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# Against Criminalization and Pathology: The Making of a Black Achievement Praxis

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AGAINST CRIMINALIZATION AND PATHOLOGY: THE MAKING OF A BLACK  
ACHIEVEMENT PRAXIS

by

CHARLES M. GREEN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Criminal Justice in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2018

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Charles M. Green

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Criminal Justice in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## ABSTRACT

Against Criminalization and Pathology: The Making of a Black Achievement Praxis

by

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Advisor: David Brotherton Ph.D.

In social, educational, and criminal justice contexts the statistics and predications centered on Black men and boys can be best described as pathology-laden. To date, the analysis of Black men has been nested in a deficit modular paradigm that remains devoid of a counter-narrative that is representative of those that have defied the statistical probabilities of social and academic failure. Utilizing 29 in-depth, semi-structured interviews in this qualitative inquiry, I explored the life-course narratives of Black male scholars who, as victims of varying manifestations of structural violence, have “beaten the odds” academically. This study’s conceptual and theoretical grounding incorporated accommodation, resilience, and resistance. Its findings revealed that economic disadvantage, exposure to direct violence, family dysfunction, criminal justice disruption, and educational deficits served as the most salient inhibitors of academic success. Findings also suggest that Black men and boys benefit from positive, racially-informed socialization that assists in the development of an internalized identity that: (a) acts as a protective and resistant barrier against some of the impediments of institutional racism, (b) operates as a counter-criminogenic influence, and (c) facilitates educational resilience. The development and nurturing of an ethos of Black resistance, resilience, and achievement is at the

crux of this study's findings. Findings from this study will have implications about the development of protective mechanisms, support systems, and interventions that are relevant to facilitating the healthy development of systemically-besieged Black boys. Last, the researcher introduces Criminogenic Resistance Theory (C.RT) as an alternative conceptualization of the process by which Black boys resist the criminogenic influences of structuralized violence.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	4
Structuralized Violence .....	4
Black Poverty .....	6
Exposure to Violence .....	10
Black Academic Outcomes .....	12
Criminal Justice System .....	14
Black Male Criminal Identity .....	17
Structure vs. Culture .....	19
Conceptual Framework of Black Male Success .....	20
Achievement as Accommodation .....	20
Achievement and Resilience .....	22
Achievement as Resistance .....	24
Critical Race Theory .....	26
Theoretical Framework .....	27
Social Control–Accommodation .....	27
Resilience Theory .....	28
Resistance Theory .....	30
Social and Cultural Capital .....	31
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .....	34
Methodological Approach .....	34
Sampling .....	34

Data Collection.....	35
Data Analysis .....	37
Trustworthiness .....	39
Dependability .....	39
Credibility.....	39
Transferability .....	40
Confirmability .....	40
Limitations .....	41
Ethical Concerns .....	41
<b>CHAPTER 4: STE DILEMMA OF CONCENTRATED POVERTY, VIOLENCE, AND</b>	
<b>IDENTITY, ‘WHERE WE’RE FROM’ .....</b>	<b>42</b>
Introduction .....	42
Racism and Concentrated Poverty .....	45
Trapped in the Matrix: Normalized Deficiency .....	45
From Structural to Direct Violence .....	47
Clear and Present Danger .....	47
Adapting to Survive .....	49
The Impact of Street Pharmaceuticals and Moving Weight.....	50
Troubling ‘Family Matters’ .....	51
Cops and Criminal Justice .....	53
School Daze.....	54
Noticing Difference .....	57
“I felt less of myself.” .....	57



Summary .....	59
CHAPTER 5: BLACK IDENTITY FORMATION, RESISTANCE, AND RESILIENCE .....	60
Introduction .....	60
The Black Identity Development Process (Socialization).....	61
The Talk .....	62
Messaging.....	64
“Don’t be like them” “Bullet don’t have a name.” .....	65
Environment: “Life ain’t fair.” .....	66
Birth of an Achievement Ethos .....	69
All in the Family.....	69
Daddy Often is Not “Absent” .....	72
Reading was Foundational .....	73
Black Literature.....	76
External Influencers .....	78
Hip Hop and Media .....	81
Stereotype Resistance.....	82
Learning to Resist.....	83
Resistance as Achievement .....	84
Black Identity Management .....	86
Code Switching .....	87
Summary .....	88
CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH .....	90
Relevant Findings.....	91

Black Socialization and Resistance .....	91
Theoretical Implications.....	94
The Introduction of Criminogenic Resistance Theory .....	95
Central Themes and Assumptions.....	96
Policy Implications.....	101
Addressing Structural Violence.....	101
Disabling Academic and Emotional Harm.....	101
Criminal Justice Reform.....	102
Suggestions for Further Research.....	103
APPENDIX A: BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF PARTICIPANTS .....	105
APPENDIX B: ADVICE FOR BLACK BOYS FROM BLACK MEN .....	110
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE .....	118
APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM.....	123
APPENDIX E: MEMO TEMPLATES.....	125
REFERENCES .....	127

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Participant Biographical Table .....	44
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## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Black Achievement Praxis .....	93
Figure 2. Criminogenic resistance theory (C.RT).....	98
Figure 3. Deployment of criminogenic resistance theory measures. ....	99

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The issue concerning the purported statistical correlations between Black men and criminality has a long history that extends throughout the 1800s and continues today (Muhammad, 2010). Black men are constantly criminalized and scapegoated as violent and socially defective. The desire to understand the plight of Black people in America has long been a topic of inquiry, as presented in W. E. B. Du Bois's query, "How does it feel to be a problem?" (DuBois, 1903). This lingering question has come to encompass the many challenges faced by Black people in America today. In 2009, Mr. Barack Hussein Obama II became the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America. Many suggested that this historic event represented the beginning of the post-racial age for the United States. It seemed a time when the fulfillment of the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in which every person would be judged by the content of their character instead of the color of their skin, had finally arrived. President Obama and his wife, First Lady Michelle, both graduates of Harvard Law School, were considered by some people to be prime examples of what was possible for Black people—a fulfillment of the American Dream. However, the extraordinary successes to which he could lay claim did not transfer to Black men generally. According to Chetty and Hendren (2015). "in 99% of the neighborhoods in the United States, Black boys earn less in adulthood than White boys who grow up in families with comparable income." The difficulties of limited upward social and economic mobility for Black men are closely followed by concerns regarding inhibited academic success and carceral avoidance. Both concerns are validated by the 2.3 million Black men who are currently incarcerated, as well as the U.S national high school dropout rate of 41% during the 2012/2013 school year.

Unfortunately, the criminal justice and educational systems in the United States evince a symbiotic relationship. Positive academic outcomes are negatively correlated with criminal participation and incarceration. One out of every 10 high school dropout spent time in jail during the 2006–2007 school year, which is high compared to the 1 out of 33 high school graduates and 1 out of 500 people who held a bachelor’s degree who spent time in jail (Sum et al., 2009). The interconnected nature of these outcomes suggests that a contrapuntal examination of the factors that influence them both is warranted.

The current study is an attempt to address the shortcomings of both Black educational achievement and Black criminal participation research by examining possible explanations for the under-predicted “success despite poverty” phenomena. To date, resilience research has been focused on the ability of individuals to withstand and overcome undesirable circumstances, yet there has been little critical examination into the degree to which those circumstances are not self-inflicted. Research that introduces poverty as simply a problematic condition to overcome without presenting the difference between its operation as a state of being and its form of structural violence originates from an inadequate framework. In this work, I introduce structured violence as a pervasive and active component of the resilience discussion that is centered around Black men and boys in the United States. In 2015, 36 unarmed Black men were shot and killed by police officers. Seventeen more funerals for unarmed Black men were added to that total in 2017 (Sullivan, Anthony, Tate, Jenkins, 2018). Because Black men continue to be victims of extra-judicial execution, responsibility and care will be taken not to ignore the systemic and prevalent dangers from which they have attempted to escape.

In what follows, I first demonstrate the importance of this work by situating it against the backdrop of the pervasive statistical and social presentations of Black men and boys, as

described in both public and academic discourse. This summation encapsulates the Black male pathological narrative centered on poverty, education, violence, and involvement with the criminal justice system as unavoidable structuralized violence. Second, I introduce theoretical posits that range from structurally-determined to culturally-predicated outcomes that suggest models with which the phenomena can be explored and understood.

Third, I present my research questions, through which I attempt to assess (a) whether the respondents explain their trajectories as a form of “accommodation,” as in a belief in or conforming to American middle-class views and norms: (b) whether the subjects understand and discuss their experiences as resilience, as indicated by narratives that focus on adapting and overcoming various obstacles and risk factors: and (c) the extent to which resistance to socially-constructed pathologies (e.g., discrimination, racism, and classism) may have impacted or informed their behaviors and choices and, consequently, influenced their trajectories. Finally, I present my study design and methods.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Structuralized Violence

Galtung (1969) details a study for peace in which he presents his operationalization of the term “structural violence.” In this exploration of several kinds of violence, “structural violence” was posited as violence caused by a subracial system that is correlated with society and life expectancy. That is to say, when class or race can be used to differentiate the length of an individual’s life expectancy, this is an experience of violence without a direct actor to blame for it. Furthermore, Galtung discusses how direct violence has a clear subject-to-object relationship. This relationship does not exist in structural violence. Instead, it is built into social structures and institutions that are necessary and affect individual lives. Galtung also refers to structural violence as injustice and a form of inequity that can be measured by the distribution of power and its effects on individuals’ lives.

In 1971, Galtung et al. attempted to compare and quantify two types of violence: direct and structural. To do so, the authors decided to frame structural violence as a form which kills slowly. The avoidable deaths that occur because of a lack of medical and sanitary resources, in that these conditions were produced by an upper class causing the avoidable deaths of many, falls into this category. The authors attempted to develop an appropriate measure with which to compare direct and structural violence. In doing so, they evaluate the lives lost from both types of violence and the number of deaths from illnesses and accidents caused by the distribution of wealth and power. Comparatively, in the United States, White men during the period of 2003 to 2008 had a life expectancy that was six years longer than Black men (Harper et al., 2012). Overall, the authors concluded that structural violence is the difference between optimal life expectancy and actual life expectancy.



Geiger (1997) defined structural violence as “a violent action either by intention or omission resulting in the preventable harm of the physical and mental health of large populations.” The author presents institutional racism and racial discrimination as forms of structural violence in the United States that have been entrenched in the social and political-economic structure of the nation since its founding. Moreover, the racially disproportionate nature of labor markets, housing, education, and healthcare in the United States, is presented as a vibrant example of structural violence. The author also asserts that structural violence is embedded within the social fabric of the United States as institutional racism, resulting in a division of society between the White and African American populations of the United States.

The racial component of structural violence is overwhelming throughout the lived experiences of Black people in America. On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an 18-year-old African American male, was shot 12 times and killed by a White police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. The extra-judicial murder of this man created national protests and civil unrest in the United States. (Hamer & Lang, 2015), explored structural violence and its connections to recent issues facing the Black community in Ferguson. Providing several examples, including the absence or failure of infrastructure, the dangerous environmental conditions for human welfare, air pollution, and lack of quality healthcare, the authors defined structural violence as a condition that embodies political and economic organizations that cause injury to individuals and populations or put them in harm’s way. Within their examination of structural violence, the authors present how the history of St. Louis led to the tragedy in Ferguson. The authors detail the history of northward African American migration in the 1950s and describe how the discrimination they faced in the work environment led to their deficient social and economic standings. As an illustration, when companies left the St. Louis area, they offered relocation

benefits to their Caucasian workers but neglected to provide the same benefits to their workers of color. Leaving behind poor African American families, the government of St. Louis turned to over-policing to creating revenue and, in doing so, created a predictably violent social structure. With this in mind, any analysis of Black men in America must begin with a review of the conglomeration of social and economic conditions that exist and impact their everyday lives.

To understand the academic success of the interviewed respondents, an honest examination of the backdrop of their experiences as victims of structural inhibitors. The following section explores the multifaceted manifestation of structural violence in the lives of Black men in America. In the next section, I identify how socially-preventable conditions encompassed the respondents' daily lives. Structural violence is evidenced by the poverty, direct violence, educational inequality, and criminal justice disparities that are examined in the following sections of this study.

### **Black Poverty**

The impact that poverty has on every aspect of an individual's life cannot be overstated. The vast number of Black people that occupy the lower rungs of the economic stratum in America is the result of policies and ideological frameworks implemented by the United States government, the effects of which still plague these communities (Massey & Denton 1993; Alexander. 2010). The uninformed, overly-simplistic consensus that posit that 'ghettos' and impoverished neighborhoods exist as a result of persons with few resources congregating in neighborhoods that are conducive to such economic situations misrepresents the deliberate racially-purposeful policies to which many of these areas owe their origin. These diversionary presentations simultaneously ignore the systematic, dysfunctional social and economic realities that concentrated poverty inexplicably fosters and maintains (Wilson. 2010), and allow for the

manifestations of said reality to concur with racially-formulated pathologies. Farmer (2004) identifies poverty as a profound component of structural violence in cities across the world, including the United States, while discussing its connections to historical social roles and the negative effects of colonization. Oscar Lewis's (1966) presentation of the 'culture of poverty,' also concludes that the structures of poverty are the result of colonialism, and he examined how oppressed communities adapt to the structures that socially reproduce these conditions.

Conservatively-oriented researchers have historically suggested that maladjusted values have been internalized by the Black poor, which results in them responding in ways that create self-imposed barriers to successful upward mobility. In essence, 'Black culture' is presented as the primary impediment to Black advancement. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's (1965) controversial and often-cited work on the Black family and his "tangled web of pathology" assessment laid much of the responsibility for the plight of the poor Black family on cultural deficiencies and racial proclivities. However, as has been thoroughly examined by Richard Rothstein (2017), policies of de jure segregation have existed in almost every presidential administration dating back to the late 19th century. These constraints represent the creation and maintenance of impoverished racialized communities, and they are manifestations of structural violence (Galtung. 1969). Hochschild and Weaver (2007) examined the impact of governmental classification systems and how they create social, economic, and political inequality. Within this work, the author establishes the connections between public policy and inequality. Hochschild and Weaver state, "Being a member of a favored or disfavored race can shape one's life chances independent of one's economic standing," (ibid.). According to Cox (1948), the interconnectedness of the practice of racism and the economic interest of the dominant, capitalistic White culture are indistinguishable. In this seminal work, Cox explains the

differences between the Indian caste system and the racial stratification and inequality experienced by Blacks in America. He refuted any arguments that these differences could be explained by simple suggestions of biological or ethnocentric posits, as evidenced in his statement that “racial exploitation is merely one aspect of the problem of the proletarianization of labor, regardless of the color of the laborer. Hence, racial antagonism is essentially political-class conflict.” Delgado et al. (2001) agree that the creation of racialized differences is specifically concerned with meeting the needs, wants, and desires of the dominant society, and that these differences shift according to those concerns. These economic realities make up the environment in which subjects made their lives and determines the set of influences and life chances that they experience. Rothstein (2007) elaborates, “We have created a caste system in this country, with African Americans, kept exploited and geographically separate by racially explicit government policies.” These policies included President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Public Works Administration that designated 17 of the 47 public housing projects specifically for Blacks and assigned the remainder for Whites. This type of phenomenon was concisely described by Lipsitz (1998):

For years, the General Services Administration routinely channeled the government’s own rental and leasing business to realtors who engaged in racial discrimination. The Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration financed more than \$120 billion worth of new housing between 1934 and 1962, but less than two percent of this real estate was available to non-White families, and most of that small amount were located in small areas.

The creation of socially-isolated pockets of Black people also made the zoning laws that allowed for the placement of hazardous waste sites to be concentrated in segregated Black neighborhoods possible. Governmental policies worked in tandem with racist business practices, like widespread private industry’s practices of redlining (Zenou & Boccard. 2000), and

blockbusting that denied services like trash collection, causing the deprivation and disparities within the low-income Black communities that are experienced today.

More than 65% of the cohort of Black children born between 1985 and 2000 were raised in areas that were plagued by segregated poverty and high levels of unemployment (Solomon 2012). The number of Black children that live in extreme poverty, as defined by having a family income that is 50% below the poverty line, is 18%, which is high compared to the 5% of White children who lived in families with incomes that were 50% below the poverty line. In 2013, approximately 15.6 million 5 to 17-year-olds, and 4.8 million children under the age of 5, were living in poverty in the U.S. (ACS. 2011). While this suggests that child impoverishment is a problem that is widespread in America, the percentage of Black children that fall into that category increased by 6% from 2008 to 2013, rising from 33% to 39% (ACS. 2013).

The bleak outlook of these statistics continues when examining income, which speaks to families' abilities to work upward and out of these conditions. In 2009, the median income for Black men was \$23,738, which is low compared to their White counterparts who had a median income of \$36,785 (U.S Census Bureau. 2015). This statistic suggests that, while we live in a society that promotes America as a post-racial and equitable society, the income of Black men was approximately two-thirds of that of White men. While the discrepancies in income levels are important, if analyzed in a vacuum, the results would mask the discriminatory practices that keep Black men out of the job market. As Devah Pager (2007) identified in her research centered on employment discrimination, Black men who do not have criminal records received fewer callbacks for employment opportunities than White job seekers that self-identified as having been formally incarcerated, even when she controlled for qualifications and personal presentation.

In 2015, many Black people continued to live in neighborhoods that were segregated and isolated from social and economic resources. Poverty traps negatively impact the most susceptible subsets of the American population, Black boys and Black men. Contrary to our “Land of Opportunity” mantra, research demonstrates that upward mobility from poverty to the middle-class is not the norm in the U.S it is the exception. The durability of the characteristics of spatial inequality in poor areas has led researchers to posit that neighborhoods choose their inhabitants instead of the latter selecting the former (Sampson. 2012). These areas “choose” their occupants via widespread redlining practices (Zenou & Boccoard. 2000). Poverty is not just an economic condition; it is the milieu of entrapment. Poverty is a state that does not facilitate freedom or flight, and it limits the access of its residents to underfunded and inadequate schooling (Noguera. 2008; Lipman. 2003), poor social and economic outcomes (Wilson. 1987), and increased exposure to violence (Howell. 1997; Anderson. 2000).

### **Exposure to Violence**

Geographic location is one of the strongest predictors of victimization. Merely living in urban poverty places inhabitants at risk of being victims of violence (Anderson, 2000). Black males in urban areas are the most vulnerable to violent victimization (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006). From 2002 to 2011, the homicide rate for Blacks was 6.3 times higher than the rate for Whites (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013). According to the same data, the peak homicide victimization rate was nine times higher for Black males than for White males during that same period. Half of the premature deaths of Black boys and men in 2010 in the United States were attributed to homicide (CDC, 2014). Moreover, the leading cause of death of Black males between the ages of 15 and 34 in 2010 was homicide, while the leading cause of death of their White counterparts in 2010 was unintentional injury.

Simply identifying the number of deaths within a population does not effectively present a holistic picture of what factors impact on a community. High homicide death rates can also be quantified by measuring the loss of potential years of life (Oliver, 2000). The impact for a social being involves considering the lost potential wages, social capital, and other measures that are positively associated with life but that are no longer achievable. In 1998, Black males lost 2,448.4 years of potential life as a result of premature death via homicide for every 100,000 Black males under the age of 75 (CDC, 1998). The participation of Black males in criminal activities have been explored by various social scientists to explain what has been posited as a predisposition toward violence and deviance (Oliver, 2003). However, the oversimplification of Black males as either the victims or perpetrators of violence inhibits a greater and more nuanced examination of the interplay of people, place, and predicament in other words, of applying Institutional Strain Theory.

Savolainen (2000) found that economic inequality has a positive effect on a country's reported levels of lethal violence. Stated differently, the denial of equitable access to necessities by a social institution or structure can increase the number of lethally-violent interactions within a population. Therefore, interpersonal violence is posited as a direct reaction to this constant and pervasive assault on the poor and disenfranchised. The exploration of structural violence can offer profound insight into its victim's internal turmoil that has external ramifications (Briceno-Leon & Zubollage, 2002). Ferguson et al. (2007) demonstrated that there is a negative correlation between academic achievement, chronic stress, and living in poverty. The intersection of violence and improvised environments are prohibitive to academic success. If a child lives in poverty in their early years, the economic deficiency has a negative academic impact beginning in kindergarten that extends throughout their high school years (Mulligan et

al., 2012). Taylor (2005) identified that students who enter school from low-income families are at the highest risk of dropping out. The intersection of poverty and violence has a considerable impact on the educational environment and outcomes within the schools in disadvantaged areas (Noguera, 1996).

### **Black Academic Outcomes**

There is no shortage of data that presents the deficits that Black boys need to overcome to compete positively in their academic pursuits. The experiences of Black boys in the American educational system suggest that they are often found in a state of crisis. The school represents one institution in which Black boys find themselves operating from a place of persistent deficit. The average Black student attends a school that rates at the 37th percentile for test score results, whereas the average White student attends a school in the 60th percentile (Rothwell, 2012). For Black boys, the classroom also moonlights as an environment in which they experience varying degrees of hostility (Howard, 2014). African Americans are more likely to attend high-poverty schools than White people. Not surprisingly, the reading and math scores of Black boys are also generally lower than those of their non-Black cohorts (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Teachers have been known to treat Black boys less favorably than and assert that they are intellectually inferior to, their white counterparts (Ross & Jackson, 1991).

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 12th grade Black males trailed their White male cohort members' reading scores by 10% (Kena et al. 2015). Ultimately, they also trailed White, Asian, and Hispanic males as well as Black women. This unfortunate last-place distinction was also represented in their math scores within the same report. Black males outperform their White counterparts when you factor in high school graduation rates in very few states in the United States (Monroe, 2010). The gap between the



graduation rate of Black and White males in the United States ranges between 3% in Hawaii to 43% in states like New York and Nebraska (Monroe, 2010). We may attribute some of these gaps in achievement to the number of days of instruction missed due to disciplinary actions levied by school administrators.

The total number of days that Black children receive instruction is considerably impacted by how their disciplinary issues are managed by school administrations. Black boys miss more days of instruction because they are more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White peers for similar infractions (Aud et al., 2011). Black students are expelled at a rate that is three times higher than of White students (OCR, 2014). On average, 16.4% of Black students and only 4.6% of White students were suspended (ibid). After analyzing nearly 1 million student records, Fabelo et al. (2011) discovered that African American students had a 31% higher likelihood of experiencing school disciplinary action, compared to non-Black students, and that among all the suspended students, 31% were held back to repeat the grade. These responses reflect traditional practices focused on punishment, exclusion, and external disciplinary methods (Osher et al., 2010).

Students who are suspended for an act or action are three times more likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice system in the following year (Fabelo, et al., 2011). Many adolescent Black boys have their first contact with law enforcement in the school setting. This initial criminal justice contact can begin a socialization of familiarity with the criminal justice system that represents the beginning of a life-course intersection that continues unabated in adulthood. A Black male high school dropout that was born in the 1960s had a likelihood of almost 60% of being incarcerated in the 1990s (Western, 2006). The connection between the criminal justice system and the disciplinary actions of school administrators gave rise to the

term “school-to-prison pipeline” (Losen, 2014). The apparent connection between these two institutions makes successful academic matriculation an increasingly difficult endeavor, to say the least.

### **Criminal Justice System**

In criminal justice research, a wellspring of data exist that suggests Black men who live in impoverished areas are overrepresented due to their participation in illegal activities. While it remains politically inappropriate to publicly state that Black men represent a threat to the public, these statistical representations have been used to justify actions ranging from unconstitutional policing techniques that involve racial profiling in the form of “Stop and Frisk” to the shooting and killing of unarmed Black men by police and others in the community acting out of race-based fears. Within the American public sphere, Black skin has been weaponized in a manner that renders it a standing affront to, or preemptive attack on, anyone who deems it a threat. The owner of this criminalized melanin-enriched trait can be subjugated to unjustifiable questions, harms, and even death. The hyper-policing of under-resourced Black communities guarantees that the criminal justice system leaves its fingerprints and footprints throughout the lives and life-course trajectories of its inhabitants. It is behind the backdrop of this perpetual threat that Black men attempt to carve out healthy lives.

By the time Black males reach the age of 18, 30% of them have been arrested, and the number increases to 50% by the age of 23 (Brame et al., 2014). The United States of America incarcerates its population at a rate higher than that of any other industrialized nation in the world (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002). Currently, 2.2 million people are living in U.S. prisons and jails (Alexander. 2010). These numbers represent a 500% increase in the past 30 years. The United States incarcerates its population at a rate of 716 per 100,000 persons. Countries that are

described as politically oppressive, like Cuba, do so at a rate of 510 per 100,000 people, and the Russian Federation does so at a rate of 475 per 100,000 people. In the United Kingdom, a more comparable free democracy, the rate is 146 per 100,000 (Western 2006). The growth of the American incarcerated population can largely be attributed to the locking up of Black men, primarily from impoverished communities (Clear. 2007). In places like Cleveland and Baltimore, some of the neighborhoods have up to 18% of their Black male populations missing because of incarceration (Lynch & Sabol 2003). The participation of the carceral extension of the government in the lives of the poor changed in the 1990s. Bruce Western (2006) concluded “More punitive than limited, the government had reached deeply into poor urban communities by sending record numbers of young men to prison and jail at a time when crime rates were at their lowest levels in thirty years.”

