

8-2017

From Poverty to Economic Independence: An Examination of Factors Contributing to Success and Self-Sufficiency among Black Male Family Self-Sufficiency Program Participants

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From Poverty to Economic Independence: An Examination of Factors Contributing to Success and Self-Sufficiency among Black Male Family Self-Sufficiency Program Participants

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to acquire accurate information concerning the motivations and methods utilized by Black males who have successfully achieved economic independence, as well as the ways in which they maintain their economic independence. The scope of this study was to examine adult Black males who had successfully completed a Family Self-Sufficiency program and are currently economically independent. Using a phenomenological methodology, their experiences and a description of the relationship connecting the problem statement, research question, theory and study design was completed. This study revealed perceptions that were contrary to popular mainstream beliefs about impoverished Black males. Family and an intrinsic motivation to succeed were echoed by the participants as the driver that leads them to economic independence. This study found three major implications; the first implication was participants expressed a belief that discrimination is a legitimate problem which can hinder one's opportunities for employment and upward mobility. The second implication was that participants believe they are viewed as threatening and dangerous, especially to law enforcement. The last implication of this study was that the participants were conservative in their ideological perspective. Though their political affiliation was Democrat, ideologically their views were fundamentally conservative. Most importantly, these participants did not allow societal hindrance to deter them from their ultimate goal of economic independence for themselves as well as their families.

Document Type

Dissertation

Degree Name

Doctor of Education (EdD)

Department

Executive Leadership

First Supervisor

Guillermo Montes

Subject Categories

Education

From Poverty to Economic Independence: An Examination of Factors Contributing to
Success and Self-Sufficiency among Black Male Family Self-Sufficiency Program

Participants

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

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August 2017

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, especially my wife Keisha, who has been a constant source of support and encouragement during the challenges of graduate school. This work is also dedicated to my Mother and siblings, whose examples have taught me to work hard for the things that I aspire to achieve.

Biographical Sketch

Nathaniel Sheppard is currently the Director of the Energy Conservation Program at Action for a Better Community, the Community Action Agency for Rochester, New York. Mr. Sheppard attended Onondaga Community College in Syracuse, New York, graduating in 1995 with his Associates of Arts in Humanities. Mr. Sheppard completed his Bachelors of Science degree in History at SUNY Brockport College in 1997. In 2004, Mr. Sheppard completed his Masters of Science degree in Business Administration at Medaille College in Buffalo, New York. Mr. Sheppard began his doctoral studies in May of 2013 at St. John Fisher College in the Doctorate of Education program in Executive Leadership. Mr. Sheppard is pursuing his research on From Poverty to Economic Independence: An Examination of Factors Contributing to Success and Self-Sufficiency among Black Male Family Self-Sufficiency Program Participants, Through the Lens of Family Self-Sufficiency Program Participants Under the direction of Dr. Guillermo Montes and Dr. Robert Ruehl. Mr. Sheppard received his Doctorate of Education in Executive Leadership in 2017.

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The purpose of this study was to acquire accurate information concerning the motivations and methods utilized by Black males who have successfully achieved economic independence, as well as the ways in which they maintain their economic independence. The scope of this study was to examine adult Black males who had successfully completed a Family Self-Sufficiency program and are currently economically independent. Using a phenomenological methodology, their experiences and a description of the relationship connecting the problem statement, research question, theory and study design was completed. This study revealed perceptions that were contrary to popular mainstream beliefs about impoverished Black males. Family and an intrinsic motivation to succeed were echoed by the participants as the driver that leads them to economic independence.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

For years, studies have reaffirmed the detachment of millions of Black males from their families as well as the United States' economic mainstream (Western & Wildeman, 2009). In identifying this crisis, social scientists have offered many theories, but none have sufficiently explained the primary source (or sources) of the problem, nor have social scientists offered any effective strategy to deal with the disproportionate number of unemployed Black males living in poverty. Among ethnic and racial groups in the United States, Blacks have the highest poverty rate at 27.4 %, while Blacks make up less than 13 % of the population (Mishel, Bivens, Gould, & Shierholz, 2012). Additionally, Black males have the highest unemployment rates, highest mortality rates, lowest high school graduation rates, and the highest incarceration rates of any racial or ethnic groups in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). These statistics are alarming and point to a socioeconomic crisis not in only the Black community, but in American society as a whole.

In the last 50 years, it has become the norm for political discourse to identify poverty as the cause for low educational achievement levels, high mortality rates, and high incarceration rates for Black males (Gibbs, 1988). This discourse claims that these problems are unsolvable because poverty has always been and always will be a problem in America. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), the poverty rate has ebbed and flowed with the economy since Mollie Orshansky developed the poverty thresholds in 1963. However, the fact that poverty in America affects a significant percentage of the

population does not explain why Black males are disproportionately in poverty, victims or perpetrators of violent crime, unemployed, incarcerated, or uneducated (Nebbit, Williams, Lombe, McCoy, & Stephens, 2014).

Some investigators argue that Black male dysfunction explains racial disparities and poverty. Riley (2016) suggested the deficiencies of Black males are not the consequences of failed economic, social, or public policies, but they largely result from defective genetics, heredity, and ghetto culture. This view is a long-held theory and stereotype concerning Black males and poverty. Deficiencies such as inferior genetics, poor upbringing, lack of values, or personal shortcomings are often blamed for high poverty, crime, incarceration, unemployment, drug use, out-of-wedlock births, and low graduation rates in the Black community (Brown & Donnor, 2011). Sowell (2013) asserted that personal tendencies, choices, and cultural customs, rather than racism, discrimination, and ghetto habits, explain disparities in dropout rates, unemployment rates, poverty rates, and incarceration rates among racial and ethnic groups. Other researchers agree that Black male dysfunction exists, but the cause of the deficiencies vary.

