. The constructs presented add clarity to the analyses, evaluations, and advancement of Black male retention.

The researchers aimed to contribute to the body of literature regarding Black college men and their persistence factors. College professors, education administrators, policymakers, students, parents, and program organizers can utilize these findings to advance their decision-making processes for African American college men.

Educators can use these findings to strengthen family partnerships. The participants indicated the positive impact of supportive guardians within their households. While most participants faced barriers in their upbringings, each believed that parental support either encouraged or discouraged him from persisting academically. According to Figgers (1997), parent involvement positively influences academic attainment. In response to the findings of this study and Figgers' findings, campus leaders and program facilitators can institute orientation programs and readiness workshops for incoming students and parents. These orientation programs can unify families and create excitement among all parties as opposed to a student-only objective.

Besides, to achieve a more extensive family-centered approach, an institution may implement family weekend activities, offer incentives for family attendance at functions, and encourage students to include their guardians during academic decisions. Furthermore, increased strategies at the institutional level utilizing creative promotions (TV, radio, and social networking sites), parent-integrated symposiums, classroom experiences for parents can further advance family involvement. It was also noted that an institutional webpage explicitly devoted to parent education is a useful tool for building parent competence.

College practitioners can assist not only high-achieving but typical Black college males in identifying useful activities that will enrich their collegiate experiences. These activities should intentionally focus on outcomes that will advance workforce skills that employers will expect of interns and graduates. The participants articulated that academic advisors should serve more as coaches by way of intrusive practices. These practices would involve meeting students where they are socially and academically and tapping into self-identified milestones that might enhance their skill-sets.

Universities might also consider designing retention centered initiatives devoted to encouraging involvement and matriculation for nontraditional students. As an example, advisement and counseling offered beyond traditional hours would benefit working students, veterans, and parents.

Also, a specialized male mentorship program that matches business and alumni mentors with incoming students is one approach to increasing discipline competence and career readiness exposures. Male leadership programs can include academic, cultural, and extracurricular components. It is necessary to integrate civic engagement and service-learning partnerships inclusive of alumni mentors, academic coaches, and recognition gatherings to reenergize the culture. It was found that these elements created accountability measures that students appreciated. Aside from student programs, David referenced the need to diversify staff. He noted, "College campuses need more males who look like us and who have similar backgrounds; where are the Black mentors?" Also, Roy remarked the benefit of a collective reading assigned to all males to address college readiness and career placement coupled with workshops and online materials devoted to community development to be helpful.

Finally, this investigation found that many students, specifically Black males, confront not only social barriers but also financial constraints. Perhaps college educators can bridge the gap with K-12 schools and offer financial literacy sessions to set the stage for fiscal responsibility. Students exposed to career preparation resources at an earlier age stand a better chance at entering college without feeling overwhelmed. According to the participants, learning communities, and early interactions (grouped onboarding and orientation activities) with essential personnel presence such as admissions, career services, student leaders, and university administrators reduce anxiety. As such, if colleges are intentional in promotional strategies and communications, these early exposures will likely strengthen the knowledge base of potential students.

In sum, the perspectives of Black males provided insight into their family life and its impact on their college achievements. Overwhelmingly, participants echoed the positive impacts of non-cognitive variables on persistence and how those variables developed leadership skills and identity. By speaking to the resiliency and the strides of these students, we can see that "(t)he strengths of Black youths lie in their abilities to resist the barriers that they encounter in the various environments in which they exist" (Nicolas et al., 2008, p. 261). Black men are diverse and exude tremendous differences as an evolving subgroup (Harper & Nichols, 2008). As such, six males in this analysis provided relevant and comprehensive notions on what approaches they have combined into creating impactful support systems. The students highlighted family values, effective parenting, social supports, and active engagement as predictors for success. This work re-examined the existing research and provides additional strategies for those seeking to curtail the hindrances experienced by Black men on college campuses.

Limitations

We conducted this research at a public urban institution in the state of Maryland, limiting generalizations to colleges and student groups of similar standing. The researchers included African American men who considered themselves as typical college students based on their lived-experiences, grade point averages (past and current), and levels of student involvement. The students' stories resonated through face-to-face interviews, focus sessions, and telephone conversations. Additionally, the researchers assumed that all dialogue communicated was accurate and factually based on individual student accounts.

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