This prison population boom has had a specific impact on Black men who were at the receiving end of the increase in police involvement in their communities. Black males make up a disproportionate number of the incarcerated population in the United States (Clear 2007). In 2010, Black males were six times more likely to be incarcerated in federal, state, and local jails than White men (Pew 2013). While Black citizens made up only 12% of the American population in 2011, they were overrepresented as individuals under the direct physical supervision of the carceral system at a rate as high as 38% (Pettit 2012). The prevalence of the criminal justice system has made it unlikely that under-resourced Black families, at any given time, do not have a son, father, or uncle that has not done prison time (Clear, Rose, & Ryder 2001). The systemic criminalization of Black males has led researchers to suggest that spending time in jail or prison has become a regular life-course event in the lives of poor Black men (Irwin & Austin 2012). The impact of this practice cannot be understated. Time in prison or jail can

cause a significant redirection of an individual's life trajectory (Pettit & Western, 2004). The crime control system in the United States produces vast racial disparities at every level, from arrests and prosecutions to sentencing and rates of incarceration, and even execution (Clear, 2007).

From 1997 to 2006, the New York City Police Department focused its efforts on marijuana arrests, primarily in poor Black neighborhoods. This resulted in the incarceration of more than 353,000 people for possessing small amounts of marijuana (Levine & Small, 2008). This is 11 times more arrests than in the previous decade, and 10 times more than in the decade before that. The authors concluded that these arrests were not due to an increase in the use of marijuana during that period (ibid). This unwarranted increase in the searching of Black neighborhoods and an increased focus on marijuana, which is the drug of choice within those neighborhoods, has caused the prisons to be filled with low-level Black offenders. The result of this mass-incarceration of Black people has had the effect of class creation. The mark of a criminal conviction has the effect of relegating a person and their family to a continued life of poverty.

The impact of such police practice is devastating to Black family structure, social relationships, and life-course trajectory. So pervasive is the disproportionality of this carceral state and imprisonment process that Wacquant (2001) suggested that the term "mass incarceration" incorrectly implies that the risk of incarceration is equally distributed throughout society. To remedy this, he posits a reconceptualization of mass-incarceration to indicate that the racial specificity with which it operates would be better explained and indicated by referring to the process as "hyper-incarceration." He further states, "The stupendous expansion and intensification of the activities of the American police, criminal courts, and prisons over the last

thirty years have been finely targeted, first by class, second by race, and third by place, leading not to mass incarceration but hyper-incarceration.” This new term is a nuanced, semantically accurate description of the lived experiences of Black men who are viewed as perpetual perpetrators.

### **Black Male Criminal Identity**

Within the American context, Black men walk through life in a constant state of defense of self. They have an inability to own their identities and present them without having to qualify themselves as not conforming to also ascribed identities. Our American society has allowed these ideas and beliefs to fester and regenerate with each generation. Muhammad (2010) examines how racial inferiority and crime developed into the ascribed identity of African Americans. He explored the generational inheritance of criminal statistics being used as a proxy for Black inferiority in masterful detail. He also presented the work of sociologist Thorsten Sellin, who warned that African Americans were being unjustly stigmatized with the concept of a criminal identity in his article “The Negro Criminal: A Statistical Note,” and University of Chicago social scientist Charles R. Henderson’s assertion that, “racial inheritance, physical and mental inferiority, barbarian and slave ancestry and culture were the most serious factors in crime statistics,” as an introductory benchmark on which to conceptualize the collusion of these factors (ibid.). In his seminal work, Curry (2017) expounds on the experiences of Black male identity in his description of the concept of ‘Man-Not.’ He states the following:

Man-Not-ness names the vulnerability that Black men and boys have to face, having their selves substituted/determined by the fears and desires of other individuals. The Black male stands in relation to others as always vulnerable because his personhood, who he is to himself, is not only denied but also negated by society.

The perception of Black men as criminals can, at least in part, be attributed to the over-policing of poor neighborhoods. Goffman (2014) asserts that the highly active policing of poor

neighborhoods creates a cultural perception of the areas as “communities of suspects and fugitives.” Since 2002, 5 million innocent people have been stopped, questioned, and frisked (ACLU, 2011). Nine out of every ten of those that were stopped were either Black or Latino. The practice of stopping more Black people has more to do with perceived characteristics than actual behaviors. Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, and DiTomasso (2014) found that Black male adolescents are seen as adults and less deserving of the consideration and respect that are often given to children. Their study looked at Black children and their interactions with the Department of Justice and found that Black adolescent males were seen as older, less innocent, inherently guilty, and therefore less respectable when compared to their White counterparts. These preconceived notions of guilt shape and inform the context of life for Black boys within impoverished communities.

Further exacerbating this problem, is the fact that Black men are often portrayed in pop culture as both dangerous and menacing (Marable 1995). When photographer Annie Liebowitz and Vogue magazine editor Anna Wintour decided to feature the then 24-year-old basketball superstar LeBron James on the cover of Vogue, someone decided that recreating a 1917 WWI recruitment poster featuring an ape was a good idea. These pervasive presentations of Black males as ignorant, violent, and uneducated coincide with the long history of fear-driven caricatures of Black men, and young people are aware of their existence (Carter. 2006).

The large number of inhibitive factors that Black male adolescents face throughout their life-courses is undeniable. Upward intergenerational mobility, as in the movement between social and economic classes that occurs from one generation to the next is considerably lower in areas with large African American populations than other areas (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, & Saez, 2014). Chetty et al. (2014) confirm that the segregation of poverty is strongly and negatively

correlated with upward mobility. With difficulties in mind, people who have overcome the prevailing Black male failure narrative represent a critical deviation from the common deficit-laden life-course discourse. These factors foreground the importance of examining the events that occurred during the lives of successful academicians that came from these problematic and precarious neighborhoods.

The explanations for both the challenges and successes of these individuals range from systemic and institutionalized structures that were developed to create and maintain economic class hierarchy, on one side of the continuum (Bowles & Gintis 1976), to the innate deviant proclivities of Black culture (Moynihan, 1965), on the other side.

### **Structure versus Culture**

Black people in poor neighborhoods are often identified by negatively-framed indicators, such as rates of teenage pregnancy, out-of-wedlock births, joblessness, criminal participation, single-parent households, and welfare dependency (Wilson, 1987). The proposed reasons for some of these social and economic conditions have created different ideological camps. The problems associated with urban poverty have been attributed to both a subculture that is explicitly embraced by the inhabitants that “develops mechanisms that tend to perpetuate it” (Lewis, 1966) and its theoretical antipodean, a purposeful and systemic continuation of slavery and Jim Crow under a different guise (Wacquant, 2001). Also, two major forces that are suggested to contribute to economic depravity are limited opportunity structures and the fragmentation of the family (Wilson. 2010). Consequently, prior researchers identified underfunded schools, a lack of successful role models, and the dearth of employment opportunities as important contributors to this phenomenon (Wilson. 1987; Massey & Denton1993; Cutler & Glaeser. 1997).

These structural versus individualist explanations remain incomplete in addressing the intersectionality of race, place, agency, and habitus in their attempts to identify the mitigating factors that produce disparate outcomes. Within neighborhoods that are characterized by criminal participation, academic failure, and dysfunction, there have always been under-researched, law-abiding, high-achieving persons who have been treated as outliers to the current pathological framework and thus are unworthy of thoughtful inquiry. Garmezy (1991) argued for refocusing our investigative lens on the resilience and other positive aspects of these communities. This will lead to a more impactful study, considering the fact that the vast majority of impoverished Black people do not commit crimes or participate in crime-related activities (Anderson, 2000).

### **Conceptual Framework of Black Male Success**

#### **Achievement as Accommodation**

The “American Dream” is a staple of the U.S. political narrative. The American concept of meritocracy suggests that hard work and dedication are dutifully rewarded. If one has the fortitude and self-will to “pick themselves up by their bootstraps,” then anything is possible for you. This bootstrap belief was supported by Booker T. Washington (1901/1963):

“No man, who continues to add something to the material, intellectual and moral well-being of the place in which he lives, is left long without proper reward.”

Mr. Washington also refused to entertain any excuses for the lack of success that plagued the then “Negro” community, as expressed by his statement: “I have begun everything with the idea that I could succeed, and I never had much patience with the multitudes of people who are always ready to explain why one cannot succeed.” (Ibid.)

The author and orator of what was to become known as the 1895 Atlanta Compromise Speech was an ardent supporter of the idea that opportunity was available to everyone. This assumes that upward social and economic mobility is the result of individual agency. Structural



blockages are inconsequential to the determined and committed. How one internalizes the norms of society, and thus, the likelihood of not violating those norms and achieving success, lies in their belief in and attachment of the individual to others (Hirschi. 1969). This process serves to keep the ideology and class hierarchy of the dominant society unchallenged (Bowles & Gintis 1976). Through the lens of this framework, a belief, which represents an attitudinal disposition or personal characteristic that conforms to societal norms and values, is used to explain the successful life-course trajectories of Black academics.

Understanding the attitudinal dispositions of Black students regarding education was the focus of John Ogbu's ethnographic research (1978; 2003). Ogbu suggested that Black students held negative views regarding the connection between academic success and increased opportunity. His cultural-ecological endeavor presented Black students as resistant to the middle-class achievement ideology due to the racially-oppressive employment market that renders any attempt at upward mobility via hard work and education an exercise in futility. He furthers his argument by suggesting that this Black collective oppositional ideology fosters maladaptive behaviors that are not conducive to high academic performance. He also suggests that Black students' actions are meant to resist assimilation into the White middle-class value system that is responsible for the racist inequality that exists as a daily part of Black people's lived experiences. Ogbu and others have also identified and defined these "White resisters" by their attempts to avoid "acting White" (Fordham & Ogbu 1986; Fryer 2005). These ideas operate in direct contrast to the operationalization of resilience that considers social and economic structures as inhibitive to success. Resilience theorists clearly explain the need to overcome hardships to succeed.

## **Achievement and Resilience**

Broadly defined, resilience is the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties. This dictionary definition presents the complexities of understanding what resilience is, as well as how or when to measure it. Resilience, derived from the Latin *resiliens*, which refers to the degree to which substances contain the characteristics of elasticity, has been adopted as the word of choice across academic disciplines to explain and describe a plethora of phenomena. Initially, the concept of resilience explained the characteristics of an ecosystem (Walker & Salt. 2006). An environment that experiences a natural disaster would be more or less resilient based on its ability to return to its original state. Psychologists later adopted the term to help define the personal characteristics that people display or enact under difficult and traumatic situations. This success is often presented and usually described as a positive psychosocial outcome. Flach (1988) used the term to describe the strengths that people use to master change while maintaining a sense of balance until one secures a sense of normalcy. Self-efficacy was one of the individualistic concepts used to suggest that a person's belief in their abilities played a vital role in their ability to succeed (Bandura 2010). Brown and Lohr (1987) pointed out that self-esteem is an essential factor in adolescents' mastery of their peer group dynamics.

Rutter (1990) inspired the shift from defining resiliency being as a set of individual traits to a process that takes interaction and environmental and social factors into consideration. The interplay of both protective processes and varying degrees of risk determine an individual's vulnerability. It was also important to measure community resources, kinship networks, as well as a process of racial socialization and enculturation as crucial indicators of resilience. This frequent problem of operationalization takes on varying directives. Kirby and Fraser (1997) explained that when children are born into disadvantaged circumstances and overcome them by

achieving better-than-can-be-reasonably-expected outcomes, they are said to be resilient. This conceptualization can be measured via specific quantifiable outcomes. Olsson et al., (2002) explained, “outcome-focused research typically emphasizes the maintenance of functionality; that is, patterns of competent behavior or effective functioning in young people exposed to risk.” Given these points, positive adaptation after exposure to negative pressures is an indicator of a high level of resiliency. Secondly, we understand resilience as a person’s ability to access protective mechanisms to thwart the negative impacts of external stressors. The retrieval and deployment of these psychological resources operate from three levels: individual, family, and social environmental (Olsson et al., 2002). Rutter’s (2006) definition also highlights the understanding of resilience as both an outcome and a process. This definition postulates resilience as, “relative resistance to environmental risk experiences, or the overcoming of stress or adversity.”

Educational resilience describes the ability of students to succeed academically despite the presence of factors that work in direct opposition to their progress. Wang et al. (1997) suggest that this type of resilience manifests in “the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences.” The term “likelihood” fails to explain a concrete process or objective.

Earvolino-Ramirez (2007) provided five elements that are consistently represented in resilience research that explain its process: rebounding/reintegration, high expectancy/self-determination, positive relationships/social support, flexibility, sense of humor, and self-esteem/self-efficacy.

Ungar (2013) described resilience as, “engaging in school, resisting prejudice, creating networks of support, attending religious institutions, all of which are dependent upon the capacity of social and physical ecologies to provide opportunities for positive adaptation

(preferably in ways that express prosocial collective norms).” This holistic approach to operationalization takes the impact that systems can have on an individual’s ability to persist or exhibit resilience into consideration. That notwithstanding, these conceptualizations often present resilience factors as interchangeable. As presented in the above definition, resisting prejudice is in the same category as engaging in school, despite one involving fighting against racism and the other participation in an activity. Left unaddressed in these examples is the fact that students face racism and prejudice in the school that they attend. Therefore, schools can be represented as inhibitors of resilience, as well as sites in which resiliency is displayed. The complexity of school attendance representing positive adaptation while, in some cases, simultaneously acting as an institution of oppression makes the descriptions of resilience a subject of debate. In that the school is a contradictory structure, this also suggests that other processes taking place within the walls of schools should be explored with alternative interpretive mechanisms.

### **Achievement as Resistance**

The idea of resistance in education suggests that we can explain actions that are contrary to expected behaviors as standing against a power structure that the student believes works against their wellbeing. Giroux (1983) reshapes the educational terrain as the location of a hidden curriculum that serves purposes beyond academic development. He suggests that wherever there exists domination, as in contested educational spaces, resistance can also exist. He recommends that “citizenship education” should exist so that students can learn to be critical thinkers, and teachers could be self-reflective, to offset the inherent problematic power dynamics within the institutions and classrooms. Willis (1981) explored the concept of resistance in his *Learning to Labor* in an attempt to explain how the attitudinal dispositions of working-class boys

reproduce social class. He describes the lads' resistance against the narrative that school was a tool for upward mobility and meticulously described their counter-conformist behaviors as motivated by "penetrations" into the individualistic and conformist indoctrination of education.

Bonilla-Silva (2010) suggests that the pervasiveness of racism is so extensive that it requires us to view our society through the theory of racialized systems. These social systems create a hierarchy based on race in which Black people always occupy the lower rungs. Resistance to education and its negative class-confirming ramifications was examined in MacLeod's (1995) critical ethnography that compared the life-course outcomes of the Brothers and the Hallway hangers in the Clarendon Heights public housing development. The representations of resistance as maladaptive behavior is consistent throughout the literature. In contrast, Carter (2006) examined academic achievement as an act of resistance by Black students. She found that adaptation to racism and oppression was not limited to maladaptive reactions as Ogbu posited. She found that a critical consciousness of race and racism also informed the academic achievements of students. In her year-long investigation into nine highly successful Black students, she explored the access and deployment of protective factors that enabled these students to operate in primarily White academic spaces. Her findings suggest that the students actively resisted racism and the concept of academic achievement as the sole property of White students and that their strong racial pride and identity enabled them to adapt and persevere.

Black boys are explicitly aware of both the perceptions and stereotypes associated with their race and gender within an American context as a result of "the-talk" that they receive about their Black-maleness from their caregivers (DiAquoi. 2015). They learn at early ages that systemic oppression is part of the foundational operation of the country that they call home. This

realization highlights an internal conflict between the members of oppressed groups in America and its institutions. Within this understanding of expected failure, Black boys participate in the required educational structures in which they are said to have demonstrated an ineptitude for success. In this work, I also attempt to see what impacts, if any, their realizations have on their concepts of academic goals and achievement. Researchers suggest that when examining minority communities', new theoretical frames need to be used to accurately analyze and understand their conditions (Solórzano & Yosso. 2002). It is because of the permanence of systemically racist structures that this and other endeavors seek to examine it through critically-oriented lenses to uncover profound, more nuanced answers.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Proponents of critical race (CRT) theory posit that racism is a permanent element of the American society that operates in every aspect of its social systems and is a tool that can be used to understand social and educational inequality (Tate 1997). From this perspective, the narratives of people of color are valued and centered as primary sources in the creation and interpretation of their own stories. It challenges the liberal, White dominant lens that historically views and analyzes the lives of people of color. Richard Delgado, Derrick Bell, and Alan Freeman established CRT to address the permanence of racism as the beginning point of reference for any research concerning American society. According to Roithmayr (1999), critical race theory is useful in the deconstruction of academic achievement. Carter (2006) suggested that CRT serves as an important analytical lens through which racism and its inhibitive impact on the educational achievements of African American students can be unpacked, allowing for a clear understanding of its interaction with their achievement ideologies.

## Theoretical Framework

### Social Control–Accommodation

Uniquely, control theorists attempt to answer why people conform. The primary factor in the crime causation matrix is the absence or presence of control. These controls may be the result of relationships with other individuals, institutions, or internal constraints that are the result of self-control. Reiss (1951) suggested that control is represented in two forms: social and personal. Hirschi (1969) was convinced that the power of internalized norms and the desire for approval encourages norm-conforming behavior. He characterizes the social bond in four distinct parts or elements called attachment, involvement, commitment, and belief. Among the four, attachment is the most crucial bond to society. Family socialization and educational instruction create and maintain the bonds of conformity and, therefore, accommodation. His conceptualization assumes that societal norms and values are universal and that the violation of these norms is indicative of failed socialization. Although social control theory is primarily concerned with deviance mitigation and not academic achievement, deviance mitigation and academic achievement are different sides of the same coin. The focus of both of these ideas is conformity. The pursuit of academic excellence by Black students could be a simple reflection of their “buying into” the American achievement narrative. Gottfredson and Hirshi (1990) argue that schools can be more effective than parents at socializing children. They understood the importance of the school as a socializing agent, but not in the same manner that Bowles and Gintis’s “correspondence principle” suggests.

The strong correspondence of structure and processes by the school to the capitalist modes of production suggest that the process of socialization by schools was, in effect, a tool with which to maintain economic class hierarchies and satisfy the social division of labor

(Bowels and Gintis. 1976). The linearity of Hirschi's assumption that a child's belief that he or she can do well in school means that he or she is more likely to stay away from delinquency completely exonerates the institutional role in the creation and maintenance of that belief. The same problem occurs with his suggestion that commitment to "conventional lines of action" creates a buffer from delinquency. The term "conventional" is, in and of itself, a presupposition. Social control theory remains uncritical of the institutions and structures involved in the creation of the norms to which its proponents suggest individuals should bond. It is this oversight that suggests that the introduction and examination of theories that utilize a critical lens when examining the economic and social obstacles, as well as environmental variations and social structures, is necessary.

### **Resilience Theory**

African American children are three times more likely to live in poverty than Caucasian children in the U.S. (Costello, Keeler, & Angold, 2001). It is not uncommon for environmental disadvantage to result in behavioral problems in children (Luthar & Zigler. 1991). The term "at-risk" is often used to describe children that have a higher probability of academic failure as a result of their economic and environmental disadvantages (Hassinger & Plourde. 2005). The ability of children to overcome these difficulties is a remarkable phenomenon to understand (Rutter. 1970). Initially, the concept of resilience was meant to explain the characteristics of an ecosystem (Walker & Salt. 2006). An environment that experiences a natural disaster is classified as highly resilient or non-resilient based on its ability to return to its original state. As stated earlier, psychologists adopted the term to help define the personal characteristics that people display or enact in difficult and traumatic situations. Positive adaptations after exposure to negative pressures are indicators that a person has a high level of resiliency. Self-efficacy was



one of the individualistic concepts used to suggest that a person's belief in their abilities played an essential role in their ability to succeed (Bandura. 2010). Brown and Lohr (1987) also pointed out that self-esteem is an essential factor in the peer group dynamics of adolescents. Rutter (1990) inspired the shift from resiliency being considered as a set of individual traits to a process that takes interaction or environmental and social factors into account. The interplay of both protective processes and varying degrees of risk determine an individual's level of vulnerability. It became essential to measure community resources, and kinship networks, as well as the process of racial socialization and enculturation, as critical indicators of resilience.

Rutter's (2006) updated definition also highlights the understanding of resilience as both an outcome and a process. This definition postulates resilience as, "relative resistance to environmental risk experiences, or the overcoming of stress or adversity." This continual problem of operationalization takes on two varying directives. The first involves looking at resilience as an outcome to be measured after difficult events occur. When an individual succeeds despite difficulties, this displayed of resilience. This success is often presented and usually described as a positive psychosocial outcome. Olsson et al. (2002) explained that "outcome-focused research typically emphasizes the maintenance of functionality; that is, patterns of competent behavior or effective functioning in young people exposed to risk."

The other school of thought presents resilience as a process in which protective mechanisms are deployed during stressors to mitigate their impacts on individuals. Payne (2011) proposes a "site of resilience" framework that involves looking at street life, and highlights the subjective construction of the term resilience while simultaneously arguing for its reconceptualization. Within his framework, the term "resilience," when decontextualized for the specific neighborhoods to which it is referring, is uselessly ambiguous. In their examination of

girls and violent behavior, Hine and Welford (2012) posited that violence can be seen as a resilient coping mechanism with which to protect oneself and survive in hostile environments. It is noteworthy that in this case also the many expressions and interpretations of resilience warrant an exploration of the perspective and narratives of the subjects.

### **Resistance Theory**

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois (1899) explore the seeds of internal conflict with the external society. Du Bois states the following:

“One ever feels his twoness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

This brilliant and insightful description of African American “double consciousness” clearly depicts that resistance and conflict have continually been a part of the Black experience in America. Groups have always attempted to push against societal norms that they believed worked against their own best interest. Some of the earliest manifestations of “resistance theory” began with an examination of 1,313 Chicago gangs as counter-cultural groups by Fredrick Thrasher (1927/2010). Thrasher suggests that gangs are the attempts of rebellious boys to create their world. Working-class students, in an attempt to not be alienated by their group members, engage in rebellious behavior led by defiant leaders (Shipman, 1968; Willis. 1981). Subculture theory, the precursor to resistance theory, describes the formation of resistant attitudes and actions as responses to limited opportunity structures (Cohen. 1955). These actions have also been described as a power struggle in which students attempt to disempower their teachers (Waller 1932; Willis 1981). Paul Willis (1981) describes the extent to which the lads, working-class boys, sabotage their upward mobility through their resistance to the education paradigm. Through their aspirations, expectations, and values, they refute the social control influence of

schooling and see successfully educated boys as feminine. Willis also defines their insight into the inner mechanisms of schooling as a tool of social control as “penetrations.”

When the concept of education is stripped of its status as an unbiased opportunity for upward mobility, the concept of resistance in an educational context represents actions against domination and oppression. School-based resistance can also be transformative (Giroux 2001). Black boys often view schools as incongruent with their interests and unwelcoming (Noguera. 1996). Resistance to negative stereotypes can result in adaptive strategies, which include a high sense of racial pride that can foster resilience (Carter 2006).

To understand the successful life-course trajectories of Black men, we must consider the origins, motivations, adaptations, and resources used by these men throughout their lives. An important way to understand their success involves attempting to examine the thought processes and belief systems that produce their resilient outcomes. These beliefs can be identified before, during, and after a challenging event and throughout their lives. Resistance to pathological stereotypes could present itself as a mediating factor that informs the beliefs, ideological stances, and, subsequently, the adaptations that develop. A prerequisite for resistance is the acquisition of the cultural or social capital that enables the student to recognize obstructions.

### **Social and Cultural Capital**

According to Bourdieu, an individual’s ability to succeed regardless of economic status correlates to their ability to obtain power or a position of prestige. This acquisition is accomplished using what he calls “capital.” Bourdieu (1990) suggests that there are four different types of capital: social, cultural, economic, and symbolic. In this study, I only explore the concepts of social and cultural capital.

Social capital arises through the interactions and relationships that people develop across socioeconomic levels. Movement from the lower social and economic classes can be, and is often, facilitated via the personal connections that one has with individuals or institutions that function within higher economic levels. When parents place their children in schools outside of their district, they are using this type of capital to assist their child's upward mobility.

Cultural capital pertains to the education and knowledge that influence interaction. Socialization, the process by which norms, values, and beliefs are disseminated, and family relations, are two forms of this capital. Bourdieu (1990) states the following:

The embodied cultural capital of the previous generations functions as a sort of advance (both a head start and a credit) which, by providing from the outset the example of culture incarnated in familiar models, enables the newcomer to start acquiring the basic elements of the legitimate culture, from the beginning. (70–71)

Understanding the degree to which cultural capital plays a role in the success of Black academics, if any, will allow the researcher to refute the preponderant notion that all things are equal within these impoverished communities. This will also allow for a highly nuanced exploration of their unique experiences.