Brown and Donnor (2011) argued that dysfunction causes many of the problems facing the Black male demographic; conversely, Payne (2005) argued that persons accustomed to living in generational poverty think and act differently from persons in the middle and upper economic classes. Furthermore, students from generationally impoverished families are far more likely to act out chronically or to have greater difficulty grasping a concept even after repeated explanations. Both Payne (2005) and Riley (2016) agreed that Black males are deficient, intellectually as well as morally;

Riley (2016) asserted Black male dysfunction cause and/or exacerbate poverty, while Payne considered poverty to be the primary cause of Black male dysfunction.

Additionally, this Black male pathology argument typically compares impoverished Black males to White males and other ethnic groups who may be born into and mature in different social, economic, and cultural contexts.

Ford (1996) and Hilliard (2003) disagreed with the above stereotypical views of defective, incapable Black males. For example, they observed resilience as a characteristic of high-achieving Black males. Additionally, Black males in their studies shared multiple characteristics, such as self-confidence, self-control, a sense of personal responsibility, an understanding of the goals, and a belief that they could accomplish any tasks related to their ultimate goal. Furthermore, Hilliard (2003) explained that these high achievers understand that other people may have negative perceptions about them, but they reject those views because they deem themselves to be gifted and competent. The research of Ford and Hilliard contradicts the view of the defective Black male; though their research covered high achieving Black males, it demonstrated an ability of these men to make cognitive competent choices and clearly understand the responsibility and benefits of those choices.

While Ford (1996) and Hilliard (2003) rejected the stereotypical view of Black males, research indicates Black males consistently underperform academically as well as economically when compared to other ethnicities and their female counterparts (Noguera, 2009). Though Noguera did not specifically subscribe to the defective Black male theory, he did, however, validate the long-held belief of the crisis within this demographic. According to recent statistics, the nationwide college graduation rate for all Black

students is 42% as compared to 62% for White students, a full 20% less. Furthermore, the national college graduation rate for Black males is 33.1% as compared to 44.8% for Black females (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). Economically, Black males fare no better; at the end of 2015, the unemployment rate was 5.5% for White males, 9.2% for Black females, and 11.6% for Black males. These data corroborate Noguera's (2009) assessment of Black males' academic and economic deficiencies.

Criminal justice system statistics and the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) data support Black male deficiency, which showed non-Hispanic Black males accounted for 40% of the total prison and jail population in 2009 compared to 32% for Black females (Carson & Golinelli, 2013). Out of 2,096,300 males incarcerated in the United States, 841,000 were Black males compared to 201,200 females incarcerated in the United States, of whom 64,800 were Black females (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010). For every Black female incarcerated, there were 13 Black males incarcerated that same year, which indicates incarceration of Black males also caused a crisis for the Black community.

In response to the challenges that face Black males, government initiatives support efforts to improve their economic position by closing the academic gap, which would make them more employable (Mincy, 2006). The federal government has a history of legislation aimed at creating opportunities for Blacks to improve their lives, beginning in the 1960s with the Great Society programs to the more recent federally funded job programs in urban areas during the recession of 2008. In 2010, President Barack Obama allocated funding to urban school districts in high poverty areas to restructure curricula to better address the achievement gap of children living in poverty

(Lacour & Tissington, 2011). In 2014, President Obama announced the My Brother's Keeper Initiative, a call to action for community leaders to address the perceived, persistent opportunity gaps for young men of color through mentorship, partnered funding, and access to educational and economic opportunities (Obama, 2014).

After more than 50 years and billions of dollars spent, Black males still lag far behind academically as well as economically when compared to other ethnic groups or their female counterparts. In 2010, only about 50% of Black males between the ages of 25 and 65 were employed as compared to nearly 85% less than 40 years ago (Guy, 2014). Furthermore, Black males in the public education system are most often placed in special education classes and labeled as “educable mentally retarded,” “trainable mentally retarded,” or “developmentally delayed” (Guy, 2014). Though there has been innumerable government initiatives aim at improving educational and economic prospects for Black males, there is little evidence to support any measurable success, which leaves Black males facing a dire future at best.

Problem Statement

As previously indicated, Black males have the highest high school drop-out rates, unemployment rates, incarceration rates, and the second highest poverty rates that are slightly lower than single minority mothers in the United States (Mishel, Bivens, Gould, & Shierholz, 2012). Despite the data, little research has examined results of programs and/or initiatives aimed at alleviating social challenges faced by this population. This study focuses on gainfully employed Black males who have participated in a Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program, henceforth, *participants*, who, while in program, received assistance from any “means-tested” government program (welfare), especially those who

received Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). This population was of particular interest because they represent one of the most socially and economically challenged demographic groups.

While it is true that Black males are more likely to live in poverty, it is not true that Black males are without the necessary intellectual aptitude and social skills to better their circumstances. Quane, Wilson, and Hwang (2015) asserted the escalating joblessness among Black males and increase in concentrated urban Black poverty directly correlates to sociodemographic changes in the inner city, such as shifts in the labor market, the migration of higher-income families, and the associated reduction in available services to impoverished Black families left behind in the inner cities. Additionally, these factors also correlate to higher rates of crime committed by unemployed persons. According to scholars like, William Julius Wilson, (2012) Thomas Sowell, (2010) Cornel West, (2001), and Jason Riley (2016), the reasons for the changes in urban Black communities can range from racism and discrimination to self-defeating ghetto habits and cultural legacy.

Raphael and Winter-Ebmer (2001) assert that crime rates in the United States are much higher in areas with high percentages of unemployment and minorities, such as inner-city communities. Young Black males are the most likely group to be involved with the criminal justice system; additionally, Raphael and Winter-Ebmer (2001) found that property crimes were affected positively and significantly as crime rates relate to unemployment rates, as unemployment rates went up 1%, crime rates went up as well. Moreover, the intersection of race and unemployment showed that the highest probability of incarceration is for unemployed young Black male defendants, especially those

charged with public order or violent crimes (Chiricos & Bales, 1991). Individuals who are young, poor, black, male, unemployed, undereducated, and living in an urban area have the highest probability of being the victim, perpetrator of a violent crime, becoming incarcerated, or of succumbing to a premature death, which further demonstrates the need to study the effects of government intervention on this group (Votruba & Kling, 2009).