The success that the subjects of this study accomplished occurred in resistance to the push-and pull factors of failure. Through this endeavor, I uncover the tools used to implement resistance, and explore how they developed and persisted through various levels of agency. This research will contribute to the literature by parsing the concepts of accommodation, resilience related to lived physical experiences (e.g., poverty and violence), and resistance to pathologically-predictive ideologies. This endeavor investigates ecological environments and the intersectionality of school, family, poverty, aspiration, and prediction. Each of these elements plays an intricate part in the experiences of Black men and boys in America. MacLeod's (1995) work on aspiration and achievement demonstrates the difficulty of climbing out of the class from

which a person is born. Those who have accomplished this feat are significantly important to our understanding of accommodation, resilience, and resistance.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### Methodological Approach

The objective of this study is to understand how Black men explain the life-course trajectories that carried them from the impoverished conditions of their childhood through success in higher education. Methodologically, the study took the form of a qualitative inquiry. The orientation of this paradigm allowed the researcher to create a “complex, holistic picture and analyze words and report detailed views of the Informant” (Creswell, 1994). The researcher also oriented the analysis toward concrete cases in their temporal and local particularity, starting from people’s expressions and activities in their local contexts (Flick, 2009). This paradigm of research allowed the participant to shape and direct the flow of information, as well as for greater reflexivity in research. Narrative analysis is best suited for understanding the lived experiences and self-perceptions of individuals and allows them to provide substantial personal insight and rich descriptive accounts.

### Sampling

Given that the characteristics of the respondents that make them relevant to the study were determined a priori, for this study, I used a criterion sampling strategy (Patton, 2002). This purposeful method is ideal to use when attempting to contact hard-to-reach populations. Black graduate students and doctoral degree holders represent a small and unique population within higher education. A purposeful criterion-based sampling process was used to locate 29 Black male would-be doctoral degree holders or graduate students who were raised in neighborhoods that had an average income below the poverty line for interviews.

While this method did not produce a representative sample, the primary goal was to understand the experiences of the respondents and the significance of those experiences, as

expressed by the participants (Siedman, 1997). This useful method enabled the researcher to investigate phenomena through lived experiences.

Utilizing agencies and organization is a conventional method when working with hard-to-reach populations (Taylor, 2009). The researcher is a founding member of the Black Doctoral Network (BDN), a multidisciplinary clearinghouse for Black and Latino scholars and professionals in the social sciences, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), and humanities. This organization has access to over 5,000 members in the United States and 500 in the United Kingdom. The researcher was granted permission to recruit respondents via the network at the BDN's third annual national conference in Atlanta, GA. October 8–10, 2015. The researcher set up an area to recruit participants and negotiated suitable appointment times and dates for interviews.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher collected qualitative data in the form of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interview process allowed me to gain a deep understanding of how individuals see their social world. This symbolic interactionists' paradigm suggests that people perceive and interact through the use of symbols that have meanings that are transmitted through both verbal and non-verbal signals (Siedman, 1997). These signals are often not transferable through other means of data and other information-gathering techniques. In-depth face-to-face interviews are specifically effective for understanding how people understand and perceive themselves within the context of their experiences and environments. This type of inquiry allows for an ebb and flow of information to develop between the researcher and the respondent that produces a fluid roadmap with which to understand both the answers provided and their contexts within the

respondent's experiences. This also allowed the researcher to guide the conversation to explore subjects in depth as well as expand the scope of the discussion when needed.

Interviews varied in length, with a minimum duration of 45 minutes. The researcher included open-ended questions with the intent to explore and build on the participant's responses (Siedman, 1997), and adapt further questions based on their answers (Fontana & Frey, 1998). Particular attention was paid to the stories that the respondents shared about their lives. The researcher encouraged the activation of narrative production through prompts to allow for a complete and rich exploration of their lived experiences (Holstein & Gubrium 1995).

Before the interviews began, an informed consent form was presented to the participants, and their signatures were required for participation. They were asked to consent to the interview and to being digitally recorded. For the interviews with participants who did not consent to the recording, detailed written notes were taken. During the interviews, I made writing memos a priority to ensure that ideas that may otherwise be lost were recorded (Glaser, 1978). This allowed me to pay special attention to and remember details that proved significant only after the subsequent levels of analysis had been completed. Through the use of these memos, I was able to engage the data to a higher degree than would have otherwise been the case (Birks, 2008). I constructed ideas while simultaneously looking for linkages between them. The recordings were later transcribed and entered into Atlas. Ti.

During the in-depth interviews, the researcher asked questions to ascertain whether the respondents had role models, real or imagined, whom they admired and whose behaviors or habits they attempted to emulate. The interviewees also looked into emotional and intellectual tools that either impeded or facilitated their academic success. Family structure, parental, academic, and employment history, as well as religiosity and family worldviews were examined.



The researcher explored also, questions that address critical influences on Black students, particularly those related to academic achievement despite socioeconomic deficiencies, including, but not limited to, racial identity. The researcher also looked to provide the respondent with opportunities to share related narratives from important turning points and events in their lives. The respondents were given pseudonyms to keep their identities anonymous.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process began with the manual transcription of all the interviews into Atlas.Ti. The researcher performed several levels of analysis to understand and identify recurring themes and meanings that help to understand the phenomenon at hand. The four levels of analysis were observation, the informant's accounts, text deliberation, and contextualization and reconstruction (Ben-Ari, 2010). Breaking up the analysis into different levels enabled me to examine more than simply describe what was said.

At the first analytical level, I identified and described my assessment of and reaction to the surrounding environment. Creswell (1998) described qualitative inquiry as a process that focuses on the phenomenon in question within its natural setting. While the standardized interview format would not have been considered a normal or natural setting, being inside a university and interviewing an academic could be considered a setting that my respondents would find familiar. In the initial stage, I sought to understand and describe my insider status within the interview process as both a Black male and doctoral student. Ely (1991) stressed the importance of knowing your position as an observer within the context of the situation.

Reflexivity facilitates an understanding of the impact of the researcher and their subjective influences on the collection and interpretation of the data (Primeau, 2003). My familiarity with

the subjects, as well as the environment, required less of a learning curve in relation to language or becoming acquainted with norms (Ely, 1991).

The second level of analysis was concentrated on the text within the transcribed interview documents, notes, and memos. This stage focused on the informant's perspective and their construction of reality (Ben-Ari, 2010). This involved focusing on descriptive and factual information. The researcher reviewed the transcribed textual information to ensure it accurately depicted the respondents' conceptualizations of the life-course events discussed. I reviewed the digitally-recorded interviews to revisit them and immerse myself in the audio data. I utilized this data to transcribe audio recordings into their textual representation.

In the third level of analysis, I used the qualitative research software Atlas.Ti to identify categories and themes while identifying varying dimensions. I searched through the transcripts and memos for reoccurring phrases or subjects, paying specific attention to what was not necessarily implicit while searching for areas that need particular attention or further interpretation. It was also essential to locate a theme that developed throughout the interview while intertwining all the information gathered at the previous levels of analysis.

The fourth and final level of analysis is referred to as contextualization and reconstruction. I organized similarly-coded themes and code families to formulate a thematic map for consideration. The data was checked to ensure all the information was credited to the correct respondent. This involved analyzing all the information from the previous levels within the broader context of the study. The relationship between the researcher and the informant's information, at this level, resulted in the identification of a theoretical perspective that explains the phenomenon more clearly.

## **Trustworthiness**

The usefulness of research is in its ability to fulfill the four components of trustworthiness, which are dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba. 1985). The establishment of these components is significantly vital because they ensure the quality of the research in a manner that suggests that it could be conducted again with similar outcomes (Morrow. 2005). As suggested by Marshall and Rossman (1995), “All research must respond to canons that stand as criteria against which the trustworthiness of the project can be evaluated.” In the following sections, I make the case that these requirements have been fulfilled.

### **Dependability**

To ensure researchers can duplicate this research for other populations, care was taken to develop and articulate the research design and maintain consistent adherence to the plan of action (Lincoln & Guba. 1985). This study achieves dependability by maintaining an inquiry audit and providing a thorough explanation of the research procedures and processes. This allows other researchers to follow the steps involved in producing the results.

### **Credibility**

The extent to which the results of an inquiry reflect the perspective of the participant is the degree to which the work can be considered credible (Patton 1999). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), it represents the level of exactness between the interviewer and the participant. Patton (1990) identified three elements used to establish credibility:

- 1) rigorous techniques and methods for gathering high-quality data that is carefully analyzed, with attention to issues of validity and reliability...;
- 2) the credibility of the researcher, which is dependent on training, experience, track record, status, and presentation of self; and
- 3) philosophical belief in the phenomenological paradigm, that is, a fundamental appreciation of naturalistic inquiry, qualitative methods, inductive analysis, and holistic thinking.

To fulfill these requirements, the researcher used a digital recorder to ensure that the answers were taken directly and literally from the respondent's words. Both the respondents and the interviewer spoke American English throughout the interviews, thereby eliminating any need for language translation. Both the audio and transcribed data were checked for accuracy multiple times and compared to notes that were taken by the researcher throughout the process. This triangulation of information helped ensure this endeavor's credibility.

### **Transferability**

In this endeavor, the researcher provides "rich, thick descriptions," which according to Merriam (2002), serves as an important strategy with which to ensure qualitative generalizability. These descriptions will aid future researchers in determining the extent to which these findings can be useful in other settings, groups, contexts, or populations (Lincoln & Guba 1985). In this study, I aimed for high transferability by providing a significant number of direct quotations from the participants.

### **Confirmability**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe confirmability as "a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest." Due to my positionality, I was familiar with many of the experiences and language used by the interviewees. As a Black doctoral candidate, it was easier for me to establish credibility and trust with the participants while simultaneously developing rapport with them. Also, memos were used to audit the analysis, which provides reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lastly, member checking was used to further facilitate confirmability. I allowed four participants to read and make suggestions about the initial draft of this dissertation.

## **Limitations**

The goal of this study was to provide analysis that was generalizable. However, there are limitations to that end. A primary issue is the varying ages and locations of birth of the respondents. It is probable that the decades during which the respondents grew up (the '70s versus the '90s, for example) could impact the degree to which the findings would hold if compared to groups raised in times when technological advancements changed the ways we interact and view the world. A second limitation is the potential differences between foreign and American born Black men. While this study contains both, it seems probable that if the subjects were separated by the birthplace of their parents, then other, more nuanced finding would be uncovered. Lastly, the possibility that differences exist between men raised in the northern United States (e.g., New York) versus the Deep South (e.g., Mississippi) is considerably high given the history of slavery and its roots in the southern part of the United States.

## **Ethical Concerns**

Ethical issues were of primary importance at every phase during the study. Complete compliance with the institutional review board rules, regulations, and expectations was achieved. An informed consent form was presented to all persons before any interview questions were presented to them. The anonymity of all participants was protected by using a coding structure that eliminated any identifying characteristics specific to participant identity. All data files and instruments, including transcripts, are kept in a locked file in the research office and will be destroyed after a reasonable amount of time. Lastly, the interview protocol helped to ensure that each of the participants understands the nature and purpose of the interview. This standardized form reduced the likelihood of misunderstandings, inconsistencies, or deceptive practices.

## **CHAPTER 4: STE DILEMMA OF CONCENTRATED POVERTY, VIOLENCE, AND IDENTITY ‘WHERE WE’RE FROM’**

### **Introduction**

The myriad of difficulties faced by young Black men who are born or raised in the lower social and economic stratum of American society, as suggested by the literature review, are well-documented (Wilson. 1989). However, it is also important to include an examination of how these individuals are engulfed by oppressive systems and systemically violent structural processes that create circumstances that need to be overcome. In this study, I sought to utilize a grounded approach to understand the lives of the respondents as described through their subjective lenses and, in turn, present their interpretations of their journeys as survivors of structural violence, moving from poverty into and through higher education. The first part of this effort was unpacking and exploring the lives of the respondents beyond generalized terms like “poverty” and “deviant,” while deliberately resisting both the academic and political proclivity toward simple pathological confirmation. Unfortunately, throughout academic discourse, experts overlook how their language and inquiries reproduce ideologically-problematic “findings,” while simultaneously remaining uncritical of and oblivious to how their framework(s) led to foreseeably myopically inadequate conclusions. To wit, academic discourse has often either been exclusionary or stigmatically oriented. This chapter attempts to move toward a highly nuanced understanding of these respondents and their complex lived experiences in conjunction with their positionality under systems and processes of structural violence.

In this chapter, I present the narratives of Black men who, as victims of structural violence, are now either doctors in their chosen profession or currently in pursuit of advanced degrees. The following sections include backgrounds and introductions to their rich episodic

descriptions regarding the struggles and impediments, both internally- and extraneously-oriented, that made their exceptional academic achievement the most unlikely of outcomes.

This section contains an examination of their descriptions regarding (a) the economic depravity that the participants and their communities experienced, (b) their exposure to direct violence and their subsequent adaptations to that exposure, (c) the existence of underground black market economies, (d) internal family difficulties, (e) criminal justice interactions and interference, and (f) their experiences with racism and the various attacks on their self-concepts. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a summary of the findings.

Table 1. Participant Biographical Table

Name	Age	Locations	Education
Akai	37	Born in Kingston, Jamaica and moved to Florida	Licensed Psychologist working towards graduate degree
Alton	37	Graduate Student Born in Guyana, moved to New York	Ph.D.
Anthony	32		
Eric	33	Born in Detroit Born in Detroit moved to Florida for high school	Ph.D. in Education Administration Policy
Ezell	37		Ph.D. Masters in Policy Studies and Urban Education working as an assistant professor
Freddie	38	Born in Chicago	
Jason	27	Born in the Bronx	Working on Ph.D.
Jerome	64	Born in Brooklyn Born in Brooklyn moved every two years, eventually ending up in California	Ph.D.
John	44		
Jordan	34	Graduate Student	Working as an adjunct college professor
Keith	26	Born in East Chicago	Ph.D. Working on Post-doctorate degree
Kenneth	22	Born in Cleveland	Graduate Student Ph.D. in Business Administration and Organizational Leadership
Laquan	52	Born in Brunswick	
Larry	68	Born in New York	Working on Ph.D.
Michael	26	Born in the Dominican Republic	Working on Ph.D. in Public Health
Oscar	27	Born in Houston Born in San Francisco and moved to Sacramento	Working on Ph.D. program for Sociology
Patrick	33		Working on Ph.D. in Psychology
Philando	58	Born in New York	Received Ph.D. from Virginia Tech
Ramarley	24	Born in Louisiana	Working on Ph.D. in Social Work
Rumain	61	Born in Jamaica New York	Ph.D. in Business Administration
Samuel	23	Born in Kansas	Graduate Student
Sean	27	Born in Suffolk Virginia	Working on his Ph.D.
Stephon	54	Born in South Amboy, New Jersey	Ph.D. in Education and Development
Tamir	33	Born in Grand Rapids, Michigan Born in Syracuse and moved several times	Working on Ph.D. in Educational Leadership
Terence	48		Ph.D. in Mathematics
Treyvon	37	Born in Liberia and grew up in New Jersey Born in Fort Lauderdale Florida then moved to Louisiana	Working on Ph.D. in Computer Science
Tyre	38		Ph.D. in Psychology
Walter	30	Born in Lanstall Rieniger, Germany	Working on Ph.D.
William	34	Born in Chicago	Ph.D. in Biology



“You must let suffering speak if you want to hear the truth” (Cornel West).

### **Racism and Concentrated Poverty**

You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were Black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity. Take no one’s word for anything, including mine- but trust your experience. Know whence you came. (James Baldwin)

### **Trapped in the Matrix: Normalized Deficiency**

A common thread throughout the interviews was an understanding of the interviewees’ financial deficit. While the respondents came from different parts of the country, their narratives regarding economic depravity were very consistent. Participants stated that their low socioeconomic conditions made life difficult. As defined by Ho (2007), their conditions meet the definition of structural violence: “the disparity between the actual abilities and potential or possible ability to meet a person’s needs.” The respondents described their economic deficits in ways that included their plight, as well as those of their neighborhoods’ other inhabitants. Their responses enable us to understand poverty beyond being the predicament of individuals, going further into a highly nuanced exploration of problematic social conditions. When asked about his family’s financial standing in his community, Jerome stated the following without hesitation: “Oh no, we all... everybody was poor. The whole neighborhood was poor.” The commonality of deficit was interwoven throughout the descriptive narrations shared by each of the respondents. These families lived in a constant state of flux and precariousness, struggling to find ways to manage their most basic needs. Laquan recalled his family receiving public assistance as a constant in his life: “We were getting food stamps left and right.”

Larry also shared that his family received both direct financial assistance and food from government organizations. As he put it, “It was me, Mom, and welfare cheese and food stamps.”

Interestingly, none of the respondents saw their poverty as unique to them or their family. 'Being poor' was merely a normative part of life where they grew up. Most of the subjects did not express feelings of resentment or hostility toward society regarding their lack of opportunities. When asked to describe his living conditions, William spoke freely about the infestation of vermin in his projects as well as his assessment of the lack of upward mobility experienced by most of his neighbors. "There were hundreds of families cramped into this building, and it was all, roach infested rat infested, and nobody had achieved much." This 'matter of fact' demeanor displayed by the respondents when addressing, what was clearly be described as substandard, and even in some cases, third-world-like living conditions, spoke to the underlying strength that families that live in these environments must possess out of sheer necessity. During the interviews, the respondents were asked to further describe their home life. Their responses revealed that the instability they experienced was not limited to a lack of finances. In some cases, the very roofs over their heads were not permanent fixtures or guaranteed to remain. Eric spoke about this unfortunate reality:

I said earlier jumping around from school to school, because I was jumping around from foster home to foster home. At one point my oldest sister, cause there's nine of us... My oldest sister decided to adopt all of us so all of us, as far as siblings, we lived together. My oldest sister became our guardian, because she had legal custody of all of us... I was pretty much grown when I was 12.

William also shared his experience with homelessness: "We were homeless for I think two years when we lived in shelters and with other people and my mom had two children during that time." Sharing that his mother continued to have children during this time of displacement, suggests that he and his family continued to live their lives in ways that defied conventional wisdom, but for him it was merely another challenge to be faced by the family. It should not be mistaken that the respondents' acknowledgment of their difficulties was akin to their being resolved to their permanence. They continued to hope for lives that exceeded what was their

unpropitious predicament. Walter also experienced homelessness, and with that burden, came frustration and his subsequent negative interactions with the criminal justice system. The tone of his voice transmitted an anger, and the sadness expressed throughout the interview resonates with the feelings of many young Black boys today. He declared, “I was tired of being homeless. I was tired of sleeping on the streets, living house to house, being broke, and going to jail.” These men were born into families that experienced structural violence in ways that are never clearly understood, even though they are often-studied. This form of violence is deadly and a form of social harm. There is a direct relationship between structural and ‘direct’ violence (Farmer et al., 2006). This violence was responsible for the respondents’ adaptive, disrupted, and interrupted life-courses.

### **From Structural to Direct Violence**

#### **Clear and Present Danger**

In support of the findings suggested in the related literature, the connections between poverty and violence were reaffirmed by the respondents’ descriptions (Pogge. 2013). Exposure to the potential of harm as a result of interpersonal violence caused respondents’ families to follow self-governing guidelines, like the “street light” rule. Children that grow up in these dangerous environments know that when the street light comes on you are expected to be upstairs already. As Christopher said, “My mother would always say, you better not let those street lights catch you out there.” A similar sentiment operated in the household of Ramarley: “In my neighborhood, there was a lot of violence and part of the reason why we were always in the house before 6 pm, the street lamps came on.”

The violence that the respondents were hoping to avoid involved perpetrators and victims who were too young to understand the impacts they had on the lives of those who were

tangentially connected to them. For example, one interviewee talked about his life in Chicago and how early young men were participating in murderous activities: “Yummy Sandifer, who was from the Southside of Chicago where I’m from, was killing people at 11 and 12 years old, so there was a lot of that going on” (William).

The closer individuals are to everyday violence, the more likely they are to experience personal victimization (Sampson and Lauritsen, 2016). The persistence of violence in communities and its ramifications continued to be a subject that was broached across interviews because it came at great expense to their families. Stephon described how it touched his life directly:

You know, my brother was killed, he was in and out of jail, in and out of juvenile detention, at the time he was killed... he was able to talk himself out of getting put into juvey<sup>1</sup>... got killed two weeks later. He was smart; he was super athletic. He was the alpha kid. When we were growing up, he was the leader always. Especially if we were on the court, or in the field, at the pool, or if he was in the street. Always was the best. He wanted to be in the street. I thought that was going to be my calling because that was my bro, that was one of the people who I looked up to. Even though I don’t think that’s what he wanted because he knew what he was into.

With these levels of chaos and dysfunction, worrying about classwork, school, and tests took a back seat to attempting to survive to see the next day. This was a concern for many of the respondents throughout their adolescence, and with such concern came adjustments in behaviors to accommodate this prevalent issue. Respondents had to remain in a constant state of readiness that required adjustments to everyday activities and choices. Jerome discussed the difficulties that schoolbooks caused in his daily life.

Man, you are fighting every day. I mean it got bad at one point, at one point I think it was maybe in the third grade I stopped carrying books. Because when you get in a fight, your books are all over the sidewalk. So, I learned how to carry a piece of paper in my back pocket.

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<sup>1</sup> Juvenile a Detention Center

These adaptive behaviors were not limited to avoiding having your books scattered all over the sidewalk. These adjusted choices were informed and constrained. The prevalence of violence, drugs, and gangs made a crosspollination of experiences unavoidable. These narratives stand in direct contrast to Anderson's (2000) presentation of a dichotomous comparison of decent versus street families. What existed was an overlap of circumstantial interactions that required constant management and creative handling. The influences of these communities and negative push-and-factors led some of the respondents to make decisions inconsistent with the trajectory in which they now find themselves.

### **Adapting to Survive**

Gang life was both prevalent and influential in the choices that respondents had available to them. Whether they entered a life of crime or deviance was not just the result of their moral compasses. Anderson (2000) describes, in intimate detail, the often-necessary campaign for respect and protection among poor Black boys who grow up in the ghetto. The rules and expectations for a young person's survival, in some of these communities, require a critically-framed yet situationally-malleable persona. In some cases, they felt that many of the critical choices that others were allowed to consider, had already been made for them. As articulated by William:

“It wasn't necessarily an informed decision, these were the sets of circumstances that these kids were in. It was the only decision.” He continued to elaborate further:

Gangster Disciplines Nation, which was the gang that ran my neighborhood. The “Hey short, we're gonna give you 50 dollars if you run this drug down the street if you do this” of course they're gonna do that, so it was easy to recruit a lot of kids into gangs in my neighborhood. I mean it was easier to get a gun than it was to get a high school diploma where I'm from.

Several of the respondents discussed the pervasiveness of gangs and street-oriented people in their neighborhoods. When I asked Jerome to explain why he was involved in gangs,

he responded thusly:

That's what you did, and I'm not going to say it was for safety because that's a cop-out<sup>2</sup> you know. We joined gangs, or we formed them because you and your boys gotta hang together. But as you got older, the hanging out it changes you know what I mean? But we also banded together to fight other neighborhoods, or to that, we didn't have to fight other neighborhoods. So, we could protect ourselves from other neighborhoods or other projects.

While not every gang-related activity shared in the interviews focused on drug sales, the interconnected nature of both issues as responses to the structuralized violence in poor communities remained intact through the interviews.

### **The Impact of Street Pharmaceuticals and Moving Weight**

The pervasiveness of drugs throughout slum neighborhoods throughout poor communities is a well-documented problem in America. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), in 2013, there were over 2.8 million new users of illicit drugs. The paradoxical nature of being around people that sell drugs and those that use them was a common struggle for the respondents. Having parents or siblings that were "users" required special consideration. One respondent shared how he and his brother handled the supposed stigma of having a mother that used crack.

My mother had a drug addiction, so of course when your parents are on drugs, you are referred to as a "crack baby." People will shy away from that, and they don't like it because they find that to be embarrassing. For me and my brother we've always embraced this idea of being a crack back and made it a cool thing, almost like... just like Black people do with the word nigger for example. We accepted it, embraced it, and turned it into this endearing term. (Eric)

Despite the risks, the booming illicit drug market in poor neighborhoods, where employment rates are the lowest in the country, presented unique opportunities for people to make money to provide for themselves and their families. One respondent described his

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<sup>2</sup> Making an unjustifiable excuse

justification for participating in this underground economy. He stated that, for him at the time, “Self-reliance is selling drugs and making money for your family.” Stephon also fell victim to these constrained options and participated in drug sales and violence at a very young age. “Oh, you know, drugs. Sold drugs, involved in gangs since a young age, probably seven or eight. It was young teen-on-teen violence.”

Challenges of violence and dysfunction were not just issues that they needed to face on the street. While the dangers experienced by Black men in their external communities have been thoroughly researched and validated, the difficulties and dangers that they face in their own homes are often overlooked. Structural violence creates interpersonal violence that is not limited to external actors.

### **Troubling ‘Family Matters’**

It is an unfortunate adage that dysfunction creates additional dysfunction. The challenges that the respondents faced were not limited to outside of their biological families. Structural violence creates a vacuum of despair and discourse that traps members in a vicious cycle of reproductive maladjustment. While many of the respondents had a positive relationship with their primary caregiver, this was not the case for all of them. Some felt that they were never wanted. This left one respondent being left without the tender affection that mothers often give their children. When examining the Haitian people, given their nation’s long history of poverty, oppression, and exploitation, Farmer (2004) suggested that the lack of affection is yet another manifestation of structural violence. The burden of raising a child in an unforgiving and unsupportive environment caused an inversion of priorities in some households. Compassion gave way to the procurement of financial means.