As explained above, crime is a multi-causal problem, but a correlation to joblessness and crime has long been established (Austin & Irwin, 2012). Criminologists continually examine data relating unemployment with criminal offending. A strong correlation has been established between higher crime areas in Black communities, low wages, high unemployment, and high poverty rates (Lin, 2000). Regions with low unemployment rates are more likely to have low crime rates; equally, regions with higher unemployment rates are likely to have correlating higher crime rates. Economic conditions alone do not drive crime rates; other factors such as demographic shifts, organized criminal practices, criminal-justice policies, and culture must also be considered and can adversely affect crime rates as well (Austin, 2012).

The reasons for Black males' disproportionate involvements in the criminal justice system differ based on ideological allegiances (Brown, 2013). In reference to this study, the respective ideological allegiances are defined as the conservative right and the liberal left. For example, some liberal thinkers claim that the high incarceration rates for Black males are consistently explained by the economic challenges in the Black community (Holzer, Offner, & Sorensen, 2005). Riley (2016), a conservative thinker, asserted that Black males' disproportionately high incarceration rates are due to ghetto culture, which not only condones delinquency and thuggery, but celebrates it to the point

that Black males have adopted jail attire as a fashion statement, in the form of pants worn well below the waist without a belt and oversized T-shirts.

Unemployment, Poverty and Academic Achievement

As the correlations between unemployment, poverty, and crime rates are debated, the correlation between unemployment, poverty, and academic achievement is also disputed. According to Duncan and Magnuson (2005), unemployment can have harmful effects on children's educational achievement, especially those children whose parents experience extended periods of joblessness. Additionally, Stevens and Schaller (2011) found unemployment to have detrimental effects on educational outcomes for all children, particularly those in urban areas with the highest unemployment rates. Compared to Whites, Blacks have double the likelihood of suffering 10 or more occurrences of joblessness during their best working years (Stevens & Schaller, 2011). For every occurrence of joblessness endured by the parent, there is a reduction in the children's likelihood for educational success (Austin, 2012). Consequently, the lower the probability for academic success for impoverished minority children, the higher the likelihood for involvement in the criminal justice system as well as generational poverty (Berliner, 2009).

By contrast, Riley (2016) argued that academic achievements have less to do with unemployment, underemployment, or poverty, but are influenced more by culture. More than 50% of the students enrolled in New York City's eight elite specialized high schools are Asian, even though Asians make up less than 15% of all students enrolled in the city's public-school system (Riley, 2016). Of the students enrolled in these specialized schools, most of the Black and White students come from middle- and high-income

families, while the Asian students come from households with incomes between \$35,000-\$40,000, which is low enough for the students to qualify for free or reduced lunch (Riley, 2016).

While Duncan and Magnuson (2005) argued unemployment and or underemployment can have detrimental effects on academic outcomes for children, Riley (2016) asserted income was not a factor in academic success, as most Asian children in New York City's elite public high schools come from lower-income families. Though the causes for Black male academic shortcomings are under debate, the disparities are real and quantifiable. Heckman and LaFontaine (2010) found Black males had significantly lower high school graduation rates than White students for decades, which spurred government intervention in the form of legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015).

Poverty and Racial Disparities

Over the past 30 years, the Right's political perspective on crime has dominated public policy and criminal justice practices, and they are still having detrimental impacts on the Black community (Brown, 2013). Their conservative rhetoric has labeled Black males as a "dangerous class," has perpetuated predatory myths, and has allowed municipalities to impose programs such as the New York City's Stop-and-Frisk program. Opponents of Stop-and-Frisk argue that it not only targets Black and Hispanic males, but it criminalizes them as well (2013). The criminalization of Black males has been exacerbated by social inequities, such as joblessness, inadequate education, and overt as well as covert discrimination; these factors have furthered the need to closely examine this understudied population.

This criminalization of Black and Hispanic males by municipalities has heightened the antagonistic relationship between law enforcement and the people they are charged with serving and protecting (Brown, 2013). Furthermore, that criminalization of Black males may have influenced a jury of six women to deliver a not guilty verdict in the Trayvon Martin murder case. On February 26, 2012, George Zimmerman, a White male of Hispanic descent, shot and killed a teenage Black male. Zimmerman was acting with no legal authority in the capacity of a neighborhood watch captain for a gated community in Sanford, Florida when the killing occurred. Zimmerman killed Martin after following and confronting Martin in his own neighborhood. Initially, the police refused to arrest Zimmerman; however, after nationwide protests, Zimmerman was eventually arrested and charged for the shooting death of Martin. On July 13, 2013, Zimmerman was acquitted of all charges. Martin's killing was the tipping point that sparked a social movement called Black Lives Matter.

Incidents of police brutality and subsequent public outcry of racial injustice have brought much needed attention to the plight of Black males being criminalized and discriminated against. The 2014 police shooting death of Michael Brown, a Black male teen in Ferguson, Missouri, and the 2015 blunt trauma death of Freddie Gray while in police custody in Baltimore, Maryland, ignited riots in the cities causing major property damage throughout the most impoverished areas. Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland, are surprisingly alike demographically. The most significant parallels these two cities share are their poverty rates and racial makeup: poor and Black. Civil unrest in urban communities after the killing of a Black male at the hands of local law enforcement raise serious concerns and many complex questions in relation to the role of government

interventions in urban communities struggling from high unemployment rates (Rothstein, 2015).

The intersection of race and poverty converges to create a greater likelihood of contact with the criminal justice system, which in turn further reduces Black males' ability to become self-sufficient (Chiricos & Bales, 1991). Though Black male unemployment rates were and still are the highest in the United States, their economic plight is largely ignored by scholarly discourse. Scholars have amassed a great deal of data on Black males as they relate to deviant behaviors, such as violence, illegitimate children, drug and alcohol abuse and educational deficiencies, but very little interest has been given to the disproportionate numbers of Black males living in poverty. A positive, however, that emerged is much needed research attention to the lives of impoverished Black males.