Ezell described how he viewed himself as nothing more than a financial resource for his

mother:

I grew up with my mom, but it wasn't like it was a happy household. She didn't want me, and honestly, looking back on it, most people say she should have given me to my grandmother who did love me. My father passed away when I was seven, so my older brother and I got social security checks, and if she gave me away, she gave the money away too. She was going to hold on to me, as much as she didn't like me, and treated me terribly, but she was getting that check. That's why she kept me. My mom was, I ain't talking about her, but she was just really physically abusive, she was emotionally abusive, it was, "You ain't gonna be shit like your daddy. You can't do this. You can't do that."

This disconnect from and resentment toward primary caregivers was an experience shared by other respondents within the study. One respondent described how his mother's primary emotion toward him was regret and that as the years progressed, she would leave him at home to go out to the club in an attempt to recapture what she thought having children denied her.

My mother resented having to be a single parent. She was really angry at my father, so her sensibility was raising these kids is taking away her youth. So, the older we got, the more she would take off on Friday nights and go to the club. I mean, she was really angry about not being able to enjoy her younger years. She had me at like 21 so, you know, when we got to a point where we could be home alone she was at the club, you know? (John)

According to some respondents, fathers were also active participants in turning their misguided anger into aggression and violence inside the family and home. One respondent described his father's abusiveness as follows: "My dad became physically abusive and we're not talking about spanking, but we're talking about doing some things that are borderline torturing if you will."

The physical abuse that Ezell received at the hands of his mother made him long to be treated in a more peaceable, less violent manner. He stated the following:

That's what she said. If she didn't beat me, she didn't love me. It would hurt her more than it hurt me, according to her. The whole "spare the rod," you're supposed to beat your kids and... I don't agree with it, but she beat the hell out of me. It didn't make me a



better person; it just made me more hard-hearted. It made me like, “I wish you would just talk to me.”

This desire to be seen differently and treated in a manner that required his caregiver to recognize both the emotional and psychological toll that was taking place on him, beyond just the physical pain, fell on deaf ears. Patton (2017) suggested that corporal punishment is an essential contributor to many adverse outcomes, including but not limited to mental health diagnoses and school suspensions and expulsions.

### **Cops and Criminal Justice**

#### **“Both of my parents were in prison.”**

As is often the case in under-resourced and over-policed communities—characteristics that have become synonymous with Black neighborhoods in America the criminal justice system reaches deep into the family lives of the subjects. Oscar had neither his mother nor his father present in his life during his formative years due to these types of changes. “I was raised by my grandparents because both of my parents were in prison.”

The extent to which the criminal justice system is involved in the Black community today was reflected in most of the interviewees’s responses to questions regarding involvement with the police. Some subjects indicated that they had intimate knowledge of the criminal justice system. Some respondents seemed somewhat unfazed by what, to them, was a frequent, almost expected, interruption by police interactions. Eric said, “I’ve gotten arrested about four different times probably about, but I never stayed in jail more than like four days.” Yet for others, the interactions were more severe and involved changes in life circumstances due to criminal justice involvement. “I was convicted of a felony. Criminal possession of a weapon, so I end up doing a damn near four-year bid” (Anthony).

Throughout the narratives of the interviewees that reported criminal justice involvement,

a thread of life-and family-structure altering events persisted. In one particularly unfortunate instance, the subject's introduction to the criminal justice system was a result of trickery and deception on the part of his mother because he refused to give her the money that he received from his social security benefits. Ezell, described the event as follows:

“You going to give me that money?” I was like, “Nope.” She told me to pick up my stepdad from the library. I'm taking her car to pick him up. Ten minutes later, I get pulled over, and I was like, “Was I speeding?” He was like, “No. This car was reported stolen ten minutes ago.” I was like, “All right.”

The importance of a stable family and its support is often suggested as the foundational building blocks on which healthy, well-adjusted, high-achieving people are developed. Many respondents had little of both. This dysfunction, for most of them, continued when they entered school.

### **School Daze**

The experiences of Black children in the institutions that are supposed to be the economic equalizers in America are often experienced in ways that contradict their suggested purpose. Instead of the school merely representing a place of opportunity and learning to the respondents, the respondents described school events and experiences that were far from welcoming. Hall (2006) suggests that schools are often seen as “sites of intolerance, oppression, and dehumanization.” The respondents' described experiences that included the subtle interpretations of a child understanding difference, as described by Tyre: “I was very sensitive to that, being a black child, of course. Some of it was the perception of being talked down to,” Furthermore, Jerome explained that after his outright racist and violent experience, he understood that both his race and academics were unmistakably connected. He shared:

“As a kid, I've had a teacher say some harsh things to me, one particular occasion that stuck was the fourth grade and I raised my hand, and she said. ‘Put your hand down. Niggas need

to learn how to learn.’ After that, that’s when I started to check out.”

Black children’s introductions to their racialized differences are not only tragic but also violently disruptive. In these spaces, these children experienced the difference and friction between their culturally-socialized and ascribed identities firsthand. These ascribed identities or representations of their identities that are not of their construction can cause inner conflict and turmoil. Hall (1997) explained these conflicts as follows:

"Representations sometimes call our very identities into question. We struggle over them because they matter, and these are contests from which serious consequences can flow. They define what is ‘normal,’ who belongs, and therefore, who is excluded.

Jerome continued to describe other instances of his educational interactions that helped shape the bedrock of his understanding of the structural and emotional violence available to him in the place where he was supposed to receive his formal education.

My first altercation at school was at Georgia Tech Elementary where the teacher called me, “an ignorant barnyard nigger.” And because I could not connect my vowels, there was a sentence on the board. “We were asked to identify the verb ,the subject and all of that and Louisiana Creole the consonants and vowels are different, you know, so I tried my best to do it, and I couldn’t do it, and for me, I thought “ignorant barnyard nigger” was basically, you got it wrong go to your seat and sit down, but you know, kids.

Negative interactions continued for the respondents throughout their academic life-courses. Some of the problems were described as subtle attacks on their abilities:

High school I think there were a lot of microaggressions that I didn’t really have a name at the time, but a lot of passive racism. In terms of like, “Oh...” I remember I was considering taking some AP (Advanced Placement) courses and my guidance counselor was like, “That might be a little too advanced for you.” Like kinda havin to prove myself like, “No, I’m fine.” (Ryan)

The educators that were supposed to be responsible for ensuring the proper and equitable of their young minds actually stereotyped other respondents. Respondents Kenneth, Terence, and Terence, indicated their awareness of being made to feel different. They explained the following:

But it was also a couple of teachers that I remember, would say things like “All you are athletes. You ain’t doing nothing.” Like. “All y’all going to jail. You selling drugs.” We heard that too. (Kenneth)

And what was funny about it was that this teacher would only ask the White people questions in the class. Never asked any of us questions, so it was what it was. (Terence)

This structural violence exaggerated the respondents’ perception of self, even in the simplest tasks that they were expected to master. The inability to tie ones’ shoes became an indication of inadequacy for Akai. He stated the following:

I remember I didn’t know how to tie my shoe and everybody else knew how to tie their shoe. I had to get help, and just remember feeling like everyone was more advanced than I was.

The participants were made acutely aware of their differences, both perceived and real, throughout their academic lives, and as expected, they began to contemplate the validity and relevance of these differences. Romain described how being separated in school by his perceived academic level caused him to think of himself in the deficient manner in which he was being treated.

Being marginalized in front of students because we were separated. So, because we were taken out of the normal classes, and the sheer fact of being ushered into the basement of the schools, signified a lower level and you were labeled disadvantaged. That labeling sparked some ‘ostracization’ of students, and initially, I felt bad about that. I felt less of myself.

The disappointments in school continued to have an adverse effect on the way many of the respondents viewed themselves. This confirms the research findings that negative interactions in school settings can result in children internalizing negative messages (Hall 2006; Kunjufu. 2006). Jason shared the following:

I first came there, everyone was like, wow, this kid’s really smart. I knew all my times tables already. And that was when they were like, okay, take this test. All these other kids that I kind of grew up with, I remember first and last names, ironically. They were all White. I think definitely seeing these White kids performing always made me feel like... There was a lot of implicit self-hate in terms of not being good enough.

Akai mentioned how failing to be accepted into gifted programming impacted his self-assessment:

I was evaluated for gifted, and I didn't make it, right? I remember feeling like I was proving other people right. Like proving my White friends who were in gifted programs right that I wasn't smart enough. Or proving to teachers that I wasn't smart enough.

### **Noticing Difference**

In Goffman's (1963) work on stigma, he defined the use of objects or actions to relieve oneself of the perception of a stigmatized identity as "disidentifiers". Ezell shared how he attempted to use eyeglasses in this manner by taking steps to offset what he knew was a negatively skewed idea of who he was by trying to look smarter.

Almost every day, my intelligence was questioned, and he didn't have to go through that because he wasn't a large, Black male. I remember, I went to Claire's in the mall, and bought some non-prescription glasses, even though I have 20/10 vision, which is better than perfect, just so I would look more prestigious... if I'm reading something, stumble over a word, because they'll all be, "Yeah, we knew that he was stupid. He can't spell, or he can't say that word." All these things I had to go through.

### **"I felt less of myself."**

The respondents were made aware of implications related to their racial categorization at early ages. Racism was experienced in ways that impacted their feelings regarding their identities, their perceptions of White people, and the lived experiences of their entire families. Some of these experiences were closely aligned with specific local cultures. Akai talked about growing up in the South where both Blacks and Jews were the targets of disdain:

Kids would call me the N-word. They would call other people like Jewish people, dirty Jews and stuff like that, and they would call me the N-word. Where I grew up, there are rural areas where Confederate flags are waved and comments about hair and stuff like that. Yeah.

Most of them face events that had more to do with generalized American racism and racial politics. Eric said the following:

I understood racism as a kid despite living in an all-Black neighborhood. When all the corner stores are owned by white-skinned people, and they treated the Blacks a certain way, accused them of stealing or follow them around a store. Based on their distrust of Blacks, you finding them to be untrustworthy.

Beyond merely considering White people as untrustworthy, these young Black boys also realized the danger that racial differences posed to their very existence. He continued as follows:

You just didn't know and then when you get threatened with things like "I'm going to call the police on you," and all the police that you know in your neighborhood, for the most part, are White then you associate people who could harm me with the skin color. White people are bad because they have the power to harm me in some way.

This concern about harm to one's person based on their Blackness was often confirmed.

Jerome was bused to a White school and very quickly learned that his own doubts regarding integration were shared ten-fold by the parents of the White students.

Think about the second grade, third grade, fourth grade, fifth grade kids, Black kids on a school bus in a White neighborhood, and it's not the White kids it's the parents with the signs that say "Nigger go home", or whatever else they are saying. Throwing bottles, rocks, sticks and bricks at the school bus. Imagine the trauma that does to kids.

Experiences of racism and discrimination against the respondents' family members that left indelible marks on their psyches also exist within the memories of these respondents. Jordan describes being left in the middle of nowhere in the cold at an age younger than four when a taxi driver realized he lived in the Bronx.

My grandmother, she took a trip to Belize. It was November. We came home, and it was cold. She was trying to catch a cab. The cab took us. We said we're going to the Bronx, dropped us right in the middle, like off out the park, out the airport, so just dropped us someplace when he heard we were going to the Bronx. He left a 50-year-old woman and a four-year-old kid just because we're going to the Bronx and because of whatever.

While weathering all the storms that socioeconomic deficit and striatal violence afforded them, the respondents-maintained hope and a belief that there was a better life for them. William best described this ideal:

I doubted myself a lot because I was poor, but I still believed that I could do something with my life if I really, really, really tried and didn't follow the path of some of my contemporaries and colleagues.

The subjects also described a drive that created an unwillingness to accept their plight in them. Jason shared the following:

The awareness of, for a long time not really realizing it was kind of like marginalization and being perceived as less than. Just feeling that in so many different ways, I think has always made me feel I need to do better. I feel like I never left that perspective in a way where I felt like I can't be less than them.

### **Summary**

This resistance to structural violence and negatively-stereotyped identities allowed these respondents to traverse the lower economic rungs of America's most impoverished and under-resourced communities and achieve the highest academic degrees obtainable. It is important to note that the respondents did not begin their lives as high-achieving students. Unlike Carter's (2006) description of how under-resourced student's "straddle" their own culture and others, these respondents suffered scares of structural violence that required a deep inner resolve that did not manifest via happenstance. This study adds to the literature by looking at the ways in which these participants explain the difficult pathways toward their achievements and explore the development of their goals, ideals, and concepts of self. According to many of their narratives, their resilience grew out of their resistance to how they were perceived by others and the limited opportunities provided by a racially-ordered and class-based society that I have described as promoting structural violence. This other concept of the self then developed into a positive Black identity that was fostered in the same places that they experienced their greatest challenges (i.e., at home, in their communities, and in their schools). The development and nurturing of this ethos of Black achievement is at the crux of this study's findings.

## CHAPTER 5: BLACK IDENTITY FORMATION, RESISTANCE, AND RESILIENCE

### Introduction

This study is focused on the inhibitive environments in which the respondents were reared and their explanations of how they were able to “beat the odds.” The data suggest that both resistance and resilience were interrelated, and that both were significant in the respondents’ explanations of their positive life-course trajectories. Across their lives, the respondents were keenly aware of their stigmatized Black identities and their responsibility to work “twice as hard” to assume a “prove them wrong” (Carter. 2006) mentality that, in turn, continually fed their desire to overcome their circumstances. This data refutes the idea that the concepts of resistance and resilience were mutually exclusive factors in the Black male poverty-to-academic success matrix. These findings support the theoretical posits of Oyserman et al. (1995), in that the subjects’ understandings, of their Blackness was intricately connected to their achievement ideology. Consequently, their concept of self and, more specifically, their Black identity acted as a mitigating factor against the barrage of interpersonal negativity to which they were exposed (Carter. 2006). The research suggests that the higher the degree to which Black boys are infused with positive imagery of themselves, the less likely they are to accept and participate in activities that work in contrast to their understandings of their positively-oriented Black selves. The data from this study indicates that, while the respondents were acutely aware of the meanings and devaluations attached to their socioeconomic positions and racial identities, their internalized or subjective selves served as a buffering or protective agent against internalizing their marginalization. In the following chapter, I explore the subjects’ introductions to the interconnected pieces of their identity-formation puzzles that they indicate to be the sources of



influence that shaped their lives. While some of the influences were external, as indicated above, their mothers, fathers, and grandmothers did most of the heavy lifting.

### **The Black Identity Development Process (Socialization)**

Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear. (James Baldwin)

Black boys in America are born into a political and social system that situates their identity between a state of perpetual suspicion and an inferred premature guilt. The degree to which Black men are targeted and harassed on a daily basis has reached epidemic levels, and the presentation of their extra-judicial homicides have become a sickeningly consistent storyline throughout the news media cycle. On March 18, 2018, Mr. Stephon Clark, an unarmed Black man, was shot by members of the Sacramento Police Department in the backyard of his home that was owned by his grandparents (Berman, 2018). The officers shot 20 rounds of ammunition, 8 of which hit Mr. Clark, ending his life. On July 19, 2015, Samuel DuBose, an unarmed Black man was shot and killed by a University of Cincinnati police officer during a traffic stop (FARS, 2017). Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager, was shot and killed in Sanford, Florida, by a neighborhood watch volunteer (Capehart, 2013). In each of these cases, the victim was unarmed, and the perpetrator was not convicted of any crimes. These occurrences reflect a systemically pervasive license for law enforcement and the general public to conclude, at their discretion, that the Black bodies with which they come in contact are no longer allowed to continue living, and they can end their lives without fear of justice. Black parents have a unique responsibility to inform their boys of these risks and others that are unique to their plight as Black boys in America. This precarious positionality requires a unique socialization that includes parents addressing the threat of unwarranted and potentially unpunishable harm and death.

## The Talk

The participants in this endeavor spoke about the unfortunate reality that parents of Black boys face as a consequence of the racialized categorization of their children. Black children have to be prepared for racial discrimination as a byproduct of the perpetual racism that is part of living in America. While not unique to Black parents, these conversations take place most frequently in the households of African American families (Caughy et al., 2002. Hughes et al., 2006). The “talk” consists of messages about racism that reflect sociohistorical changes around issues of race (DiAquoi .2017). Parents from the lower socioeconomic stratum consider these messages to be a normal part of their childrearing process (Coard et al., 2004). Kenneth clarified his mother’s justification of this process by saying, “She just had these experiences with White folks, and I have too, so she’s just telling us the game and helping us understand.” He further explained the following:

She’d tell me. “This is a White man’s world, but you can do anything.” She had several experiences, racial experiences growing up, along with my grandparents. She would tell me that she would always stand up for what she knew was right. She isn’t bad, but she don’t play no games if you treat somebody wrong, or she suffered from racism. She definitely stood up.

The caregivers were also uninhibited in expressing their general views of the White population. In the following excerpt, Stephon explains his grandmother’s general dislike of White people, despite not giving him specific reasons for it. Her point, nonetheless, was clear:

Interviewer: Did your mom or anyone in your family ever discuss being Black in America?

Stephon: Grandma. Grandma did, and Grandpa did a lot. Grandma don’t like White people, at all.

Interviewer: All right.

Stephon: Let’s just get that out there. Granddad, he was more of like, just recognized who he was. “I’m just trying to make the money, ain’t

trying to mess up nobody else's life, or nothing like that and don't anybody mess with my life." Pretty much it.

Interviewer: How did Grandma express her not liking the White folks?

Stephon: Oh, you just don't trust them. You don't trust them. Cause they are not... that was just pretty much it. I don't think she had nothing; she didn't say, she didn't say nothing bad about nobody. Just don't trust them.

While parents warned their sons about the current hierarchy of race that young Black men are expected to face, the instructions on how to contend with race and racism were not always the same. For example, whereas Kenneth was instructed to stand up for what he felt was right, Ramarley was encouraged to not "talk back." This was revealed when he was asked, "How did your family feel about their Blackness?" He replied as follows:

They owned it, they constantly reminded me that in this world, coming from my world, in Southeast Louisiana to this one your Blackness is all that what people gonna see they're gonna see your Blackness first before your college education, they're gonna see your humanness right, they my parents both of them talked to me about making sure that I don't talk back to White people, don't give them a reason to wanna lock you up or anything like that, so being Black was at the forefront of my mind.

His indication of not wanting to get locked up spoke to another complexity of socialization. The respondents spoke about preemptive measures of behavior. As a result of their Black-maleness, they needed to find ways to offset its problematic indexicality. One explanation for the different strategies that the parents suggested is their demographics. Ramarley was from the southern part of the United States that carries a long history of abject racism and intolerance while Kenneth was from Milwaukee, Wisconsin in the upper Midwest. Despite differences in strategies for how to handle oppression, these strategies unvaryingly came with an understanding that they were presented to build resolve and confidence, not inflict harm. Research indicates that negative racial identity is related to a feeling of inferiority (Parham & Helms, 1985) and psychological stress (Munford, 1994).

Oscar's grandmother shared views regarding the uphill struggle ahead for him. She also made sure he knew not to let it affect his self-worth. When Oscar was asked to provide a vital directive from his caregiver, he stated the following:

My grandmother always said this, though: "You have to work twice as hard to prove yourself," and that you could do that. I think in that sense they kind of understood a sense that they may perceive superiority, and they may look at you in a certain way, but don't allow them to do that.

Alton confirmed that this was also a part of his rearing, as well as his understanding of it: He shared the following:

My mother would always tell me this is a White man's world. He can do whatever he wants to do. She would always say that, and when you're young, you're like what? What are you talking about? I realize that it's really her just preparing me... Really making sure that I had confidence in myself, that I had self-esteem but making sure that I always knew that whatever I wanted to do, I could make it happen.

These views and warnings were a part of a more substantial construction of messages that the respondents used in the formation of their sense of self and their Black identity.

### **Messaging**

The varying identity-informing messages that the respondents received from their caregivers fell into three basic categories. They were being told about (1) who they're were or who they were not, (2) the current oppressive environment into which they were born, or (3) what was expected of them concerning the previous two. Each one of these messages served dual roles throughout the adolescence respondents' and beyond. Their understandings of these three messages would help them, first, to traverse the steep terrain of the American experience of being a Black male and, second, hold on to an internal sense of self throughout the process. This infusion of positive racial identity or socialization is a well-documented process. Research has indicated that a positive understanding of and belief in one's racial identity can lead to greater self-esteem (Speight et al. 1996., Phelps et al., 2001). Heppner, et al., (1997) suggested that this

socialization process could also lower levels of perceived, culture-specific stressors.

Consequently, the highly-stratified and resource-deficient communities that these men were born into continually presented culture-specific stressors. To prevent children from developing negative ideas about their identities, caregivers often made sure that children knew whom they should not emulate.

**“Don’t be like them,” “Bullet don’t have a name.”**

This idea of being different from the other persons in the neighborhood was an important message that many of the caregivers stressed. In a population inundated with daily presentations of negativity, parents need to do more than tell the young men who they are. They needed to express who they are not. Laquan shared about his mother’s imploration:

“We different, we different, do not be like them, do not be like them.” We didn’t understand what it means. ‘Be like them.’ You think about it now, some of them that did not play ball with me are in jail, dead, or you know, incarcerated, same thing. That’s why she said, “Don’t be like them.” In other words, she started early, “Don’t be like them,” because she doesn’t want us to end up whatever she thinks we gonna end up at.

Ramarley’s mother was also very direct in her assessment of the other people in her community. She merely stated, “You have a future, they don’t!” Ramarley elaborated as follows:

In some respects, it was true I hung around a lot of people who were in gangs and stuff like that. They could; it could have gone negatively for me if I continued down that path. My mother was very concerned about that. She had no problem embarrassing me in front of my friends.

This idea of creating a sense of difference within difference was an exciting finding throughout the interviews. The respondents found themselves working against the reality that some of the persons in their neighborhoods did, conduct themselves in ways that fit the negative narratives. However, some of their caregivers had said their sons were not “like them” and, therefore, should not be around “them.” Jordan’s mother also expressed that he should avoid and see himself as different from his surroundings and not be trapped in them. His grandmother used

the unpredictability of the trajectory of a bullet to drive this point home. In the interview, Jordan shared the following:

If somebody was known to get in trouble, they'd be like, "You should not show with them as much. You should stay away from them." My grandmother's favorite thing is, "Bullet don't have a name."

This concern about the randomness of violence is supported by events like the shooting to death of the seven-year-old Aiyana Mo'Nay Stanley-Jones who, on May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010, was shot in the head and killed by members of the Detroit police department (White 2014). The officer who took the fatal shot was not convicted of any crime, as was the case in the shooting death of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, who, in November of 2014, was shot and killed by a member of the Cleveland police department. In this case, no indictment was ever brought against the officer. This respondent learned that Black lives don't always matter and life for Black people is not fair.

**Environment: "Life ain't fair."**

While being exposed to the conditions that structuralized violence facilitates is not the fault of the respondents, making them understand the plight from which they would need to escape was at the forefront of many of their discussions with their parents. In confirmation of this, Tyre remarked as follows:

My mother accepted, she incorporated it I think into her parenting. I remember her constantly telling me, "Life is not fair, so you do what you need to do to get ahead."

Ramarley's parents explained their struggle as intertwined with and a part of their Black identity.

He explained the following:

They characterized it in their struggles, in their respective struggles. So, my mom would say this ain't nothing new, I've been a struggling Black woman all my life. My father would always say the White man is not never—you know—treat me in a way that's gonna be on their level of respect. So, I think that's how they identified their Blackness it's through their struggles.

Sanders (1997) found that part of the motivating factors that inspired high-achieving students was the awareness of racially-oriented barriers. One of many formational gems submitted to young Black children by their parents is the idea that you have to work harder than everyone else. This notion of working “twice as hard” is a common belief in the Black community. Christopher gave further insight into this phenomenon:

I don't know anyone, any Black person that is, that wasn't told that they have to work twice as hard to get the same outcome or same credit as their White counterparts. My dad told me 'twice as hard' all the time. It's ingrained into my psyche.

The general notion of having to work hard was also followed by specific expectations that were expressed and understood by many of the men in this study. These expectations included messages regarding their attitudes and academic outcomes. Romain stated that his mother's primary objective was to promote, “a sense of responsibility and self-worth and independence” in him.

Trayvon shared the directives that were a part of his understanding of his mother's hopes and dreams for him:

Mom always valued honesty. Being a man of your word. Being mindful of how you treat other people. My mother's thing, as I was growing up was always, “Yes you can learn and be the smartest person in the world, but it's also important that you know how to treat other people.”