Government Initiatives

There have been many government initiatives aimed at addressing disparities between demographic groups, but little direct government intervention has been given to Black males, though they are the most academically, economically, and socially challenged group. Government intervention can range from subsidies for employers to hire persons reentering society from incarceration to federal aid for programs providing direct services to disadvantaged students (Hawken, Johnston, & McDonnell, 2005). Black males have the highest incarceration rates in the United States, yet there is no federal program specializing in Black male re-acclimation to mainstream society. Raphael (2011) asserted former prison inmates faced many employment barriers, such as discriminatory practices in the screening process of applicants to blatant exclusion from

employment for former offenders, which exponentially decreased the probability of securing gainful employment; when the additional burden of race is added to the stigma of a criminal record, employment opportunities are greatly diminished for Black males.

Race, gender, and poverty converge to create a greater likelihood for Black males to experience academic challenges, economic uncertainty, and/or contact with the criminal justice system, which in turn further reduces their ability to become economically independent (Chiricos & Bales, 1991). Though unemployment rates for Black males are the highest in the United States, the economic plight of these males is largely ignored by government intervention. This lack of interest from governmental initiatives, coupled with mismatched pairings of Black males with social programs ill-equipped to address the unique needs required by this specific demographic, has left Black males economically disenfranchised (Brown-Dean, 2007).

On occasion, the U.S. government has directly intervened in crises of joblessness and rising poverty rates for the country, but not for Black males as a select demographic. The federal government offered additional support during the Great Depression, the recessions of the 1970s, and most recently the Great Recession beginning in 2007 and ending in 2009. Even during those interventions, the unemployment rates for Blacks males were still twice that of their White counterparts (Austin, 2012). White Americans often experience unemployment rates lower than 6%, a rate that Blacks, especially Black males, have never experienced. For White Americans an unemployment rate above 10% is regarded as high, but Blacks consistently endure unemployment rates of 10% and higher (Austin, 2012). The Black unemployment rate has not been below that of their White counterpart since 1930, the last year before the enactment of the federal minimum

wage law (Sowell, 2013). After a 50 year “War on Poverty” and nearly 90 years of government interventions, Blacks, especially Black males, continue to economically lag well behind the rest of the country. Some conservative thinkers, such as Sowell (2013) and Riley (2016), considered government intervention to be the problem, not the solution.

Early scholars and intellectuals, such as abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1865), opposed government intervention as a solution to the problems that Blacks faced after Emancipation, as long as Blacks were free from prejudicial, exclusionary practices, such as Jim Crow laws and terrorism. Douglass answered the question of “What to do with the Negro?” by stating, “Do nothing with us! All I ask; give him a chance to stand on his own legs, and if the Negro cannot stand let him fall” (Douglass, 1865, p. 6). Likewise, Booker T. Washington, an educator, author, and advisor to presidents of the United States, argued that Blacks needed to put effort into acquiring property, gaining entry into industry, mastering tangible skills, increasing intelligence, and being of good character, rather than political activity (Riley, 2016). Both Douglass and Washington believed political advancement and government intervention would do little to improve the social or economic status of Blacks in America (Riley, 2016).

Douglass and Washington asserted the federal government should insure freed Blacks were afforded the same reasonable opportunities as any other free citizen of the United States; furthermore, they believed that freed Blacks should not be given preferential treatment. According to Napolitano (2009), Douglass speculated that governmental assistance would perpetuate the very prejudice it was trying so hard to alleviate if Blacks were to be given special treatment. Moreover, Washington warned Blacks would be treated as second-class citizens by giving them preferential treatment via

hiring (West, 2006). Nonetheless, 50 years later, President John Kennedy began the groundwork for the most comprehensive governmental interventions to affect the Black population since Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal legislation.

President Kennedy first took up the fight to address poverty in America shortly before he was assassinated on November 22, 1963; he asked a group of advisors from the economic community to propose some initiatives to combat the poverty problem in the United States. After Kennedy's death, President Lyndon Johnson continued the legislation and crafted the Economic Opportunity Act along with other initiatives intended to fight poverty in America (Bailey & Duquette, 2014). On January 8, 1964, President Johnson gave his State of the Union address and began The War on Poverty, the unofficial name for legislation aimed at reducing poverty rates, which included The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, The Food Stamp Act of 1964, The Social Security Act of 1965, and The Elementary & Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Brauer, 1982). These acts, along with some modified legislation from President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, were the foundation for what was known as the welfare system, America's poverty safety net, which according to some conservative thinkers, caused the welfare dependency problems in the Black community today (Jennings, 2002).

The Economy and Welfare 1965-1992

After President Johnson implemented the Great Society programs, conservative rumblings against liberal welfare policies grew, and Republican Richard Nixon was elected to the presidency in 1968 (Edelman, 2004). During a minor recession in 1969, President Nixon proposed abolishing the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC) and replacing it with the Family Assistance Program (FAP), an

incentive to work that gave \$1,600 annually to eligible families and allowed them to earn up to an additional \$4,000 without penalty. Moreover, all FAP participants with the exception of mothers with children below the age of 3 were required to work, creating the first framework for workfare programs (Quadagno, 1990). Nixon was the first president since Roosevelt to propose such major national welfare reform legislation. The legislation was not received well by conservatives or liberals and died in Congress in 1972; however, it did create a political platform for welfare reform.

After the FAP legislation died, and during a time of astronomical gas prices, stagflation, and a steep recession from 1973 through 1975, President Nixon's policies expanded services and increased spending. States were mandated to expand the food stamp programs and Supplemental Security Income (SSI), while the federal government's Earned Income Credit (EIC) enacted in 1975 provided the working poor with direct cash assistance in the form of tax credits (Danziger, 2001). During the 1970s, proponents of welfare reform worked to advance the idea of workfare, a reciprocal relationship of work in service positions in return for cash welfare payments. By the 1980s, many conservatives thought welfare recipients were undeserving poor and work for benefits emerged as the future of welfare reform (Katz, 2002).

Riding a wave of general discontent, staunch welfare critic Ronald Reagan won the presidential election in 1980 (Danziger, 1983). During his first term, he reduced the number of persons on the welfare rolls by an average 10 to 15% nationwide by cutting the budget to the AFDC program. Additionally, his policies incentivized states to encourage recipients to participate in workfare programs, which provided education and training to recipients (Danziger, 1983). As a direct result of President Reagan's policies,

40 states implemented welfare-to-work programs (workfare). Later, the Federal Family Support Act of 1988 forced all states to implement welfare-to-work programs by 1990. During the first 6 years of Reagan's presidency, inflation subsided and the economy stabilized in part due to low oil prices and a renewed confidence by private investors (Alesina, 2000).

The last 2 years of the Reagan presidency, however, saw a short economic recession, which ended by the early 1990s. The economic recovery of the early 1990s was unlike recoveries of the past. Other 20th-century economic growth periods after recessions saw income gains shared across demographic groups; conversely, the recovery of the 1990s were concentrated in the upper income demographic group (Danziger, Sandefur & Weinberg, 1994). The advantaged groups enjoyed economic improvement, while the groups in the below-average income brackets with high unemployment and high poverty rates saw little advancement. During this recovery, the old gained more than the young; more educated workers saw improvement, while less-educated workers experienced income declines. Moreover, single parent families with children experienced income declines, while two-parent families gained, and minorities gained less than Whites, (Danziger, Sandefur & Weinberg, 1994). While the advantaged middle class of the 1990s was economically sound, the working class and working poor were economically stagnated (White & Rogers, 2000). The inflation rate remained relatively flat during the 1990s, but the jobs that were created during the recovery did not lift families out of poverty. Instead, many families were forced to seek economic relief from the AFDC program. The strong economy and rising numbers of families seeking

assistance from the welfare system created a climate for conservatives to push for welfare reform legislation (Besharov, 2003).

Welfare Reform

In response to the increase in the numbers of families seeking AFDC services and concerns about welfare dependency from the conservatives, President Bill Clinton enacted The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) (O'Connor, 2002). Fulfilling his 1992 campaign promise to reform welfare, Clinton signed PRWORA into law on August 22, 1996. This legislation marked a fundamental change in both approach and purpose of the AFDC program, renamed The Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program (TANF).

Fueled by years of stereotypes and political rhetoric, PRWORA changed the welfare system from poverty safety net to what was supposed to be an economic empowerment vehicle (Blank & Ellwood, 2001). As a poverty safety net, the welfare system functioned to provide necessities such as food, shelter, and cash assistance to low-income or no-income persons. The welfare system program's services included the Food Stamp program, which provided food purchasing assistance to persons with low income or no income (Slack, Kim, Yang, & Berger, 2014).

The oldest form of public assistance, public housing programs, was a form of residence tenure in which the property was owned by a public entity. The original goal of public housing was to provide safe, affordable domiciles to persons with low incomes or no incomes who otherwise were unable to afford adequate housing (Newman, Holupka, & Harkness, 2009). Lastly, the safety net provided cash assistance for children whose families had low income or no income (Aratani, Lu, & Aber, 2014).

After the shift from a poverty safety net to an economic empowerment vehicle, the welfare system entitlements changed to make employment appear more appealing (O'Connor, 2002). Much like Nixon's FAP, the Clinton administration's intent was to structure the system in a way that would entice recipients into the workforce. The legislation enhanced the workforce development component of the welfare system, making it laden with incentives to compel and sometimes coerce recipients to hastily exit the system for any employment (Lee, 2009). The legislation was applauded by the U. S. Chamber of Commerce and considered by conservatives to be a return of America's work ethic (Morris, Huston, Duncan, Crosby, & Bos, 2001). As a part of the welfare reform legislation, many welfare recipients were required to find work or participate in work-for-benefits programs, such as Welfare to Work (WEP) or Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) programs (Lichter & Jayakody, 2002).

Between 1993 and 2000, AFDC/TANF caseloads dramatically fell from their peak of over 14 million to below 6 million (Blank & Ellwood, 2001). After the Clinton Administration's welfare reform legislation, the Department of Agriculture reported that child hunger had fallen by 40%, and census data indicated that child and adult poverty had declined as well. Furthermore, the rate of single-mother employment saw significant increases (Blank & Ellwood, 2001). Considering these trends, many Republicans, and more than a few Democrats, declared welfare reform a spectacular success (Martin & Lin, 2003).

Gender Bias in Means-Tested Programs

Statistically, the decade seemed to be a good one for low-income women, especially minorities and single mothers (White & Rogers, 2000). Welfare reform forced

great numbers of them off the welfare rolls, and the robust economy helped others to find employment. Incentives to join the workforce, such as childcare subsidies and an expanded Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), also encouraged many recipients to work. Policies underscoring reciprocal obligations as well as enticements and work grants, such as childcare assistance, dramatically increased employment for women and lowered welfare receipts for this population (Holzer & Offner, 2005).

Conversely, this legislation also included a key component aimed at recovering government monies from non-custodial parents for the support of their children. The clear majority of non-custodial parents were males, especially Black males. The legislation carried harsh punishments for non-compliance; punitive consequences from loss of professional license to incarceration further exacerbated the economic challenges for Black males (Hansen, 1999). According to social scientist Nathan Glazer, the same system that had made it easier for fathers to abandon their families and mothers to separate from their husbands was now requiring absent fathers to take financial responsibility for their children (Riley, 2016).