These general expectations continued to reappear through the transcripts of the interviews. The significant messages that the respondents received from these expectations were often not academically-oriented in nature. The interviewees revealed many other roadmaps regarding behaviors and attitudinal dispositions that helped to shape how they perceived their place in the context of their struggles. Jason shared how positive affirmations informed his concept of self:

My mother was always, definitely pushing me to do better. I think it was more indirect and in terms of like, people weren't saying in my household and kind of weren't telling

me to do things. They just kind of always just had this personal predisposition to just want to do good. It was more like positive affirmations, Jason's smart, "Jason's smart, Jason's smart." It wasn't directly saying, "You're to go do this." That for me was kind of like function in saying, getting that positive reinforcement that I had ability and potential.

Other parents were more specific in their descriptions of what they expected from their sons regarding academic achievement. Akai's mother, for example, wanted him to pursue a career in the medical field. He also attributes his achievement to her:

My mom expected me to be a doctor. I was like okay, whatever. In the master's program someone told me like, "Yeah, you need to make sure you hit that mark." I didn't necessarily drive that. Someone else pushed me into that.

Being pushed into a world through which the respondents did not have experience maneuvering required them to learn how to be culturally multidimensional. The "bridging function," as described by Cross et al. (1995), suggests that Black students can move between Black and White cultures while maintaining a deep connection and respect for their norms and values. This function refers to a Black student's ability to participate in another culture without having to suppress their racial self-concept. Tyre described how he was taught about the importance of both education and remaining open to understanding others. He stated the following:

There was an emphasis on education. There was an emphasis on learning how to fit into society, you know, things like etiquette classes and foreign languages, and you know, learning to, there was an emphasis on engaging in other cultures.

Tamir's father explained to him that the degree and education you receive becomes a permanent part of your story. His dad told him, "Son, once you get that paper, no one can take it away from you." To Tamir's father, "that paper" represented an asset that could not be taken away. This desire to not be interrupted or taken advantage of speaks to the perpetual status of pre-interruption that victims of structural violence endure. The belief in and the pursuit of a stable life that is devoid of the thievery and loss that has become a staple in the experiences of Black people in America was a recurring theme that the participants presented in their interviews.



Throughout this endeavor, it became clear that this achievement mindset was instilled in them early in their development.

### **Birth of an Achievement Ethos**

#### **All in the Family**

Most of the primary caregivers of the interviewees did not have a college degree. In fact, most of the academic achievements of the respondents' parental authority figures were quite unremarkable. While Oscar, Sean, and Walter stated that their mothers or fathers graduated from high school, Laquan, Alton, and Walter had parents whose highest grade of completion ranged from eight to tenth grade. This lack of formal education did not impact the expectations and educational goals they set for their children. Respondents discussed the messages that they received from their primary caregivers regarding what they expected of them. Laquan indicated that his dad wanted him and his brothers to be successful, which would be reflected by them having to wear ties. "I remember he said he wanted all three of us to be... to have a tie on. I don't know if you know what that means." The tie meant that he would have a job that did not require the back-taxing labor to which his father was exposed. He wanted his son to be upwardly mobile and to contradict the downwardly mobile outcomes that suggest the probable downward intergenerational social mobility of Black Americans. Seven out of ten Black Americans who are born into the middle wealth and income quintile, fall into one of the two lower quintiles as adults (Rodrique, . et al.,2017). These caregivers worked tirelessly to give the participants avenue to success. Not surprisingly, the literature on resilience indicated that family was often identified as necessary for forming a protective barrier during adolescence (Olsson et al., 2003).

Understanding that events in the lives of the respondents change, as circumstances do, in this study, I was attentive to the changing dynamics of family makeup and support. The

following excerpts represent varying timeframes during the life-courses of the respondents that demonstrate the fluidity of family in the lives of these men. Many of the respondents identified various family members as being instrumental in their understanding of lasting, unconditional support. Akai shared the following:

My mom and brother and I are very linked in terms of taking care of each other. But it was always understood that you make sure that you take care of yourself and get where you ever need to get to, and if you need us, we're here for you. The individuality or the independence was always encouraged, but there was always a sense, of if necessary you could depend on us.

Most of the respondents recognized the importance of family. Both Michael and Tamir shared positive commentary regarding their mothers:

I don't know where I'd be without all the support I've had, and, yes, a super supportive mom is like extra. My biggest fan is my mom. I always joke with her, like, my mom is like my homie. That's the homie. (Michael)

I grew up with a strong sense of family. We were very close coming up. (Tamir)

Sean explained how his mother's support was instrumental for him, despite her personal, academic deficits:

As far as the academic perspective, not so much. As far as the social and emotional support, yes. She was extremely encouraging. She would pray with me, give me words of advice. Not much on the academic side because it was something that she didn't have any experience with, but having that level of support, kind of what you experience... pushing you to bridge those gaps and put you in a place where you don't know how to navigate too well.

Interestingly, members of the extended family, for reasons beyond the respondents' control, often stepped in with positive influences and served as role models in the respondents' lives. Tamir shared that after the tragic loss of both of his parents, his siblings helped him stay on course:

Though my parents were no longer with us, my oldest brother stepped into that fatherly role for me for a while. My sister too, because they knew the importance of staying on the course of education. I had great folks around me when my parents passed away who really supported me and made sure I stayed in school. They were like, "You're not going

home. What are you going home to do? Hang on the corner? No, you're going to get this education."

Ezell spoke about his aunt's and grandmother's influence and presence in his life:

My aunt, she's very successful, she's very educated, but she never had kids, so she calls me her kid. When I go to Chicago, which I call home, I stay with her. I'm her child. I spend Thanksgiving with her. I spend Thanksgiving with her. I used to do that with my grandmother when I was going to school in undergrad, but my grandmother's 90 now. She lives in an assisted living facility, so she took that role. She's the person that calls me all the time. She's the person that encourages me.

He continued as follows:

We have a great relationship. Whenever I see her, she tells her friends, "This is my son, the nephew." She's very vocal in the decisions I make, and very... She inspires me too, just like my grandmother, but she is a person that I can talk to when I say, "You know, I don't know if I should do this Ph.D. program, or this stuff ain't coming together, I don't think I can do it." She'd be like, "No, you've come this far. You are standing on greatness."

The extension of support beyond the immediate family is not an uncommon practice for a culturally-displaced population. In addition, her assertion that he had a responsibility to represent and honor the ancestors that have paved the way for the opportunities to which he now has access was also an important and consistent message that was frequently shared with the respondents. That message was similar to that expressed in the flowing excerpt of Maya Angelou's (1978) timeless work, *Still I Rise*:

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise.

Another important factor that emerged from the study is the presence of fathers that stands in direct contrast to the historically prevalent narration of Black fathers being absent within the Black family structure.

## Daddy often is Not “Absent”

Too often, the literature regarding Black family’s centers around the single Black mother and the missing Black father. Although the missing Black dad narrative has been refuted in important works, such as “*The Myth of the Missing Black Father*” by noted scholar Dr. Charles Green (2009), the consistent growth these presentations is innumerable, both in the public and academic spheres. While the respondents spoke of parental involvement by mothers, grandparents, and extended family, their commentary regarding their fathers was particularly noteworthy in this context. Interestingly, in a study of 1,213 African American males, Wilson-Sadberry et al. (1991) discovered that fatherly influence was a strong predictor of college attendance. Many of these men shared stories that stand in direct contrast to the absent dad framework. Christopher shared this touching commentary about his father’s interaction with his younger sister:

Watching my dad braid my sister’s hair while we were on the train heading to school taught me much of what I needed to know about being a real man. I carry that with me even today. He is what you would call, a very masculine man, right... but would let her practice putting makeup... on him. He would look crazy... man! My mother would say he looks like Wesley Snipes in drag, like in that movie *To Wong Foo*. (Christopher)

When asked whether their fathers played a role in their educational objectives and goals, many respondents shared stories of their earliest memories of how their dads helped them with their schoolwork throughout their adolescence.

I remember when I was very little, I think kindergarten, first, second grade, my father would make me write these paragraphs every day. And you know a paragraph when you’re little, it felt like it was extremely long, but I’ll never forget it that he made me do that. Always. (Kenneth)

Laquan described copying his dad’s math solving skills, even before he fully understood what he was doing:

Only thing is, you know, we, he used to take his ditto sheet, he used to study a lot of math, because boy, man, we used to take his ditto sheets. We called them ditto sheets

back then; you know what I'm saying? We'd take it, and we used to look at the numbers. I remember just trying to do it. I'm young, I'm thinking, I don't know how to do no fraction, none of that, but we were copying him. That's how we were. Most of us are engineers now.

However, for Ramarley, his dad's influence was less structured and more of an understanding of love and pride:

His parenting to me was more so that, "I'm proud of you, son," I talk about you a lot to my brothers and all of that, and I knew he loved me, and I knew he was proud of me that was the extent of his parenting, for me. (Ramarley)

Beyond family physical and verbal interactions and messaging, the respondents gave specific tools and developed habits that assisted in the development of their academic success and their racialized achievement ideologies.

### **Reading was Foundational**

According to Hernandez (2011), the dropout rate of poor Black students that were not reading proficiently in the third grade is about eight times that for all proficient readers. While the caregivers of these young boys may not have been privy to this fact, they still stressed literacy. Several respondents indicated the importance of the presence of reading material in their homes. Oscar described his involvement with reading at a young age:

Encyclopedias... we had all of *the Cat in the Hat*, Dr. Seuss books that my mom kept, and she hasn't bothered them. They still at home until this day... my mom, she was like, when we came home, if we ain't have homework, we had to do a book report, and so we had to pull one of those books.

In direct contrast to Cohen's (1955) suggestion that lower-class individuals have a different set of morals from the upper class, as well as goals, and norms, the subjects consistently indicated that the infusion of educational practices and reading into family life was a norm. This stands in direct contrast to the label attached to Black men and boys that marks them as being part of an anti-intellectual population. Both Jerome and Tyre spoke about the impact that reading had in their formative years:

Actually, I was doing better, I knew more than a lot of kids did. Cause I knew how to read, my daddy taught me how to read. (Jerome)

I can specifically remember favoring a lot of the Curious George books and a lot of the Berenstain Bears books, and a few of the Goosebumps series, that sort of thing. (Tyre)

Interestingly, despite the financial difficulties faced by their families, caregivers spent what little they had ordering books and, for those that could, utilizing the public libraries, or picking up second-hand reading material. Jordan and William explained the following:

They had this thing like Scholastic. It was like, I have to describe, like a newsletter... I think that's old too, but anyway, it's like a listing of books, and you order books, so we would order books from there. I went to the library, so I always would have books. (Jordan)

We had books, encyclopedias, magazines, we had lots of books. Our grandmother would give us encyclopedias... the encyclopedias were the ones that she would find that someone threw out, she would find them and give them to us. Some of them were ten years old, and that's how you're able to explore the world back then, there was no Internet. (William)

The importance of reading at an early age cannot be overstated to these men. Some of the respondents had experiences in their formative years that served to foreshadow their potential. Christopher shared the following:

I was always in trouble in school. I was fighting every day. For most of us, that was just the norm. Run up on some cats and put that work in. Fact. Even though my mother was really strict, she would let me read comic books, and a lot of the wording in those books was difficult. I remember even today some of the phrases in those comics that helped me expand my vocabulary beyond my peers. When I was in the fourth grade, I took the citywide exam and scored a 12.6 which meant I was reading on a twelfth-grade level. - They called my mom up to the school to let her know that her trouble-making boy was kinda smart.

He continued as follows:

I mean... I remember in a Marvel comic where someone said, 'The magnitude of my power at this juncture is beyond your comprehension and your kin,' like come on, I'm reading these phrases at 6, seven years old. So, I had to look up words to get the gist of what was being said, so my vocabulary was crazy.

Conversely, the subjects relied on reading, even when they seemed to reject formal education during periods of truancy. Jordan explained how the library that his mother introduced him to also served as a hiding spot for him. I could read so early, [it] helped me. Even when I got a little bit of a teenager and was like whatever about school, I could always bring my way back because I could read.

Significantly, Jordan's commentary suggests his understanding of the attitudes regarding Black boys and the ways in which he did not fit the stereotypical fluidity of attitudes regarding education and school. The respondents were not always following the rules. They experienced periods of rule breaking and deviance. Jerome described how the library and reading still played an important role in his life, even if it was for less-than-admirable reasons.

I didn't even know what I was doing, I was just reading, I would sit in the library and read history books, encyclopedias and we are talking about a little kid. And I knew to go to the library because truant officers, they weren't looking for you... They knew Black kids weren't playing hooky in no library!

Sometimes, they needed a little extra motivation to continue with these positively-oriented behaviors. Reading was also reinforced using reward and punishment systems. Tyre learned that his mother's insistence on reading came with benefits that made it worth pursuing. He stated the following:

Every summer my mom had me participate in the summer reading program. Back then they gave you big charts with stars, and you had to write down the books that you read and keep track with the stars every day that you read, or for every book that you read. At the end of the summer you would turn the chart in, and I'm glad they don't do this now, but you would get like a certificate for a free personal pizza or something like that. Of course, the food was a big motivator for me.

On the opposite side of the motivation spectrum, Anthony shared how punishments by his father involved increasing his reading volume at the expense of watching the New York Knicks basketball team, a favorite pastime of his family. He shared the following:

My dad was big on reading. We were a Knicks family... so when I wasn't doing good in school, or I didn't get it or when I did something bad, he would turn on the Knicks game, right... had me sit down and face him. I'll never forget this, and he opened a book about George Washington Carver and Albert Einstein, and he said, "Read that... } and right there on the spot while the Knicks game was playing.

Christopher's experiences with reading as a punishment led him to consider the possibility of his dad having a hidden agenda. He shared the following:

My dad would tell me to go to my room and read whenever he got mad. Funny thing was... I'm not sure he knew that after a while it wasn't a punishment anymore I couldn't wait to pick up a book. They came before Columbus changed my life son... Facts! Actually, now that I look back, maybe he did know it.

This tendency to read books that aligned with imagery of Black people that were not available or presented in their schoolings solidified their self-efficacy and allowed for them to see lives, goals, and accomplishments that were beyond the scope of their economic victimizations.

### **Black Literature**

When I asked the interviewees about what reading material stood out the most to them, an interesting and common thread appeared. Each respondent described how Black literature affected him in ways that were important to them. Ezell, John, and Jerome agreed that books about Black life had a significant influence on their development. They shared the following:

Every time I read certain books, "Up from Slavery" ... or The Autobiography of Malcolm X. There were certain books that, after I read them, they changed my life. (Ezell)

Chancellor Williams, Destruction of Black Civilizations was on my shelf, and I picked it up one day and read it, and it changed my life, you know. Malcolm was actually on the shelf, but I didn't know it, and my friend brought me his copy and made me read it. (John)

As a kid, you learn about Nat Turner... or Harriet Tubman and so forth and you're like "Damn these folks were strong people." They cared about the freedom of their people. I've gotten to carry on our tradition. Right? I have a responsibility. How do I carry a torch? (Jerome)



These participants were finding new avenues for seeing themselves and discovering different ways of being through literature that was not part of the public-school academic curriculum. Even in situations of paternal absence, the adults would leave indicators of what was important in literature and art and what was worthy of consumption and consideration. These breadcrumbs of identity were described in John's exploration of the items his dad left behind.

My father left his book collection at the house. And I remember my mother had this huge shelf that took up a whole wall in the living room of all these Black books so everything from Michelle Wallace's *Black Macho*... So, I'm seeing African statues and Black books. I didn't read them, but the visuals gave me a sense of "Okay, that's supposed to be something I come from." So, there was at least that kind of comfort (John)

The importance and pursuit of this alternative education suggest an understanding that Black people in America are subjected to carefully-crafted knowledge that is presented as the canon for intellectual development, yet this is done in painfully- and harmfully-deficient ways. This distrust in education by Whites for Whites is a well-documented concern, as outlined in the seminal work of Dr. Carter G. Woodson, *The Miseducation of the Negro* (1933). This problem was also examined by Paulo Ferrer in his 1993 book *The Politics of Education*, in which he states, "it's naive for the subordinate to think that the oppressor will educate you in a way that you will perceive your own oppression." This need for and pursuit of alternative education is, in itself, a form of resistance. Christopher expressed his thoughts on formal education this way:

Man, have you ever read *Moby Dick*? That book is supposed to represent some of the best literature that America has to offer... and it's required reading. So almost every Black child has got to read the chapter that describes how White skin "sets them above" the other races. Or *The Last of the Mohicans*, a book that refers to the natives as savages more times than you can count. That's psychic warfare, and it has predictable ramifications.

Essentially, the "predictable ramifications" to which Christopher alludes are the self-doubt that can be infused within the psyches of Black boys in response to the structural violence that they

experience in the form of being made to read literature that reinforces the idea of their ascribed subjugated identities.

### **External Influencers**

In the Black community, it's widely understood that there are people that help you get through life who do not show up on the thank-you list. The African proverb that it takes a village to raise a child speaks to the community's collective effort that is required to raise a child from adolescence to adulthood. The respondents also described outside people that helped them survive. Christopher shared the following:

I was walking through the hood with my girl and didn't notice a group of boys about 30 feet behind me. I didn't find out later how I was protected by one of the guys that were in the group.

He continued as follows:

One of the guys started talking shit about me and my girl because he was jealous that I was dating her, so he told the other guys that they should jump me and let me know what it is. My man Alvin was in the crew and told the kid, 'Nah son, that's my man. If you want him, role up and give him a fair one cause ain't nobody jumping him while I'm here.' The kid decided not to step up because he knew I would give him that work<sup>3</sup>. Back then the hand skills were no joke. Anyway, there are so many times that people step in for us and we don't even know it.

This event speaks to the precariousness of life in the neighborhoods in which the respondents lived. The interdependence of people and community members remained an important factor in the lives of these men. Other respondents spoke of people, some unnamed, that they knew had their best interest at heart and would address any wayward behaviors that were unbecoming of them. Jerome talked about the older people in his neighborhood who were on watch. He shared,

Well, you gotta remember back then we are talking about Farragut projects you know, you had the older people on the bench who would if they saw kids doing things they spoke to it.

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<sup>3</sup> Beat the kid up

Philando explained how his best friend's father kept him aware of expectations, both academic and otherwise, by engaging him in conversations that required him to be able to give answers to questions about his current academic status and plans:

There was one gentleman, Mr. Richards, who is still with us. He's my best friend's father, he would always ask me, whenever he saw me, "How are you doing in school?" It wasn't just that one question, but he wanted to know what you were doing in school, learning in school, what are your plans, what have you, you know.

Eric shared that, when he began working one of his first jobs, one of his co-workers stressed to him to not get stuck there or become complacent and to go to college. He shared the following:

One it was this old-head there doing security with me. He was retired so we would chop it up. He kind of put himself [up] to be my mentor, if you will. At one point he was already telling me "Hey man don't get too comfortable here. Take advantage of this opportunity and go ahead and go to college."

A similar experience was also shared by Ezell:

The guy talked to me. The guy should be a motivational speaker because I couldn't change me. He was like, "Man, what you doing?" I was like, "Nothing, man. I'm bagging groceries at the grocery store." He was like, "You don't want to do that." I was like, "No." He was like, "You want to go to college." I was like, "Yeah."

Kenneth also spoke about the importance of Black mentors, saying "I think for some of my mentors, because I was a black man and they were black men, they really wanted me to win. And so, they did some extra."

The energy and encouragement that was needed to navigate the struggles of structuralized violence faced by these young Black men required constant addressing. Some of these men found their encouragement from persons located in their schools. Freddie talked about his eighth grade teacher, Ms. Turner:

She had, I think, a pretty positive influence. I remember all my teachers for the most part, and I do feel blessed to have had the elementary school... one, two, three, four Black teachers. Four or five Black teachers in elementary school. Then I would say Ms. Turner

if I had to just say, one excellent teacher. I would be something like her. I ended up becoming an eighth grade teacher.

He continued to explain the difference between her and other Black teachers and the way they handled him, their classrooms, and how he felt as a result:

An orientation about themselves and the way they managed the classroom, and Black teachers remind you of your aunts, and your grandma, and your mother. They just want to see you do well. I had one Black male teacher, and I just remember being so enamored just by the fact that I had a Black man who was my teacher when all you look around the building, you just see a whole bunch of women. I can't name one specific thing they said or did, but I always just remembered them being really encouraging.

Ramarley described his appreciation for Ms. Johnson, a Black grade school teacher about whom he shared fond memories:

She was, she was very special to me because all the time whenever I would get something wrong or say a sentence wrong, she would never pass judgment on me. She would always say okay I see that you get this, but you're not getting what I'm saying here. Let's do a little micro assignment, and I still do that today. I break up what I try to do into micro assignments, and then I combine them all together. She was a unique person, Ms. Johnson, was a very good person through and through. She reminded me a lot of a person who displayed unconditional regard for all people. And I try to emulate that after I graduated college and I got into practice, I tried to emulate that because, now as I am the teacher. Truth be told, I never wanted to be a teacher, her pastor said all the time "I see God telling me you're gonna be a teacher," and I said I don't see that. Right, so. But fast forward to 2016, I'm an assistant professor, right?

The respondents claimed that these were some of the interactions they relied upon in times of trouble to stay grounded. They also described instances that resonate prominently when they described what they identified as the frameworks of their successful academic paths. These frameworks for success are infused within their understanding of the duality of their personhood—a concept often referred to as “double consciousness.”

The respondents also found encouragements and direction in other mediums, including television and their musical choices.

## Hip Hop and Media

Watson (2016) interviewed scholars to address the impact that the *Cosby Show* had on their lives. During the interview, Dr. Bryant T. Marks, the director of the Program for Research on Black Male Achievement and an associate professor of psychology at Morehouse College shared, “In addition to the humor, it dealt with serious topics such as racism, fatherhood absence, interracial dating, Black history and culture, and having the courage to pursue one’s passion.” This quotation represents a common thread that is shared between the respondents. Television shows helped to cultivate a desire to model the behaviors and accomplishments of individuals with whom they did not have direct relationships. John explained how the *Cosby Show* let him know what was possible in his life:

My roadmap was watching *A Different World*. That was my roadmap. The *Cosby Show* gave you a framework for appreciating college. *A Different World* gave you an image for what college could look like. And so, you’re seeing people going to class. You’re seeing people going to the cafeteria. You’re seeing people dealing with professors. You’re seeing people staying up late finishing papers. You know, you did some of that, papers and stuff, in high school but there was no vision for it. (John)

William was a little more emphatic when he was asked if he felt that any television programs were important to him growing up. He exclaimed, “*A Different World*, *A Different World*, and *A Different World!*” The subjects indicated that the *Cosby Show* and similar programming allowed them to see a life outside of their conditions and envision themselves beyond their current circumstances. Music also played an important role in the lives of the subjects. Several of them suggested that hip-hop and television gave them a sense of liberation. Stephon and William shared the following:

I grew up with, and that was a huge part of my young life. Which of course is, you see all the stuff that you want on TV. This was in the nineties, eighties, and nineties where they were liberating television, as far as what you could see. (Stephon)

I listened to hip hop a lot of lyrics stand out, you know Tupac said if you believe then you can achieve just look at me on the song with Scarface. Those lyrics stuck with me.  
(William)

### **Stereotype Resistance**

One of the most insidious insinuations in both public and academic discourses is the violent nature and inadequacy of the Black man. The pervasive negative depictions of Black men and boys are prominently on display throughout all levels of the American social sphere. This tribal stigma, as defined by Goffman (1963), originates outside of the self-concept or ego. The idea of resistance in education has primarily been discussed to contextualize anti-intellectual behaviors and dispositions that are deployed by some low-income minorities who perform below acceptable academic standards. Herbert Simmons and Ogbu (1998) use a cultural-ecological framework to suggest that the limited opportunities that are available to minorities cause them to abandon education as a viable option for them to use to move upward economically. This defeatist positionality is meant to place structural inhibitors alongside negative cultural adaptations at the forefront of the issues of academic attainment disparity. Ogbu suggests that the maladaptive behaviors that lead to poor academic outcomes are the result of deliberate choices made by students. Giroux (2001) shares this idea that structure and agency operate in conjunction to explain resistance to education. Giroux suggests that we need to consider “wider structural and ideological determinations while recognizing that human beings never represent simply a reflex of such constraints.” Therefore, the interplay of both structure and individual agency need to be analyzed comprehensively. What both these scholars suggest, and seem to miss, is that the resistance that can be formulated in response to structural domination can and is directed toward the preconceived notions of expected failure.

## Learning to Resist

With each respondent's confirmation of their deep consciousness of both their racial identity and their need to demonstrate that they were not a part of the stereotype, it became quite clear that they were actively resisting these labels via their efforts, objectives, and achievements. This stand against the majoritarian White construction of their personhood carried a general mistrust of White people with it. Eric shared the following:

I saw White people as people who were empowered, but didn't have my best interest, so I always had a disdain or distrust for certain White folks and a love for Black folks, just 'cause that was the nature of the struggle.

Jerome also shared the following:

If you would read the history books about what's been done to us, Black folks would be telling White folks to go to hell. ....and it's like we, not hating you, we just don't like what you do.

This idea of "what they do" is a communal understanding of varied experiences and interactions of Black people with their White counterparts. As exemplified by the interaction that Tamir's mother had with a store owner, the mistrust shared by the participants is the result of lived experiences. Tamir described an interaction between his father and a store owner that discriminated against his mother. When his father learned that his mother was refused service at a local store, his dad modeled how to challenge oppression. He shared the following:

I'll never forget my dad had to go to Woolworths and have a word with the manager. In the vein of MLK, he pretty much told the manager, "If my wife comes in here and she is not served ever again, I will have all of these Black folks in this entire town boycott your Woolworths and every store that you own."

Jerome described his opinions regarding White people in response to the way he was treated by the parents of a White student before he entered the school walls. As a child, he was bussed into what was considered a better school district that, coincidentally, was located in a

primarily White area. His critique also alluded to the structural inequality that is inherent in the funding structures of the school system. He exclaimed the following:

Equal funding or not equal funding so not really integrate you send Black kids to a White school and you call it integration. That's not integration! That's harassment.! That's racial harassment. Because them White folks harassed us. They didn't want us there near them.

These events of conflict and contention followed him and the other respondents into what, to them, was an unexpected battleground. A place where it would take much more than resilience to survive and flourish, inside the school walls.

### **Resistance as Achievement**

The contested operationalization of the term “resilience” as both an outcome and a process render it an inadequate descriptive term for the phenomena expressed and experienced by the respondents in this study. Resilience is limited in its scope to explain or infer the extent to which effort is exerted to overcome and succeed. That is to say, the peculiarities of structuralized violence in the form of racialized oppression necessitate the consideration of its properties as a consistent and continuing force in any explanation or definition of one’s engagements with it. Therefore, the degree to which the respondents were able to push against actively-engaged systems and processes that are oriented to impede and/or inhibit the acquisition of their proposed objectives and goals is best described by the term “preemptive resistance.” Resilience, as a concept, is too benign and offers little critique of the systems enacting structural violence against the men in this study. Preemptive resistance presupposes the historical and empirically supported weaponization of Blackness and its status as a perpetual threat in racialized American society. It is the respondent’s ability to resist statistically predictable negative outcomes, behaviors, and dispositions and deploy countermeasures against the emotional and psychological assault against their very personhood. In the following portion of the transcripts from Ramarley’s interview



resides a view into the need for total resistance. Ramarley talks about the instructions he received from his mother about how to handle a teacher that called him a “barnyard nigger”:

Ramarley: I will never forget that. I walked up to Dr. Wilson, told me to look him in his eye, and I’m a child, I’m a child, scared cause I thought I was in trouble and “You tell him what I told you.” [laughter] and you know it wasn’t bad, it was good, you know, and she told me, my mom told me to say your words don’t matter because I’m going to be something greater than you and I was, I said it, and then I retreated right back outside the room and sat on the bench outside the principal’s office, and the next day I walked into his class and sat in the front row and he was just as nice as he could be

Interviewer: And how did that make you feel?

Ramarley: I was nervous, you know, because this man could fail me, he could fail me. My mom went up there and went off on him. I honestly thought my mom would whoop his ass, I really did. But she didn’t, she was hollering at the principals saying. “I don’t bring in my child to be called no N-word.” But I was just nervous you know an all my so-called friends were like. “Don’t fool with Ramarley, his mom will come here and fight y’all.” But you know, I was nervous, but that was the first time in my life that I was confident enough to stand up against someone who did not have my—well didn’t have my best interests in life

Interviewer: How do you think that impacted you going forward in terms of your education?

Ramarley: So, I would, like I said I have this unapologetic tone, you know I would always speak up in matters of social distress when I would see something I felt wasn’t right. I learned over the years to be more tactful about it and to be more assertive when necessary.

This violent interaction presents school as much more than a place of educational advancement. It was a place of conflict for Ramarley and the other respondents. This dehumanization within the academic setting suggests that their ability to persevere is much more than an act of resilience. These boys found themselves at war for the very right to exist as human beings. This idea of standing up for yourself was shared by several of the participants. Their lives were in a state of constant contention. Jerome’s resistance put him at direct odds with school

administrators and officials because of his unwillingness to stand for the pledge of allegiance in school. He noted the following:

I didn't pledge allegiance and my father had to come up to the cause he taught us not to pledge allegiance to a country that oppresses you.' Did I understand what he was saying, no? All I did was repeat what he said.

Many of them took on a "prove them wrong" attitude, similar to that described in the research by Moore et al. (2003). Oscar best articulated this disposition when he responded to the question about whether he felt the burden of disproving negative stereotypes:

Definitely, all the time. I'm like, "I'm going to finish this program because I'm going to prove them wrong," or "I'm going to get this research project funded because I'm going to prove you wrong." "I'm going to get into these grad schools" because you felt like I couldn't get into them.

He continued as follows:

"By someone saying or doubting in any type of way my abilities or whatever, definitely kind of sets a fire to me to be like, "I'm going to figure this out with or without you."

The participants' resistance was deployed in ways that spoke to the richness of Black culture, as well as an understanding of the historical preeminence of Black resilience as success through persistence. However, it is also important to note that the participants also understood that when Black people live in a country in which their racialized categorization is treated as a stigmatized identity, their Blackness needs to be "managed."

### **Black Identity Management**

In examining the life-courses of the respondents, I found the respondents' narratives evidenced the importance of their racial identities concerning their achievement ideologies. Yet, each participant also spoke about the varying situational adaptations of their Blackness. The burden of managing racial identity that these men carry affects daily decisions about language, potential interactions, and even what clothing to wear. Christopher shared his concern about being ostracized because of his "ways of being":

You don't want to feel other, so you adapt communication styles and ways of being. You sort of contort yourself in ways that don't make you feel ostracized.

When describing morning thoughts, it becomes quite evident that simply getting up and out into society takes serious contemplation for Black men. Ezell described his morning Black identity management ritual:

When I wake up in the morning, I look at myself, and I say, 'Look. I'm still Black, so I've got to act accordingly.' What can I wear today to not get followed in a store? What can I do to not get pulled over today? What can I do, so people won't ask me if I'm a football player? So, I don't wear a hoodie, I don't wear anything that has Nike on it, or athletic, or you know what I'm saying? Try to look less athletic and more academic. Those are the things that other people don't have to think about that aren't Black males. It's tiring after a while. It's just a lot.

### **Code Switching**

Code switching was used to make others feel a sense of comfort and familiarity with the respondents throughout their lives. This differs from "bridging" in that the purpose of this technique is to hide many of the differences in language and behavior that might create a cultural gap and hinder situational comradery (Cross et al., 2002). Yet, this shifting and switching is tiring and takes a psychological and emotional toll. Freddie often felt that, despite his best efforts, this was a constant search for respect that left him feeling unfulfilled and inadequate. He shared the following:

I think you become skillful at compartmentalizing your lives such that... Again, nobody wants to feel different, so you concede to however, these people are talking. How they talk, how they dress, how whatever. There was never a sense in mind of "Well what do I really want to say or do? I'm like I'm in this space let me adapt to this space that I'm in. I feel like I've always been that way. When you're in a hyper-White space with a whole bunch of White people, you adapt to that too. In that way, I didn't feel like it was super successful. The part that was awful, that was bad, was that even when I'm doing what it is that I think that I'm supposed to do based on what I've seen when that's still not good enough then that's when it gets to be awful. You have to do double time just to prove that you are as good as them, or better. That's the part that's hard when you're doing all the stuff that you think that you're supposed to do, and you still don't get treated with the same amount of respect.

“Switching back” was also an important part of the contortion of self. Kyan spoke about understanding the rules of code switching and the importance of not losing oneself in the process. You must be able to live in both worlds. He explained the following:

You got to code switch. You got to write in a manner that they understand. See, it’s one thing to code switch. You have to be able to switch back. I can switch back. Some people code switch, they can’t switch back, and they talk like that all the time. I can switch back. When I was around them, I pretty much code switch. When I was around my friends, I talked regular. The rule was, the implicit rule was, make them feel comfortable around you. Keep your hair trimmed, be well-groomed, be well-spoken. Don’t give them something to be threatened by. It’s understood.

While “keeping your hair trimmed,” as described by Kyan may seem like a small detail, Patrick shared how not following that line of thinking can cost you a job:

I think in changing my dialect and my diction, like when I’m speaking. I very much have a switch when... and like even after my first job after I graduated college, during the conversation I have long, I have dreadlocks, but at the time I had braids. They pulled me in the office because I was up for a promotion and they said, “Oh, ya know you’re up for this promotion, etc. etc. etc.” Anyways the end of the conversation came, or the basis of the conversation was, “You will get this promotion if you’re willing to cut your hair. Despite the fact that you’re qualified, the only way you will get this position is if you are willing to cut your hair. If you’re not willing to cut your hair, you will not get this position.”

Consequently, his refusal to cut his hair resulted in him not getting the promotion.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I discussed the socialization processes that fostered an academically-resilient Black identity within the consciousness of the respondents in this study. These processes included an infusion of positive identity and life-affirming messaging throughout the life-courses that the respondents reported as having lasting impacts on how they perceived themselves and the utility of their academic efforts and trajectories. Despite the pervasiveness of structural violence in the respondents’ communities, their victimization and its impacts were mediated by several reported factors. The respondents reported being informed about the plight of being Black while having requirements of high expectation that were couched within a knowledge of

historical precedents that was important for their academic success. They were also instructed on who “not to be.” Clear delineations were made between themselves and other oppressed members of their community who fell victim to the pressures and outcomes of impoverished living. These messages came from caregivers in their immediate families and from other adults throughout their neighborhoods. They also emanated from the reading of Black literature and the watching of media depictions that reflected positive Black imagery that coincided with their Black achievement ideology. The respondents actively resisted the majoritarian stereotypes of Black people as anti-intellectual and deliberately worked to disprove those narratives by becoming personal representations of Black academic excellence. Their behaviors, demeanors, and ideological beliefs support Carter’s (2006) critical race achievement ideology (CRAI). Additionally, the participants’ interviews revealed the importance of “code-switching” as a tool that enables them to traverse successfully what they depict as a hostile racist environment to which they are exposed daily in America. These men represent what is possible academically when Black men are equipped with knowledge of self, a grounding in their rich history of achievement, and perseverance. It remains an unfortunate fact that public education, as it exists now, runs in direct contrast to these objectives.

## CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The purpose of this endeavor was to explore the explanatory narratives of Black men who, after being born into under-resourced communities within American society, accomplished levels of academic success that represent essential contradistinction from statistically predictable and probable adverse outcomes. As victims of structuralized violence, these respondents and their accomplishments allowed for an in-depth look into the interworking of adaptive and resilient beliefs and processes. Uniquely, this study correctly orients these men from within an anti-deficit framework while also taking the besieged and weaponized Black identity that made their success considerably more outstanding into account. One of the objectives of this work was to ascertain how the respondents explained their life-course trajectories and whether the theoretical or conceptual frameworks of accommodation, resilience, or resistance proved to be pertinent in their description.

Accumulating insights into the life-courses of Black men whose trajectories defied the high probability of academic failure allows for the construction of ideas and remedies for other boys and men that exist in social and economic places that, heretofore, seemed inescapable. Interviews were conducted with 29 Black men who were holders of, or students in pursuit of graduate degrees, and who succeeded where most others failed. These interviews were recorded and transcribed using digital technology to ensure that the data was accurately represented. The themes and subsequent findings are the results of carefully organized, methodologically-informed analysis.

There exists an extensive body of literature and research on Black men. Unfortunately, many of the presentations of Black men in academia woefully neglect to situate contextually the position of Black men as victims of structuralized violence. In addition, research tends to also

present their race as a variable within the analysis and, as such, constructs findings that reinforce misrepresentation of Blackness and provides justification for the dangerous weaponization of Black men's melanin-infused bodies. First, in this qualitative study, the author sought to address this shortcoming in the research by correctly identifying the conditions that are actively-engaged inhibitors to Black boy's academic progress. Second, this work foregrounds the voices of the participants as the most authentic representations of their narratives. Lastly, because of the previous steps, this work helps to understand the poverty- to-success course that these respondents experienced.

### **Relevant Findings**

#### **Black Socialization and Resistance**

The findings of this study substantiate the relationship between racially-informed resistance and counter-criminogenic dispositions, as well as academic resilience. Ward (2002) contended that the development of a sense of Black identity that is "unassailable" is the most significant strategy with which to resist racial oppression. Hence, it is a requisite for African American children and adolescents. The data suggested that the deliberate attempts of caregivers had favorable effects on the development of the positively-racialized identities of the respondents. According to Coser et al. (1983), socialization is a process enacted by adults to inculcate in young people the norms, values, and beliefs that enable them to adapt, and hopefully flourish, as productive citizens to young people. Racial socialization, as it relates to racism, is argued to promote and enhance not only effective coping but also the psychological strength to resist and overcome oppression and devaluation (Ward. 1999). Consequently, for these caregivers, this childrearing socialization process is enacted against the backdrop of opposing systemic inhibitors (i.e., structural violence) to promote the safe and healthy development of

Black boys. Hence, this dilemma necessitates that the guiding principles of this process encompass resistance to the prevailing majoritarian conceptualization of and effrontery to Black-maleness. This racially-informed socialization assisted in the development of an internalized social identity for which academic success is simultaneously an expected outcome and a reflection of Black self-image.





## Figure 1. Black Achievement Praxis

First, this process includes the assessment and dissemination of the past and current state of culture and affairs that represent a threat to a young man's ability to move through society as a Black person in a racially hostile environment. The intergenerational patterns of anti-Black agendas, policies, and economic conditions to which the respondents were exposed necessitated interruption. Boys with low economic statuses, like the participants in this study, often lack the resources required to cope with the many manifestations of problems and pitfalls that are endemic to their social class and can fall prey to street-oriented respect-seeking dispositions without strong guidance (Anderson 2000; Staples, 1982). Referred to as "the talk" by some researchers, this infusion process involves considerably more than conversation. According to the respondents, this process involved: (a) conversations about structural violence (e.g., racism, criminal justice practices, inequality, and poverty) and its impacts; (b) introduction to religious tenets and Black individuals and events of historical consequence; (c) the consumption of positive racially affirming media, including television music, and literature; and (d) continual interactions and associations with like-minded racially-informed people. This process allowed for the creation of an inward-facing point of reference for the respondents whenever they were presented with negative events or depictions of or expectations about their behaviors, attitudes, or outcomes. The importance of this process is highlighted in the advice that Alton shared for the young Black boys of today. He explained the following:

I would tell them three things. One, is it's going to be extremely important for them to understand who they are, their identity. What that means for me is, not only your history, but it also means who you are. So, your core, your values, your core attributes, that personality that ain't going nowhere, you will understand yourself fully, that identity.

Larry's suggestion for the Black youth of today shared a similar sentiment. He spoke about the importance of self-sufficiency and internal validations of self.

I would say something to the effect that validates who they are, acknowledgment of who they are, recognition of who they are. Because that is the core of the identity. First, it's validation; then you believe the validation, then your power plant isn't external locus of control, it's inside. So, I don't need outside validating. It started from the outside, but I captured it, and so now I do it myself. I've become self-sufficient with my validation.

These men continually relied on their understandings of and belief in their central concepts of self to transport them through their most difficult circumstances. This belief in self is differentiated from the -belief- in the validity of conventional norms and values as an explanation of positive behaviors, as proposed by social control theory. The entire concept of "conventional" within those posits obscures the conventionality of the oppression and devaluation that stems from various American institutions. This blind spot within the postulatory tenets of social control theory, and by default, the broader idea of "accommodation," in its exoneration of the social structures that can simultaneously operate as places of support and intellectual development for some people and centers of oppression and degradation for others, warrants a theoretical reconceptualization to better explain their trajectory.

### **Theoretical Implications**

In criminal justice theory, social control theory is an important contributor to the way we contemplate why people refuse to participate in 'non-conformist' or law-breaking behaviors. It also suggestively explains, by definition, why people participate in law-abiding conformity. Therefore, an understanding of why the participants in this study "conform" to the pursuit of academic achievement should be explainable using the components of attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief as suggested by social control theory. However, according to the respondents' narratives within this work, Black men have other and more complex, racially-informed incentives. Specifically, these respondents held conflicting objectives: on the one hand, succeeding academically, and on the other, the protection of their emotional and psychological welfare. While these may seem to be complementary goals, as shown in this work, at times, these

men found the academic enculturation processes to be hostile and incongruent with their preservation of self. The curriculums that they were required to master included deliberate omissions and misrepresentations of Black life and people in America. Therefore, their commitment was not centered on a belief in the school, teachers, or curriculum. They maintained an unwavering belief in themselves, their culture, and their ability to persist despite their academic experiences. Unfortunately, as with other criminological frameworks, the permutations of the explanatory hypothesis are built upon evasions of or attempts to present race-neutral posits for consideration. As such, these reified formulations ignore the prevalence of the structural racism and violence that precedes their intellections. This failure to examine the obvious implications of race relations within criminological and educational contexts allows for the continued misconstruction of Black “criminality” as well as life within academia and beyond.

The significance of informed resistance in the life-courses of the respondents, both concerning their high academic achievements and their resistance to the criminogenic influence of structural violence, suggest the underpinnings of a new theoretical lens through which we might better understand the process.

### **The Introduction of Criminogenic Resistance Theory**

The pervasiveness of structural violence, the social and economic imbalance that it manifested within the lived experiences of the respondents, and the interdependence of the respondents’ racialized resistance and subsequent academic success underscore the salience of the respondents’ racial identity formations. This idea coincides with the posits of Ward (2000), who identified the importance of African Americans’ internalizations of positive messaging about their racial identities from caregivers for their survival within psychologically-hostile environments. I argue that positive Black identity socialization is simultaneously resilience-

inducing and antigenic against the transmittal of criminogenic compulsions of structural violence. These men viewed their race and its meanings as the primary reference point in their decisions to act regarding academic pursuits and criminal desistance. While four participants shared their experiences with the criminal justice system, it was their attachment to and belief in the reaffirming tenets of positively-oriented Blackness that they credited for the rerouting of their life-courses.

### **Central Themes and Assumptions**

Criminogenic resistance theory (C.RT) is an integrative framework that encompasses several propositions also presented in institutional anomie (or strain) theory (IAT), left realism, and critical race theory. Both IAT and left realism suggest the extensive impact that macro-level forces can have on law-breaking activities. Further, IAT presents the American ideological foregrounding of its “free market-driven” economy, and “consumption culture” creates and exacerbates anomic pressures that result in aspirations unbridled by morality or law (Messner et al., 1994). Critical criminologist Jock Young (1999) also positions external influencers like capitalism as the promotive factors that create inequality and relative deprivation, which he suggests leads to crime participation. C.RT focuses on the specific inhibitive force that targets the population within this study, i.e., racism. The central idea behind the collection of these frameworks is the influence of systems and structures that are beyond the control of the individual. Consequently, the prescribed remedies for these macro-level challenges require a paradigm shift in the American political, economic, and social spheres. Regardless, potential victims of these threats need an actionable strategy that addresses the immediacy and direct threat of these concerns. C.RT seeks to address this gap in the criminological cannon. Its foundational assumptions are the following:

1. The United States of America was founded and developed through the use of various forms of unjustifiable violence (direct, structuralized, genocidal, etc.).
2. Structural violence (SV) continues to operate in the lives of members of the Black community, as evinced by preventable racialized disparities in the criminal justice, educational, and economic spheres.
3. SV operates as an effective class-creating and preserving mechanism within the lives of members of the under-resourced Black community.
4. SV is inhibitory to economic, political, academic, and social advancement.
5. SV is criminogenic.
6. Until its eradication, the effects of SV must be constrained.

# Criminogenic Resistance Theory (C.RT)

Criminogenic Resistance theory (C.RT) is an integrative framework that encompasses propositions that are also presented in Institutional Strain Theory (IAT), Left Realism & Critical Race Theory.

**The foundational assumptions of C.RT are:**

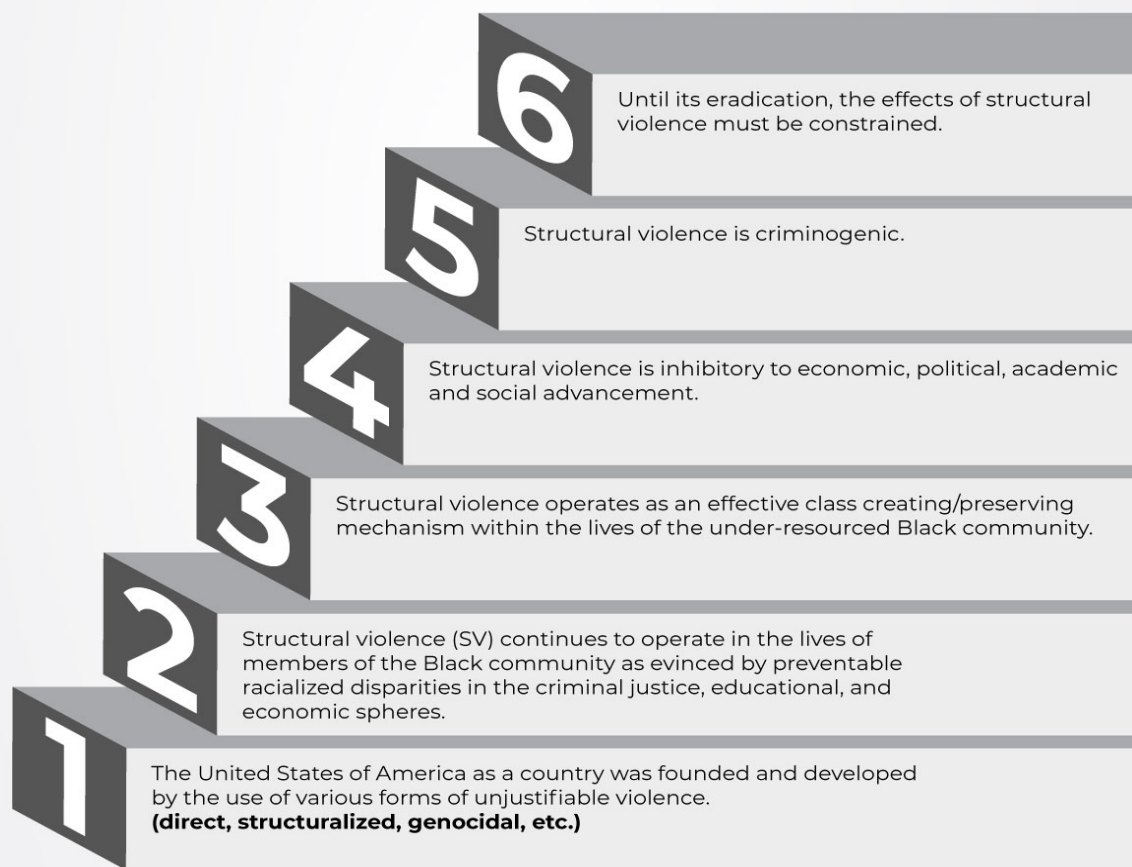


Figure 2. Criminogenic resistance theory (C.RT).

The respondents in this study revealed the influences and processes by which they thrived academically, despite their exposure to SV. C.RT interprets a process that is enacted to offset the

adverse effects of SV exposure. Figure 3 demonstrates the counter-measure process revealed by the respondents.

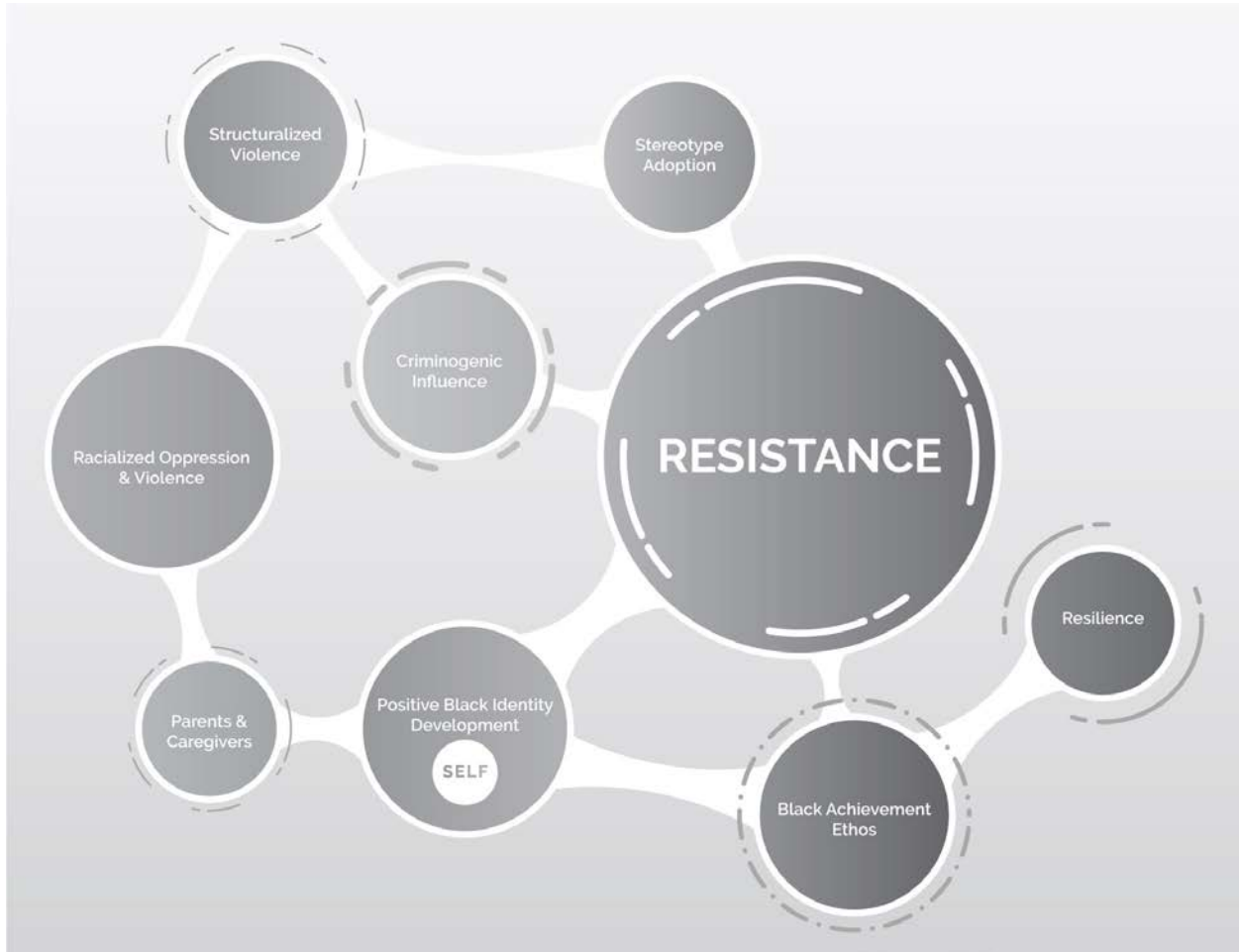


Figure 3. Deployment of criminogenic resistance theory measures.