Black females may have been joining the workforce in record numbers, but research indicated that they were generally working in low-wage, dead-end jobs, and their families continued to face many substantial hardships, such as ignored healthcare needs, hunger, and unsafe housing (Martin & Lin, 2003). As low-income mothers fought to become economically independent, they encountered barriers, such as physical and mental health problems, inadequate childcare, inadequate occupational skills, lack of transportation, criminal histories, and limited educational abilities (Brown & Barbosa, 2001). These barriers coupled with restrictions and time limits on TANF benefits led to

hastened job searches, which resulted in poor matches and lower wages. Again, government initiatives and intervention did not solve the problems of the underclass; instead these interventions left the poorest and least employable the most vulnerable to deeper poverty (Grogger, 2003).

Black Males Left Behind

The latter half of the 1990s produced strong labor markets in terms of numbers of persons employed in the United States, but for Black males, especially young Black males, it was still a time of economic decline (Mincy, 2006). The unique challenges faced by many in this demographic were previous incarceration and new stricter child support enforcement policies, which did not have the same effect on the young Black female demographic (Holzer et al., 2005). The number of unemployed young Black males climbed persistently with only an insignificant pause during the economic peak of the late 1990s (Eckholm, 2006); in 2000, 65% of Black male high school dropouts in their 20s were without jobs, and by 2004, the number had ballooned to 72%, compared with 34% of White and 19% of Hispanic dropouts.

Young Black males without a high school diploma are the most likely persons to be unemployed in the United States as compared to any other race or ethnicity (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Another alarming statistic is that Black males between the ages of 15 and 19 had the highest murder rate of any race and gender group. Murders from gun violence were the primary cause of death for Black males since 1969, peaking in 1991 at 39.4 out of 100,000, in comparison to six out of every 100,000 for White males (Fox & Zawitz, 2000). For this and a plethora of other reasons, Black males need and deserve an

empathetic study focused on the unique challenges they face, and through a specific theoretical framework that can capture the nuances of the Black male experience.

Theoretical Rationale

Black males have been studied for many years without a distinct theoretical framework through which to truly examine their lives. Bush and Bush (2013) developed African American male theory (AAMT), an emerging theory that examines Black males through a multi-system perspective. The theory examines the individual and collective experiences, behaviors, outcomes, events, phenomena, and trajectory of Black males' lives (Bush & Bush, 2013). AAMT posits that Black males are born with a desire for self-determination and the capacity for morality and intelligence; the theory utilizes the resilience theory and fervently opposes defective models, rational, and practice. From this perspective, social and educational challenges facing this group stem from socially constructed systems, such as culture or environment, rather than any innate biological deficiencies (Bush & Bush, 2013).

In relation to this study, AAMT facilitates understanding the struggles encountered by Black males as they rise out of poverty and achieve self-sufficiency by theorizing the impact of factors such as violence, fatherlessness, racism, culture, environment, and poverty. Moreover, Livingston and Nahimana (2006) called for the need to study Black males from an ecological perspective, first introduced by Urie Bronfenbrenner, he claimed that “disproportionate rates of incarceration, poverty, and school failure all speak to the need for a holistic approach to understanding and addressing the problems that Black males face, therefore an ecological, or structural, approach is warranted” (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 213).

As illustrated by figure 1.1, AAMT is composed of six tenets and assumptions; the first tenet is, “The individual and collective experiences, behaviors, outcomes, events, phenomena, and trajectory of African American boys’ and men’s lives are best analyzed using an ecological systems approach, which was established by building on the foundation of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (EST)” (Bush & Bush, 2013, p. 7). EST asserts that there are five interconnected environmental systems that include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). AAMT expounds on EST by dividing the microsystems into two distinct parts: the inner microsystem and outer microsystem, thus creating an outer system called the second subsystem (Bush & Bush, 2013).

The inner microsystem is the biology of the Black male, the personality, sexual orientation, beliefs, perceptions, and intellect (Brown, 2013). The outer microsystem refers to the institutions and groups that directly impact an individual’s life, such as family, school, religious affiliation, neighborhood, and peers (Brown, 2013). AAMT further expounds EST by developing a system called the first subsystem, which situates the supernatural and spiritual aspects of the Black male identity; it also encompasses the unconscious of the collective will, as well as archetypes. The subsystem is the interconnections between the inner microsystem and the outer microsystem, influenced by the supernatural, spirituality, collective will, unconsciousness, and archetypes (Bush & Bush, 2013). The mesosystem is the connections within the microsystems, interactions between the family and school, individual’s peer group and family as well as different sets of peer groups, such as school peer groups and neighborhood peer groups, which can differ immensely (Bush & Bush, 2013).