As demonstrated in Figure 3, SV is actively present in the lives of the respondents in this study. Therefore, parents and caregivers embarked on the process of positive Black identity development. This process is antithetical to the pervasive majoritarian presentation of Black people and heritage, and seeks to function as a buffering agent against psychological attacks.

This mental and emotional inoculation sets the groundwork for expected behaviors and creates a

reinforcing system of encouragement, support, and directives. This construction of their sense of self stresses the values of communal representation and responsibility. These Afrocentric values contradict the ideas and posits of American individualism. These codes of conduct and ways of being create an internal yardstick with which the respondents measure their self-worth and determine their courses of action in contemplation of their impacts on the communal body. It is within those considerations that both resistance and resilience are fostered.

Summarily, in response to the threat of SV, parents and caregivers promote a positive Black identity development model that promotes the conscious resistance to stereotype adoption and criminogenic influences, which creates a Black achievement ethos that fosters resilience. This simplified version of the process is not meant to be exhaustive of all possibilities. It represents a framework of discussion regarding one possible manifestation of applied C.R.T of which there could be many. The new literature on the criminal participation and desistance as the academic achievement of Black men must foreground the adoption of SV and racism as important foundational theoretical concepts within criminal justice and criminology specifically, as well as the social sciences more broadly. They should be considered codefendants in the crime causation matrix. The data in this work suggested that SV was a part of every aspect of the lived experiences of these respondents. To ignore the impact of those factors would leave them as theoretical uninterrogated accessories before and after the fact. In addition, understanding how they explained overcoming and overachieving despite (SV) can help us to create more significant numbers of success stories in the Black community.



## **Policy Implications**

The findings of this study provide several opportunities for individuals and institutions to help facilitate the academic success and criminal desistance of Black boys. I apply C.R.T as a framework to examine recommendations for substantial progress to that end.

### **Addressing Structural Violence**

Importantly, and not surprisingly, the respondents indicated the matrix of social and economic difficulties that served as inhibitors to their progress. To impede the effects of structuralized violence in the form of inequality, governmental agencies should provide better protections and supply legitimate economic opportunities for under-resourced communities. The government needs to make the eradication of poverty a focal point in all subsequent administrations. This would involve a significant financial investment in the infrastructure of under-resourced communities. This would include forward-focused job creation and training programs that coincide with national employment opportunity projections. Additionally, the inequitable funding structure of the public-school system needs to be changed so that poor communities can receive resources and educational opportunities comparable to those of as their wealthier counterparts.

### **Disabling Academic and Emotional Harm**

Educational institutions should utilize the expertise of scholarvists<sup>4</sup> to examine the cultures and curriculums students are being exposed to, and the potential impacts of such exposure. The interviews with Christopher and Jerome highlighted the disjunction between curriculum, culture, and impact on their sense of self. Jerome shared his experience of the violent verbal abuse to which he was exposed, being referred to as a “barnyard nigger” by his teacher.

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<sup>4</sup> Scholarvist – a nonpartisan, highly credentialed scholar whose recommendations and activism are informed by empirical and methodologically sound peer-reviewed research. Also: Scholar-activist.

This type of problem requires the full attention of all the stakeholders in education. The screening of teachers should not be limited to academic credentials. Schools need to examine and explore the ideologies of potential instructors and their backgrounds. Racially-destructive language and interactions should be treated as cases of child endangerment and abuse. Black children should feel safe from racism and trauma within the walls of their schools. Christopher questioned why he, as a Black child, was made to read material that was emotionally offensive and psychologically detrimental. The following excerpt from *Moby Dick*, an “American classic” that is often presented as required reading, speaks to this concern:

Though this preeminence applies to the human race itself, giving the White man ideal mastership over every dusky tribe; and though, besides, all this, whiteness has been even made significant of gladness.

This presentation of White men being the “master” of “every dusky tribe” is appallingly offensive to all non-White communities. White supremacist literature and ideological framing should not remain unquestioned in the educational sphere, and Black children should not be subjected to hate speech or demeaning rhetoric under the guise of “formal education.” There are societal cues that children tend not to vocalize yet still serve as class markers that, in some cases, go unnoticed until society is faced with the ramifications of their acceptance. We must dismantle the preeminent prism through which Black children’s actualized selves are refracted in educational circles. A critical analysis of the included and excluded literature could create a highly racially inclusive cannon of relevant knowledge while avoiding the predictable harm that Black children experience.

### **Criminal Justice Reform**

The degree to which the criminal justice system methodically participates in the mechanism of structuralized violence is well documented within this study and, more importantly, through the cannon of criminological literature. This study’s findings only confirm

the need for the criminal justice system to trust the empirically based research that identifies the racial disparities throughout its entire institutional process (Western, 2006). Essentially, a real commitment to the elimination of the structural racism that facilitates the continual disruption and destruction of the lives of Black men in America remains a vital component of the path toward an equitable and just society.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

The author of this study examined the narratives of Black men who achieved academic success despite their continued exposure to SV. The purpose of this endeavor was to understand their interpretation of the trajectory of their lives against the backdrop of economic and social deficiency. Many researchers have presented studies that have ignored this population of high-achieving Black scholars in their attempts to understand Black men and boys that spend their formative years in under-resourced communities. The findings of this study indicate that the participants consciously racially oriented, resistant dispositions to inspire resilience and encourage and inform their actions and decisions throughout their life-courses. Based on the results in this study, further research is needed.

This study focused on the narratives of graduate students and doctors. Further researchers should examine the degree to which these findings would be transferable to underclassmen in higher education. Undergraduate students tend to be in the process of evoking whatever techniques they can muster to traverse the pitfalls of undergraduate work. According to the themes explored in chapter 5, the respondents' need to disprove stereotypes was a particularly salient finding. Examining the deployment of their emotional resources would, comparably speaking, be of particular interest.

Second, four of the participants reported being arrested and incarcerated during their life-courses. Further research should be conducted to examine how individuals who bear the extra burden of having a criminal record, which has been demonstrated to be a difficult stigma to overcome (Pager, 2007), persevere through the educational process. Comparing the attitudinal dispositions of those who received their education while incarcerated to those of individuals who were not could provide an important and varied perspective.

Last, as shown in Table 1, the age range of the participants makes them represent a large swath of people who were raised in completely different decades. An investigation into the possible differences that might exist in response to the era in which one was raised could provide insight into the shaping dynamics of the socialization and identities of Black children that experience SV. In addition, particular interest should be focused on Black children who are reared in middle- and upper-class families to determine whether the socialization processes in those households differ from those used in the households of the resistant and resilient men in this study.

## APPENDIX A: BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF PARTICIPANTS

### **Asim**

Asim is 32 years old and was born in Linden, Guyana where he attended kindergarten. During his childhood, Asim immigrated to the United States with his parents and three siblings. He attended high school in New York City. After graduating, he went to a state university in New York where he was a cross country runner. Asim viewed his athletic ability as freedom because it opened a door for him to get into colleges. Both of his parents encouraged Asim to receive his undergraduate degree. During his time in college, he was strongly influenced by an African American professor of Black Studies who was a mentor for Asim.

### **Bale**

Bale is 33 years old and was born in Detroit, Michigan. During his childhood Bale relocated often, switching schools almost every year, due to household poverty. He lived with relatives, in foster homes, and his mother depending on the circumstances. Similarly, during college, Bale experienced multiple changes. He began attending a junior college then went to a private university in Michigan where he received an undergraduate degree in business. Afterward, Bale received his MBA from a public university. Later, Bale went on to a top-ranked public university for his Ph.D. in the field of education. Bale currently works with the overseeing of non-profit organizations and cultural community centers while also working as an adjunct professor.

### **Barack**

Barak is 37 years old and was born in Detroit, Michigan where he attended elementary school before moving to Florida where he attended high school. For his undergraduate education, Barak attended several universities ultimately receiving his degree from a HBCU. Barak received his Ph.D. from a top-ranked public university. His football coach and history teacher encouraged him to obtain a college education. Barak considers that being an athlete was one of the reasons he could stay out of trouble and go to college. Barak currently works as an elementary school teacher.

### **Christopher**

Christopher is 42 years old and was born in Brooklyn, Illinois where he attended public elementary school, middle school, and high school. Christopher's mother is from Georgia and his father was born in South Carolina. His father worked as a bus driver. Christopher is grateful to his mother for pushing him to attend college and develop a career. Christopher received a bachelor's degree from a city university and then his master's and doctorate degree in the field of Social Science from public university. Christopher is currently an assistant professor and striving toward tenure.

### **Clarence**

Clarence is 38 years old and was born in Chicago, Illinois where he attended public elementary school, middle school, and high school. Clarence's mother is from Chicago and his father was born in Jamaica. His father worked as a social worker and later as a police officer. Clarence notes that his paternal grandmother for pushing him to attend college and develop a career. Clarence received a bachelor's degree from a private university and then his master's degree in

the field of educational policy from a top-ranking program at a public university. Clarence is currently an assistant professor and striving toward tenure.

### **Darrell**

Darrell is 27 years old and was born in the Bronx, New York. He moved to Upstate New York a few years later where he attended elementary school. Then he moved to Dover, Delaware where he completed his education until high school. During his childhood Darrell lived mostly with his grandmother. His mother, however, was the one who pushed him to obtain higher education. Darrell was a part of a college preparatory program during high school that prepared him for college. Darrell went to a major public university for two years and transferred to a CUNY college where he ultimately received his bachelor's degree. He is currently working toward his Ph.D.

### **Da-Shawn**

Da-Shawn is 64 years old and was born in Brooklyn, New York. Da-Shawn grew up with seven brothers and sisters, mainly living with his mother for most of his life. Da-Shawn's mother was Christian and father was a Muslim. His father taught him to read at a young age before entering school. Da-Shawn dropped out of high school in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and returned to school as an adult, obtaining his bachelor's in history from a top public university and eventually achieving a Ph.D.

### **Dwayne**

Dwayne is 44 years old and was born in Brooklyn, New York. During his childhood, Dwayne moved about every two years because his mother was trying to find work, which caused him to change schools very often. Dwayne's father was a Black Panther and was expelled from college for leading a protest against the college president. Dwayne's mother made college mandatory and portrayed it as the "thirteenth grade." Dwayne attended a California State University for his undergraduate degree before earning his master's and Ph.D. from two different universities.

### **Isaiah**

Isaiah was raised by his maternal grandmother after his mother died when he was only 12 years old. His grandmother was from Belize and Isaiah grew up speaking her native language until he entered elementary school where he learned English. Isaiah credits his grandmother as one of his biggest supporters in his decision to attain a college education. Isaiah currently works as an adjunct college professor.

### **James**

James is 26 years old and was born in East Chicago, Indiana. James's parents saw education as a path to success, encouraging both James and his sister to earn doctorate degrees. His parents also encouraged independence and believed education to be an integral part of attaining it. James attended a highly ranked public university for his bachelor's and master's degrees. He then completed his Ph.D. and a post-doctoral position at two other top-ranked universities.

### **Kwame**

Kwame is 52 years old and was born in Brunswick, Maine. His father was in the military, which caused the family to relocate frequently during Kwame's formative years. He completed high school in Miami, Florida where his football coach was influential in his decision to pursue higher

education. Kwame attended an HBCU for his undergraduate degree in a STEM field and a master's degree in business. He completed a doctorate in business leadership at a different university. Kwame is currently working as a technology solutions manager.

### **Kyan**

Kyan is 68 years old and was born in New York, New York but moved to Newark at an early age. While working during high school at Burger King, one of Kyan's co-workers started to motivate him to go to college. Beyond his co-worker, Kyan's grandfather also influenced his education; his grandfather wanted to be a doctor but, due to circumstances, he was unable to obtain a college education. Kyan went to a HBCU for his bachelor's and master's degrees. Later, he began a master's program at a different institution, but a negative academic racial experience led him to leave and pursue his academic interests at another major university.

### **Lance**

Lance is 26 years old and was born in the Dominican Republic, but his family moved to Queens, New York for economic opportunity. Lance arrived in Queens in time to start elementary school and went on to complete high school. He grew up with both of his parents and a younger sister. His parents ensured that Lance learned Spanish at home and fully supported his college education. Lance attended CUNY for his undergraduate and graduate degrees. He is currently a researcher and college professor.

### **Malik**

Malik is 27 years old and was born in Houston, Texas where he grew up and completed high school. During high school, Malik played in the school band and noted that he was very glad that he was committed to playing an instrument because it kept him out of trouble. Malik was raised by his grandparents and lived with his twin brother and two younger brothers. He studied sociology, criminology, and African American studies in college before going straight into a Ph.D. program for sociology.

### **Marcus**

Marcus is 33 years old. Born in San Francisco, California, he later moved to Sacramento halfway through middle school. Marcus's grandmother influenced him to attend college by encouraging him to make a list of all the colleges he wanted to attend. He grew up with his mother and two younger siblings. Marcus completed his undergraduate degree at a top-ranked HBCU. He received a master's in psychology and is earning a doctorate in the same field.

### **Marvin**

Marvin is 58 years old, born in New York and raised in Harlem with both of his parents and a younger sister. Marvin's mother strongly encouraged his education and ensured he got his work done. After high school, Marvin received an associate degree in applied science as a medical assistant, then secured his bachelor's in psychology. For his post-graduate education, Marvin obtained a master's in education from a HBCU and a Ph.D. a major public research university. Marvin currently works for the federal government.

### **Musa**

Musa is 24 years old, born and raised in Louisiana. Musa's first language is Louisiana Creole and he learned English upon entering elementary school. Both of his parents were in the military. They highly valued a strong education and wanted him to attend college. One of Musa's English teachers encouraged and helped him to get into college. Musa has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's in social work, in which he is also pursuing a Ph.D. at an HBCU.

### **Nelson**

Nelson is 61 years old, born in Jamaica, New York. During elementary school, Nelson was one of the only Black students in a White Jewish school. Nelson went to a Black high school that was very formative for his identity. Nelson was influenced by his guidance counselor who informed him of several opportunities that existed for Black students to attend college during that time, including federal programs offering tuition assistance. After high school, Nelson went to a top-ranked public university for his bachelor's degree in health sciences. He then received a master's in Environmental Engineering and a Ph.D. in business administration. Nelson currently works as a safety consultant and an academic consultant.

### **Osaka**

Osaka details his life and how he overcame adversity during his early education, which held him back from going to college several times. Osaka credits his great aunt and her husband for his educational goals and discipline. In addition to Osaka's aunt, his college professors had a positive impact on him encouraging him to apply to work for the federal government.

### **Payne**

Payne is 27 years old, born in Suffolk Virginia. At a young age he moved to Oakland, California but returned to Virginia to complete high school. Payne credits his high school band director for being one of the largest influences for him to attend college and generally encouraging him to further his education. Payne has a bachelors and a master's degree and is currently pursuing a Ph.D.

### **Randall**

Randall is 54 years old born in South Amboy, New Jersey where he grew up with both of his parents and an older brother. Randall's parents encouraged him to get a college education. His mother had told him that college education was the only thing that cannot be taken away. Randall's father, who was a pastor, reiterated the same message. Additionally, Randall saw his older brother go to college, which further encouraged him. Randall attended an HBCU and then a major public university where he studied Education and Development. He is a counselor who works mostly with students.

### **Robert**

Robert is 33 years old born in Grand Rapids, Michigan where he grew up with his mother and six older siblings. He was particularly close to an older cousin who attended college. Although Robert's original plan was to go to the military, his mother encouraged him to pursue higher education after high school. He completed a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and a master's in education. Robert is currently working on his Ph.D. in Educational Leadership.



### **Shaun**

Shaun is 48 years old, born in Syracuse, New York. Shaun's parents moved several times during his childhood, which negatively impacted his school performance. Shaun was raised by his mother and had a younger sister. Shaun details how the media impacted his perspective on college, particularly a show on PBS about schools and education. Shaun went to a HBCU for his undergraduate degree in mathematics. He received a master's and a doctorate in mathematics education and now works as a professor.

### **Terrence**

Terrence is 37 years old and was born in Liberia but grew up in Trenton, New Jersey. Terrence's family moved to the United States because of the Civil War in Liberia. Terrence notes that he had several mentors in high school who encouraged him to study engineering and to attend a historically Black college. Terrence studied computer engineering for his B.S. and went on to receive his master's degree in robotics. Terrence is currently working on his Ph.D. in computer science with a focus on artificial intelligence.

### **Trever**

Trever is 38 years old, born in Fort Lauderdale, Florida but moved and attended school in Louisiana. Trever mainly grew up with his mother, who was a registered nurse, and with his two siblings. Trever notes his maternal great-uncle as a father figure and the largest influence in his values and college education. Trever received his undergraduate, masters, and Ph.D. degrees in psychology. Trever works as a business consultant.

### **Trayvon**

Trayvon is 30 years old, born in Lanstall Rieniger, Germany, because his father was in the military. Trayvon moved to Arizona for elementary school and then moved to Georgia for high school, ultimately obtaining a GED. Trayvon was raised by his father who was a stay at home dad. He lived with his brother, stepmother, and stepsisters. After completing college, Trayvon went on to receive a master's degree and is currently working on his Ph.D.

### **Tyrone**

Tyrone is 34 years old, born in Chicago, Illinois, where he grew up with his mother and brother. When Tyrone was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, a high school band director told him about college. Tyrone eventually received a band scholarship to attend college. During high school, Tyrone was a part of a medical technology program where he shadowed different doctors, which inspired him to study medicine. Tyrone attended a HBCU where he received his B.S and M.S in biology. He went on to receive a Ph.D. in molecular biology from a public research university.

## APPENDIX B: ADVICE FOR BLACK BOYS FROM BLACK MEN

The respondents were asked, “If you could speak to every Black boy in America, what message would you give them and what do they need or what should they do to succeed?” The following commentary is a collection of the responses they provided.

### Alton

“I would tell them three things. One is it’s going to be extremely important for them to understand who they are, their identity. What that means for me is, not only your history, but it also means who you are. So, your core, your values, your core attributes, that personality that ain’t going nowhere, you will understand yourself fully, that identity.”

“I would tell them to pay attention to their feelings of what they think is cool. I think we let society tell us what’s cool and then we go in the opposite direction of where our purpose truly is. So, I would tell em to pay attention to how things make them feel, and really figure out what they want to do and what’s cool to them, so they can really be on that journey towards their purpose.”

“I believe that everybody’s purpose is to make sure that while they’re moving up, they’re pulling everybody else up as well. You can’t get to the top and look down at folks. You gotta figure out a way to build a step ladder or throw down a rope. You gotta find a way to pull people up to where you are. It’s very strategical how you do that. I think that’s everybody’s purpose to get wherever they’re going, and then bring others on up with them.”

### Anthony

“A support system. A support system which are the people that I mentioned before and other people When I first came home, and I bumped into you (I: uh hum) and you blessed me that was huge that was like because you didn’t know what I was going through. You knew that I just came home you understand, ain’t nothing to talk about. (I hum hum) So that’s was like having a support system.”

“That I love them and I’m here for them. ... no matter what. When they throw you away I got you come home no matter what. We ain’t even got to talk about it. Call me email me I got you That’s what I’d tell them.”

### Eric

“One, you got to want it. Think of the movie Five Heartbeats. In the movie, Duck was talking one time. He was like somebody gave him some advice one time like “Hey Duck will be a great writer one day when he’s suffered more.” To me to actually aspire to want more. For me, all the friends I grew up with that had a two-parent household tend to lack ambition at least by comparison. For me I started seeing. I don’t a hundred percent agree with this, but in many cases I started to see how coming from a two parent household handicapped people, because you can always understand you can lean on your parents so you never have this strong desire to want to go get it and you put up a fight. Just like if you were fighting with somebody one on one, you fight and you treat the person like you’re fighting one person, but if you thought you were getting jumped by two or three people you are just going to bring out the animal in you and you give it all you have cause you have no choice. That’s how I kind of use that analogy as far as the streets go.”

“When you understand that “Hey I have nowhere else to turn to. I have to go hard in this area to get it” it’s a different mindset. I tell youth that one you got to stay out of trouble. Two you got to find what you care about. Is it money? Is it women? It’s a little hard to connect with some of the youth today. For me, women don’t play a big role in my life because I don’t always like women, so I understood “hey I got to get money and dress nice” so that was an incentive. I want to get more money.”

“hey man there’s a lot of different ways that you can pursue and get money. You can try the four-year route. Go to a construction school and the training school. There’s lots of different things you can do these days. A lot more resources. Y’all got internet. Y’all got Wi-Fi. Y’all got cell phones. Y’all have more access to resources and things of that nature and you’ve got human capital. Man, you’ve got people like me. You’ve got more brothers like me. When I was growing up I didn’t know nobody was a doctor or even got a college degree. It’s more common for your generation and younger generation to bump into brothers who even if they have worked in a plant for 20 years.” There has been some evolving that has happened. So, some of these generations got better resources.”

### **Ezell**

“I felt like I was always smart, but that’s how I made it through my program, even though I didn’t have the tools. I didn’t have everything I needed from middle school to high school, when I wasn’t taking gifted, and honors, and AP classes that were, basically, college preparatory courses. I was behind, but the reason I was behind... I caught up easily because I was smart. I had to believe in myself, apply myself, spend late nights studying and making sure I knew everything. I guess, I remember I did this study. My master’s was on Motivating African American Males Towards Academic Success, and the biggest thing I could say, I know you’re talking about me personally, but I think its peer groups. People say, “birds of a feather flock together.” If you hang around with people who rob people, well, you’re going to rob too.”

“We pushed each other, we motivated each other. I needed that. When I was at The University, there were people like my home boys, we had a group called Breathe University. It was based Eric Thomas, the motivational speaker. He said, “You want won’t succeed until you want it as bad as you want to breathe,” or something like that. The whole point was that he... Every day I didn’t feel like studying, but Ferris was like, “Man, I’m over here at River’s Crossing,” which is the place where we studied at. And I was like, “All right. Since you’re already there, I’ll come. If you would’ve said you were at home, I would’ve stayed at home.” But we were kind of alike.”

“My point is that, I might have had some skills, but I couldn’t have made it alone. I couldn’t have made it without my grandmother, without my aunt, without the professors who motivated me, especially when I went to Florida A&M, because all of them looked like me. I couldn’t have made it without people like Ferris Mohammed. I couldn’t have made it without my study group. We pushed each other. If I was sitting there studying by myself, I wouldn’t have stayed all night, like when I would stay with them. We would stay until 6:00 or 7:00 o’clock in the morning on a Friday night, go to sleep, come back at 2:00 or 3:00 and do it all again.”

“I would never do that on my own. I would concentrate for a couple of hours, and I was like, “All right, man. I’m out.” As much as I had certain skills to get me into graduate school, all that did was get me there. I need the support to make sure that I finish and excel while I was there.”

“I feel like, as far as poor Black boys, I feel like circumstances are all different. I feel like, if you know who you are, and you know your identity, know where you came from, know your history, that will cancel out some things for you. If you don't know your history, you think you came from slavery, act like a slave, and that's just it. There's a slave mentality that gets perpetuated, it's cyclical. I feel like, if I had the time to sit down and tell them say, 'You need to look at this person, or read this book, or I'll read it to you. There's this wealth of knowledge that you need to know and if you can read this, and move forward and do the same thing, then that's fine.' Every time I read certain books, or 'Up from Slavery,' or the autobiography of Malcolm X. There were certain books that, after I read them, they changed my life. I hope that if they read those books, or just saw their stories, they don't even have to read the book. Watch the movies, watch the documentaries, and just be enlightened to know who you are, and know your identity. Know yourself and know that you are better than this. You can overcome this, because the people before you had to go through more than what you're going through right now. That's probably what I would tell them.”

### **Freddie**

“Personal characteristics? I feel like, again, my faith. I feel very much that God has blessed me with certain gifts and I have made a decision to exercise those gifts and use those gifts to the best of my ability in every aspect of my life. Anything that I can think about or imagine that's important that I also put forward the effort to make steps towards realizing what it is that I envision or imagine. I think the willingness to do the things that I'm afraid of or that scare me, the things that I've not been asked to do but things that I think would make a meaningful contribution, I do those things.”

“I made a decision at the very beginning of my professional career, right out of college, my first year as a teacher, that despite how I feel about what it is that I'm working on that I'm going to be so excellent at it that by the time I leave that people will know that I was here, and that they will want more when I'm done doing whatever it is that I'm doing, even if I absolutely hate it. I've always been that way, be excellent at all costs. That comes with a cost and I'm just now starting to figure that out and pull back and be less type A, but that's been my MO. I've just always been very, I try to be, very, very thorough. I will go the extra mile if I think it's going to make whatever I'm doing be done better.”

“I would say you're enough. Then spend your time figuring out exactly who and what you want to be. Be open to the range of possibilities, dream about whatever future you want and then pursue it. Do that despite what everything and everybody around you is telling you, because it may very well be contrary to what you see, or envision, or hope about who or what you can become in the future. You got to find a way to get away from the noise so that you can develop a vision for the future despite whatever around you to the contrary.”

### **Jerome**

“Go read!”

“Because there is something in reading. Let me put it to you this way if White folks didn't want us to read during the enslavement era there's a reason for that because you could lose your lives if they found out you could read right? (I right) So the question is what is it? It's knowledge? You could free yourself from their oppression. Paulo Ferrer says in his book 'The Politics of Education' 'it's naive for the subordinate to think that the oppressor will educate you in a way that you will perceive your own oppression’”

“So Black folks will never receive an education that will free them from White people, because it doesn't benefit White people to educate us that way.”

“Even if the Black folks that they allow; the Clarence Thomas, the Obamas or whoever these people are that are reaching the top, they reach the top for a reason. Because from an understanding of what hegemony is. Hegemony is like a tree and when a hurricane hits it, the tree bends, it will lose some branches, but it never breaks because it bounces back when the storm is gone, and it can grow another branch. So, in hegemony they'll compromise. They'll give a few limbs. And they will bring in an Ice Cube or someone Black campaigning for social justice. Ice Tea had a song (remember the cop killer song) but he's on TV Law and Order. Hegemony works, you give you give a few Black folks a few crumbs the rest will be content “

“We are always begging and looking for acceptance to be accepted in America by the White establishment (I: um) That's historical no matter what we do”

“When the civil war started Martin Delini and them brothers went around recruiting Black men to serve in the army and they were given guns half the time that didn't work. When they went into battle sometimes they were told not to shoot. They had to fight dogs and everything else. When the war was over what did they get Jim Crow. World War I came around and the Black folks join the army and fight for America. When they came back, they were lynching them in uniform same thing with world war II. Vietnam brothers started waking up. You see what I'm saying. Like King said ain't now little brown men in Vietnam shooting no gun at me, why do I need to go fight him? Even Cassius Clay said that, and he changed his name to Mohammed Ali.”

“Then you distant you leave them alone. Why can't we do that with White folks? We don't do that we consistently say we forgive you for kicking us in the behind. They don't ever stop kicking you in the behind. You just got used to being kicked in the behind so much now your ass is numb”

## **John**

“Open yourself to mentors. I was very, and I still have this about myself sometimes, I was very distrustful of people because I didn't have very many people extend themselves to me, so I really didn't know how to deal with it anyway. I'm only just now starting to appreciate the impact that mentorship can have, only just now. I think it would've saved me a lot of headaches. I think I've only had four mentors and that's actually been in the last decade that I had the last three so if I could I tell these brothers to allow for people that know more than you to give you suggestions that you take to heart. And learn to identify people that actually are demonstrating care.”

“I didn't know how to interpret that either. I didn't know how to interpret care with mentors, with people in general, with women. I didn't really trust a lot of people and I didn't understand what their motivations were, but that kind of lack made things a lot harder and, you know, I think there are people like, for example, people like yourself, you know, that a young brother like me might have been averse to just because I didn't know how to trust people, but a relationship with someone like you at age ten, fifteen, sixteen, twenty, would have been, you know what I mean, it would have just saved me a lot, but I didn't know how to do that. I didn't know how to ask for help. I didn't know how to look for the right people to ask.”

“That's something that men do. Men will strike. Men will talk about I'm pulling your resources away from you until you give me what I want, but just aggressively asking and yelling at people about things you're expecting, men don't generally identify with that because we're not

socialized to ask. We're expected to go make it happen. It's an unrealistic expectation for Black males with no resources, but it's nonetheless the way we were socialized so even when it became a skill that I needed to learn I didn't know how. And like I said, I still have trouble. I've got colleagues who get grants and buy themselves out of class. I teach at a four, four. Every Tuesday my teaching day is twelve hours long. My colleagues get grants, buy themselves out of classes. I don't know how to do that. I still don't know how to do that. The very process of looking for grants and applying for them and buying myself... You know, I come from that, this is my job, let me knock this portion out of it so I can go on my way. It's still something that I have to learn, and it doesn't come second nature to me."

### **Jordan**

"I start to realize that's an issue, because then you really rely on teachers, you really rely on systems and structures, you really rely on others even more if you can't read. If you can read, and then of course, you learn a little bit of research skills or whatever, but you can get to answers, you can get some more information. If you can't, you really need other people to do it right for you. You really need that modeling even more, so you could see."

"Learn how to read and then read. Reading is key because reading can always put you on the pathway of learning. It's one of the hardest things to do. It's one of the hardest skills to develop for a lot of reasons, but you got to be able to do it. Learning how to read will open up the world to you, particularly access past information. That's a skill, but emotionally I would just say, "Look, you got to work hard, man, period. Ain't going be no other ways for you." I think a young Black man coming from the position I came from, urban environment, lower-income, working poor family, you're just going to have to work hard. If you think somebody is going to make it easy, think again. If you think somebody is going to hand it to you, think again. You're going to have to really, really work for it."

"I think it's important, because I've always felt like my academic work is to bring the structural inequality that Black people face, to flatten that, to create independent autonomic Black institutions. Secondly, as someone who's been gifted the opportunity to get into these places, I need to be well educated. I really need to understand things about America, about history, about economics, about everything."

### **Keith**

"I'd say it's gonna be hard as fuck man. Buckle up and just ride." "I'd say grit."

### **Laquan**

"Go for, again, the opportunity. Take the opportunity to shape up yourself. I'd have him read a book. Read a couple of books I'd give him; you know what I mean"

### **Larry**

"I would say something to the effect that validates who they are, acknowledgment of who they are, recognition of who they are. Because that is the core of the identity. First, it's validation, then you believe the validation, then your power plant isn't external locus of control, it's inside. So, I don't need outside validating. It started from the outside, but I captured it and so now I do it myself. I've become self-sufficient with my validation."



### **Michael**

“You got to be open. I think for one, being young, Hispanic, Black, there’s a lot of hyper-masculine machismo. That’s a thing, and kind of like you have to be okay with not being about that like that. For me, there’s a lot of things that I feel like I’ve grown into and whatever, but it’s been super important to be comfortable with myself and understand myself in these complex ways, understand that my existence is complex.”

“I go home and I’m speaking Spanish the rest of the night to my mom and my dad, and that’s the code switch there, like super quick. I think you got to be flexible. I don’t know how it translates to a direct piece of advice.”

### **Patrick**

“I would tell them that, so much I want to tell them, but I would tell them that, ‘Anything is possible, and we’re not confined to our circumstances, and that our circumstances don’t define us. They’re a fabric of, a part of our history, but that whatever it is we want to obtain, we have the ability to do it.’”

### **Philando**

“I think there are three things that are killing and making our communities, our minds, throughout this world, actually, but a greater impact on the black community, three entities that are poisoning our values, our principles, our beliefs. One is materialism. We are so focused on things and we define our success by how many things we have and our purchasing power and our income and how many degrees, et cetera.”

“The other piece is individualism that I think is really killing us as a Black folk. Listen to people when they talk and count the number of times, the pronouns you hear as far as singular pronouns, I, me, my, compared with we, our, and us. Maybe I’m just in a very distorted environment there.”

“The other piece that is killing us is hedonism. We always want to play. Where do brothers live? In a crib. What do we call each other? Players. So, we are not, and this analogy I have is that we are, many of us are 20, 30, 40, 50, 60-year-old immature beings. We’re not on that bridge toward being self-sufficient, independent, mature individuals. Not perfect but being mature individuals.”

“Who am I taking along with me? This is a collective entity. When we begin to see those demographics shift and we have more brothers graduating from high school and going into college, and hopefully graduating, and less brothers going into the penal system and less brothers being shot and killed and selling drugs, et cetera, then we can begin maybe to talk about collective success and not the individual success.”

### **Ramarley**

“one of the things, the first words that would come out of my mouth is making sure how do you see yourself cause that’s most important how do you see yourself? If you see yourself in a way that’s poor, I’m not smart enough or I’m not good enough then anything I tell you after that won’t matter cause you’re not gonna try so what was modeled for me through Mrs. Johnson was not to feed into this deficit. We all have talents, your talent is linguistics, I don’t have that talent. Honing in on whatever talent that particular young man may have or that young woman may have are the most important things to me so if that person has a talent for being a critical thinker, mold that talent, strengthen that talent and tell them about ways of how they can strengthen it and

what avenues are available to them to help them get to where they need to be. So that is what I would say to a person who's in an impoverished, comes from an impoverished background and who is trying to enter into academe."

### **Romain**

"I would tell them to set your goals high and to then reject any negative influence that will prevent you from reaching your goals."

### **Samuel**

"Educate yourself. But see, my definition of educating yourself is not sitting in a classroom and reading a textbook only. It is not Wikipedia. It's a number of things that needs to take place to become more sophisticated. And it's not just one way of doing it, it's several ways that... You know. I will provide them with the resources and access to help them become, I guess, above substandard living."

### **Sean**

"It is so cliché. I don't know if I would even tell them anything. I think I would give them something to read, and it is a book called The Secret. I would tell them to read it and let's talk about it because the essence of the book is that your mind is extremely powerful, and although you may not be able to see the immediate results of what you think your goals are, they come to fruition after a while. You have to be very persistent, and you need people around you like me or someone like-minded that can help you get there."

### **Stephon**

"I used a couple of key words: persistence, perseverance, integrity, and repetition."

"I would just say don't quit. And align yourselves with those who can mentor you. And they don't always have to be folks that look like you. You can find mentors in a lot of different places. Look for mentors in an area that you want to be engaged with. I've had Black, brown, Asian, Indian mentors throughout my life. And each brought something to the table that helped me grow. So, don't just say, "I can only talk to a Black man." Be able to talk to any man that's going to allow you the opportunity to be successful."

### **Tamir**

"Being ethical and having a strong ethical foundation is the key to all success and most likely you'll make the right decision, instead of just making the best decision."

### **Terence**

"There's a difference between trying to understand the differences between things. Try to understand our economy, because there's a difference between being poor and being impoverished. Like there's a difference between pleasure and joy and for me that's what helped me better understand what was going on. I was not defining my situation in a way that would allow me to get the fuck out of my situation."

### **Trayvon**

"Knowing when to seek help."



“Being able to survive on meager means and still somehow wake up every day. Those are very valuable lessons that, no matter what state you enter, if you learn how those lessons transition to those areas, you will always be successful. I think growing up in Trenton, there’s a lot of things I learned about competing. Whether it was you had problems with somebody down the street and you guys have to fight. You have to figure out how to best navigate that. Whether we have a sit down. Whether I kind of have to get my older cousin with me. Whatever, you learn how to problem solve in one way or another. Or, it could be, you’re trying to come up with some money and you have to ask some family members for money. You have to find a way to pitch and sell yourself.”

### **Tyre**

“I would tell him to visualize where he wants to go in the future. Don’t concern yourself with prescribing a direct path but realize the key elements that it takes to get there and then push hard. Push against those that tell you can’t do it, including yourself. Then I would tell him more practically, something I tell a lot of students either in high school or about to start college, never let your current GPA drop below your cumulative GPA.”

“I always give them that very, very practical... I feel that it’s a very hard lesson that I learned and if I can prevent them from learning that lesson the hard way, you know, or at least having heard it. There were a lot of things that I hadn’t heard that I wish that I would have at least heard, even, people still make mistake even if you hear it, but when you make it you expect it because you’ve heard it before. That would be the more practical advice and, you know, challenge yourself. You are your hardest critic so if you can meet your own expectations you’re doing well.”

### **Walter**

“Oh gosh. Man, I don’t know. That one I would have to think about. For some reason, the biggest thing that’s coming to my mind is to be ready to fight and don’t quit. They’re going to have to fight.”

### **William**

“Proactive, resilient, prayerful, hopeful, thoughtful. I get that by mentoring young people, I think that was instrumental. And I just had an inherent desire to want something different for myself. I don’t think there’s a word to describe that, but I wanted like I wanted something for myself you look out your window you see somebody get shot you hear about somebody getting raped with a broom you want something different. So, I wanted something different, I don’t know if there’s not a word for that and I don’t know if that can be taught. I don’t know if that can be taught. You know I thought about that a lot, but I don’t know if that can be taught just wanting something different.”

“Number one, just because you start out one way doesn’t mean you have to end up that way. Number two, respect yourself and respect others. Number three, believe in yourself and in your inherent abilities. Number four, dream the biggest dream you can possibly dream. Number five, acquire mentors who can help you achieve those dreams to believe in yourself more and to respect others and who know that because you start out one way doesn’t mean you have to end up that way.”

## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE

### Demographic/Background Information

1. Birth date
2. Gender
3. Place of Birth
4. Did subject attend preschool/kindergarten?
5. Names and locations of all elementary, junior high/middle and high schools and whether they were public, private, or parochial.
6. College(s) and graduate school(s) attended, years attended, locations, and degrees awarded, financial considerations.
7. How did respondents find out about colleges?
8. Current occupation and marital status.
9. Where parents were born.
10. Where grandparents were born (both grandparents on both sides of the family).
11. Reasons all family members gave for immigrating to the United States.
12. Generation of the respondents.
13. Father's occupation while respondent was growing up (until respondent finished high school).
14. Highest grade in school completed by father.
15. Mother's occupation while respondent was growing up (until respondent finished high school).
16. Highest grade completed by mother.
17. Age of both parents at birth of respondent.
18. Composition of family at the time respondent finished high school (was original family intact—if not, at what point did change occur?).
19. List of all siblings, ages, gender, current occupation and schooling.
20. Number of sibs and B.A. or above.
21. Birth order of the respondents.
22. Languages (s) spoken in the home with (a) mother (b) father (c) sibs (d) others.
23. Which language respondent spoke primarily when beginning school?

### Religion

1. Religion practiced during formative years.
2. Level of religiousness of family (scale of 1 to 5).
3. Kinds of church activities in which respondent participated.
4. Regularity of attendance at church services.
5. The role that religion played in the family.
6. The role that religion has played in the life of the respondent and the role it may have played in the formation of career/educational goals.

### Mentors

1. Person(s) who influenced the respondent most in setting educational goals.

### Childrearing practices and parental characteristics

1. Which parent had greatest influence on the development of educational goals?
2. Mother's attitudes toward the value of education (scales of 1 of 5).
3. Father's attitudes toward the value of education (scale of 1 to 5).
4. Other influential person's (name) attitudes toward the value of education (scale of 1 to 5).
5. In what specific ways did parents assist in early schooling (preparing the respondent of schooling)?
6. Were financial sacrifices ever made to assist in schooling?
7. Style of discipline exercised by father (authoritative, authoritarian, or permissive—each explained).
8. Style of discipline exercised by mother (authoritative, authoritarian, or permissive—each explained).
9. Characteristics mother valued most in her children.
10. How much education mother hoped respondent would complete?
11. How much education mother expected respondent would complete?
12. Characteristics father valued most in his children.
13. How much education father hoped respondent would complete?
14. How much education father expected respondent would complete?
15. What "getting ahead" of "being successful" meant to mother.
16. What "getting ahead" of "being successful" meant to father.
17. Occupations suggested by mother.
18. Occupations suggested by father.
19. Discussion of current events, news, community issues and politics in the family: How often. Who initiated the conversations?
20. How highly valued was individual independence or self-reliance in the family (scale of 1 to 5).
21. Importance of familial independence of others (scale of 1 to 5).
22. In what ways did parents encourage independence?
23. In comparison to other children in the neighborhood, did respondent have more or less freedom to go places and decide own activities (scale of 1 to 5).
24. Importance of work responsibilities in elementary school.
25. Importance of work responsibilities in high school.
26. Specific responsibilities (outside of school) required of the respondent at age 12.
27. Compared to other children respondent knew, were there responsibilities greater or less in elementary school (scale of 1 to 5).
28. Compared to other children respondent knew, were there responsibilities greater or less in high school (scale of 1 to 5).
29. Special hobbies that either parent pursued.
30. Cultural activities that either parent engaged in (music, dance, art, literature, etc.).
31. Did either parent read a great deal? What did they read?
32. Mother's involvement in activities outside the home (including church, clubs, civic, trade unions, etc.).

33. Father's involvement in activities outside the home (including church, clubs, civic, trade unions, etc.).
34. Parent with greatest influence on family decisions/Parent with the dominant personality.
35. Was home harmonious.
36. Was idea of "standing up for your rights" a particular characteristic of either parent?
37. Compared to the respondent's peers, were standards parents set for behavior and school performance higher or lower than those set by peer' parents (scales of 1 to 5).
38. Did parents ever discourage playing/spending time with other children in the neighborhood?
39. Did parents view selves as different from other families in the neighborhood? In what ways.
40. Did parents ever indicate that respondent was "different" from peers or sibs in regard to ability or potential?
41. Family cohesiveness. Frequency with which family did things together (scale of 1 to 5).
42. Types of activities that family engaged in together.
43. Who signed respondent's report card?
44. How old respondent was when received first library card.
45. How respondent acquired first library card.

#### Physical environment of the home

1. Other people who lived with family, including relationship to respondent, educational level, and period of time they lived with the family.
2. How many people respondents shared a bedroom with?
3. Where respondent studied.
4. Neatness and orderliness of the home (scale of 1 to 5).
5. Comparison of respondent's home to other homes in the community with respect to value and appearance (scale to 1 to 5).
6. Presence of reading materials in the home (encyclopedia, dictionary, magazine subscriptions, daily newspaper, books, other than textbooks or cookbooks/manuals).
7. Language of reading materials.

#### School/College Characteristics

1. Age at school entry.
2. Initial feelings about school.
3. When respondent first felt positive about school.
4. Did respondent ever do poorly in school prior to college (grades of C or lower, behavior problems)?
5. Racial/ethnic composition of elementary school.
6. Racial/ethnic composition of high school.
7. Socio-economic composition of high school.
8. Any teachers who were especially significant to the respondent either positively or negatively. In what way.

9. Did respondent ever receive any special educational instruction (either remedial or advanced)?
10. Was respondent ever placed in a special classroom or “tracked” into a particular curriculum (including accelerated, remedial, bilingual, college prep, vocational, etc.).
11. When respondent first began to get good grades (B’s or better).
12. When respondent first remembered deciding to go to college.
13. Impetus for graduate/professional education.
14. Did respondent ever experience conflict between continuing studies and helping family financially?
15. Did parents ever indicate a new for respondent to put aside studies to help family?
16. Was respondent a leader in elementary school (self-identified scale of 1 to 5)?
17. Was respondent a leader in high school (self-identified scale of 1 to 5)/
18. Was respondent “popular” in elementary school (self-identified scale of 1 to 5)?
19. Was respondent “popular” in high school (self-identified scale of 1 to 5)?
20. Did respondent belong to any clubs in high school?
21. Did respondent ever feel discriminated against because of ethnicity at any level of schooling.
22. Did parents visit schools for any purpose (meetings, conferences, PTA, social functions), scale of 1 to 5.

#### Community Characteristics

1. Racial/ethnic composition of neighborhood(s) in which respondents grew up.
2. Socio-economic composition of neighborhood(s) in which respondent grew up.
3. Population density of neighborhood(s) (rural, urban, suburban).
4. Language(s) spoken in the neighborhood.
5. Estimated percentage of peers from the neighborhood who went on to college.
6. Estimated percentage of peers from school who went on the college.
7. Family’s relative status in neighborhood (scale of 1 to 5).

#### Peer Relations

1. Friendship grouping in elementary school (many friends, a few friends, loner).
2. Friendship groupings in high school (many friends, a few friends, and loner)?
3. Did respondent consider self “different” from peers? In what ways. Characterization of friendship group at school (e.g., rowdy, studious, jocks, popular, average, gang members).
4. Ethnicity of friends in high school.
5. Ethnicity of friends in college.
6. Clubs or organizations to which respondent belonged in college.
7. Was respondent admired for any special ability?
8. Did respondent have a special disability that interfered with peer relations?

#### Health

1. Did respondent ever have any particular health problem or physical disability that affected their schooling or peer relations?

### Afro-American Identity

1. How did parents feel about being Black? How did they characterize this?
2. Was respondent ever aware of discrimination against any family members. How was this handled?
3. How did each parent feel about Anglos?
4. Did parents have Anglo friends?
5. Did parents indicate their feelings about inter-ethnic dating, marriage, or friendships?
6. Did respondent ever experience discrimination because of ethnicity?
7. Was being Mexican American related in any way to academic success?
8. Does respondent think he/she looks “typically” Black?
9. Has respondent ever been mistaken for something other than Black?
10. Did respondent ever feel he/she had to “adopt” Anglo values to survive academically? Kinds of values.
11. Has respondent ever had to reject familial/cultural values to survive academically? Kinds of values.
12. Has respondent ever wished he/she weren’t Black?
13. Does respondent characterize family’s value system as “typical” or “atypical” of other Black families? In what ways.
14. Does respondent feel that physical appearance has been a factor in school success? In what ways.

### Attitudes and personality characteristics

1. Personal characteristics possessed by respondent that were instrumental in school success.
2. Differences in respondent’s background and experiences that distinguish him/her from less academically successful Black Americans.
3. The single “critical variable” in respondent’s academic success (internally or externally located).
4. Significant events that played a vital role in academic success (including opportunities offered).

### Questions Added to Sample II Formally Incarcerated

1. Have you had any contact with the criminal justice system?
2. Have you ever been arrested?
3. How much time, if any have you spent in jail or prison? Been on probation?
4. What was that experience like?
5. Have any members of your family been arrested?
6. Have any family members spent time in jail or prison?
7. How has that experience affected you?

## APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM

CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

GRADUATE CENTER

CRIMINAL JUSTICE DEPARTMENT

### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

**Project Title:** Overcoming Deficiency and Detention through Academic Achievement: Black Male Accommodation, Resilience or Resistance?

Principal Investigator:

Faculty Advisor:

C. Maurice Green

Dr. David Brotherton

Graduate Student

Associate Professor

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

524 W 59<sup>th</sup> St Suite 520-32T

524 W 59<sup>th</sup> St Room 520-32T

New York, NY 10019

New York, NY 10019

212-470-2938

212-237-8694

Dear Participant,

My name is C. Maurice Green and I am a Doctoral Student in the Criminal Justice program at CUNY Graduate Center. You are invited to participate in a research study. The study is conducted under the direction of my faculty advisor, Dr. David Brotherton. The purpose of this study is to understand how Black boys that were raised in difficult economic situations still succeeded academically. This study may provide researchers with a new perspective of Black male resilience.

The study will involve interviewing adult males who have experienced membership in prison and street gangs. Approximately 30 individuals are expected to participate in this study. Each subject will be interviewed. Interviews will last between 45 and 120 minutes. Before beginning the interview, I will ask you a set of questions to determine if you are eligible to participate in this study.

There are no foreseeable risks to you participating in this study. While there are no individual benefits to this study, the findings may be beneficial to creating models that help Black boys in poverty succeed academically.

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may decide not to participate at any time.

With your permission, I would like to audio-tape this conversation and take notes. Using a tape recorder enables me to later check my notes for accuracy. If you would like, you may see a transcript of the tape before we use the interview in our final analysis. You may request that the tape recorder be stopped at any time.

Your confidentiality will be maintained throughout this research project. All tape recordings will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my home office. Upon transcription, the original tape recorded files will be erased. The transcriptions will then be stored in a locked file cabinet that is only accessible to me.

If you have any questions about this research, you can email me at magreen@jjay.cuny.edu, or you can call me at 212-470-2938. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you can contact the HRPP Office at 212-237-8961 or by email at jj-irb@jjay.cuny.edu.

Thank you for your participation in this study. I will give you a copy of this form to take with you.

Respondent #:

\_\_\_\_\_

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above description of this research and I understand it. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Furthermore, I have been assured that any future questions that I may have will also be answered by the principal investigator of the research study. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I will be given a copy of this statement.

I agree to have this interview audio-taped: [circle one]

Yes    No

Respondent #: \_\_\_\_\_





## Thematic Analysis Memo Template

Date:

Time:

Theme:

Emergence of Theme:

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Interviews Numbers Containing Theme:

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Theoretical Implications of Theme (if any):

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Thoughts:

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Notes:

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