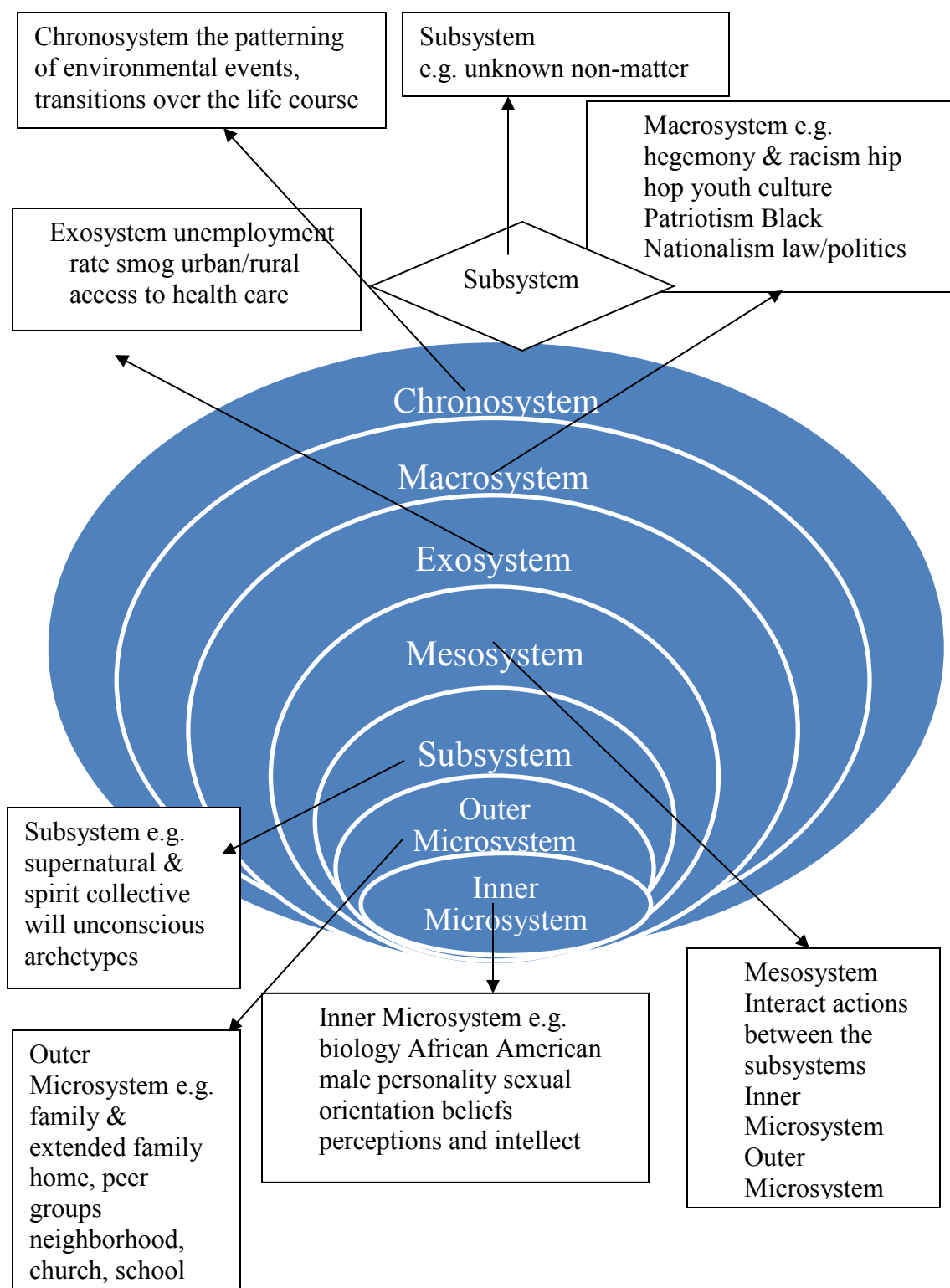


Figure 1.1. Ecological Systems Model for African American male theory.

The exosystem is the link between a social setting in which the individual does not have a direct connection (Bush & Bush, 2013).

The macrosystem is the individual's culture. Cultural context includes developing and industrialized countries, socioeconomic status, poverty, and ethnicity (Bush & Bush, 2013). This is the most important lens through which to view this study because Black males' cultural context is misunderstood at best. It is believed that members of a cultural group share a common identity, heritage, and values. For Black males, commonality is a problem, since all Black males are not the same; yet they are stereotyped as one large deviant, deficient group. The macrosystem also includes the context of industrialization. Black males in the United States live in the wealthiest industrialized country in the world with all the privileges of any other citizen, yet they are marginalized, stereotyped, and even criminalized, which furthers the need for the study of this complex group (Carter, 2003).

The macrosystem additionally encompasses the Black male's socioeconomic status in the United States, the highest unemployment rates, highest incarceration rates and highest mortality rates, yet very little scholarly literature seeks to understand the causes for these disproportionate statistics. Moreover, the context of poverty is examined in the macrosystem and Black males lead that category as well (Gavin et al., 2010). The last element in the macrosystem is ethnicity, which holds many complexities for Black males because they are perceived to be similar, but Black males are as diverse as White males or any other ethnic group in the United States.

The chronosystem is the last system of the EST; it is the patterning of environmental events and transitions over the life course, as well as socio-historical

circumstances (Bush & Bush, 2013). AAMT expanded EST by creating an outer system called the second subsystem (Bush & Bush, 2013). The outer subsystem is the place for the unknown; an example of the unknown for Black males would be from an anthropological perspective.

The second tenet of AAMT is, “There is something unique about being male and of African descent” (Bush & Bush, 2013, p.10). AAMT asserts that Black males are different from any other race or ethnic group, and the origin of their uniqueness is unknown; whether Black males are born with their uniqueness or their uniqueness is socialized is undetermined. AAMT does not negate the uniqueness of other populations or groups; rather, the theory is primarily focused on studying and discerning what is different regarding Black males as a collective and what is individually different within the collective.

The third tenet of AAMT is, “There is a continuity and continuation of African culture, consciousness, and biology that influence the experiences of African American boys and men” (Bush & Bush, 2013, p.10). AAMT asserts that African culture should be the foundation for study of Black males, due to the impact of African culture and consciousness on the thoughts, actions, and perceptions of Black males as well as the psychology, physiology, and socialization of this group.

The fourth tenet of AAMT is, “African American boys and men are resilient and resistant” (Bush & Bush, 2013, p. 10). The theory conjectures that African American boys and men are born with a desire for self-determination and the capacity for morality and intelligence (Bush & Bush, 2013). AAMT accepts resilience theory and vigorously rejects defective Black male stereotypes. AAMT maintains that Eurocentric mainstream

systems exacerbate social and educational difficulties encountered by Black males rather than genetic deficiencies or urban culture.

Ecologist C. S. Holling introduced resilience theory in 1973; Holling combined facets of systems theory and ecological theory to construct his assertions. Resilience theory is utilized to address the ability, capacity, and powers that individuals or systems exhibit that allow them to overcome adversity (Holling, 1973). AAMT is particularly interested in discovering and illuminating the resiliency present in the inner microsystem, the outer microsystem, the subsystem, and the mesosystem. Moreover, AAMT ties resistance with resiliency and centers on methods in which Black males and systems deal with White mainstream cultural hegemony and oppression (Bush & Bush, 2013).

AAMT's fifth tenet is, "Race and racism coupled with classism and sexism have a profound impact on every aspect of the lives of African American boys and men" (Bush & Bush, 2013, p. 11). Akin to critical race theory, AAMT views racism as an ever-present influence and issue in modern society. AAMT is mainly concerned with the impacts of race and racism on the lives of Black males in White mainstream society. Furthermore, AAMT is interested in examining how some Black males from a particular class might be afforded opportunity by powerbrokers in White mainstream society (Bush & Bush, 2013).

The sixth tenet of AAMT is, "The focus and purpose of study and programs concerning African American boys and men is for the pursuit of social justice" (Bush & Bush, 2013, p. 12). AAMT's goal is to focus attention on those institutions that seek to oppress Black males by explicitly examining and concentrating on those practices, policies, programs, systems, concepts, and institutions that encourage racial

discrimination (Bush & Bush, 2013). AAMT is not a reactionary theory, but rather a response to the establishment of dominance and racism. The theory draws upon the historical and current culture, consciousness, and community to determine what is social justice for Black males (Bush & Bush, 2013).

For this study, tenets one, two, and four are the precepts utilized to examine the expectations, perceptions, and experiences of Black males as they navigate an FSS program towards economic independence. For tenet one, an ecological systems approach analyzes the collective experiences, behaviors, outcomes, events, phenomena, and trajectory of FSS participants (Black males), as well as to situate the individuals within mainstream society.

Tenet two examines and captures the uniquely distinctive experiences of Black males, particularly in White mainstream society, as demonstrated by this population's low high school graduation rates, high unemployment rates, and extremely high incarceration rates (Pettit & Western, 2004). The combination of disproportionately low economic success markers and a support system created to assist female participants exacerbates the struggles faced by Black males utilizing FSS programs to gain economic independence. AAMT speaks to the importance of a study examining the unique experiences of Black males who participate in FSS, a social welfare system designed and populated largely by women.

Tenet four, resistance and resiliency, speaks to the stereotypes that people are poor because they chose to be poor or want to be poor. Resistance and resiliency are the endeavors of Black males actively engaging in strategies to lift themselves from poverty through FSS programs, the crux of the study.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this exploratory phenomenological study was to acquire accurate information concerning the motivations and methods utilized by Black males who have successfully achieved economic independence, as well as the ways in which they maintain their economic independence. An analysis of existing research findings for other disenfranchised groups is offered to establish individual and collectively themed responses to the following research questions.

Research Questions

This study examined adult Black males who successfully completed a Family Self-Sufficiency program and achieved economic independence. The study analyzed the factors that facilitated their ability to successfully exit the welfare system. This qualitative study utilized an empirical phenomenological research model to obtain comprehensive descriptions and to provide a basis for a thoughtful examination to represent the essence of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Raw data was collected from descriptions obtained through “naïve” open-ended questions and dialogue. The crux of the dialogue illuminated the perceptions of this unique population after they utilized the Self-Sufficiency program to find meaningful and gainful employment paying a wage that ensures they remain economically independent. Furthermore, based on the reflection and interpretation of participant’s story, a description of the experience was constructed. The intent was to understand the meaning to the Black male participants who have had the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

One major question and five sub questions guided the study: What factors facilitated the participants' abilities to become economically independent from the welfare system? Specifically, the study will investigate the following sub-questions:

1. How did participants describe their experience in the welfare system?
2. How did participants in FSS utilize the program, if at all, to create strategies for self-sufficiency, which in turn, countered societal stereotypes?
3. What strategies did participants employ to negotiate the welfare system to gain economic independence?
4. What factors influenced the economic independence of participants?
5. What was unique about their experiences engaging with FSS, given that most participants are women?

Potential Significance of the Study

As previously stated, Black males have the highest unemployment rates, highest mortality rates, lowest high school graduation rates, and the highest incarceration rates of all ethnic groups in the United States (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010). Additionally, Blacks have the highest poverty rate at a staggering 27.4%, yet Blacks make up less than 13% of the total U.S. population; furthermore, 26% of Black males live below the poverty line, as compared to a national average of 12% for all males (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). These statistics alone point to the many significant problems Black males in the United States face today. The goal of this study was to identify successful Black males and to quantify the means by which they achieved their success. In doing so, a blueprint may be created for other Black males to follow to achieve economic success.

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced a socioeconomic problem facing a large percentage of Black males in the United States today. The Black male demographic has the highest high school drop-out rates, unemployment rates, incarceration rates, and the second highest poverty rates in the United States (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010). Scholars have for years expressed concerns about the economic disconnect of Black males and the American Dream (Western & Wildeman, 2009). This problem does not impact the Black community exclusively, but rather American society as a whole. This study focused on Black males who participated in mandated FSS programs and who received assistance from any “means-tested” government program (welfare) while in program, especially those who received TANF.

The correlations between unemployment, poverty, and crime rates as well as the correlation between unemployment, poverty, and academic achievement were explored. Additionally, government initiatives and the economic gaps between demographic groups were discussed. Furthermore, the association connecting the economy and the welfare system between 1965 and 1992, from the Great Society programs implemented by President Johnson to the Welfare Reform policies enacted by President Clinton, were explored. Following welfare reform, the chapter discussed gender bias in means-tested programs, such as the AFDC through the transition to the TANF. This chapter also discussed the economic stagnation experienced by Black males during the strong labor markets of the 1990s.

The theoretical framework for the study is the AAMT, an emerging theory developed by Bush and Bush (2013) to examine Black males through a multi-system

perspective. The theory examines the individual and collective experiences, behaviors, outcomes, events, phenomena, and trajectory of Black male's lives (Bush & Bush, 2013).

The purpose of this study was to acquire accurate information concerning the motivations and methods utilized by Black males who have successfully achieved economic independence, as well as the ways in which they maintain their economic independence. One major research question guided the study's purpose: What factors facilitate the study participants' abilities to become economically independent from the welfare system? The chapter culminated with the significance of the study, which is to create a framework for impoverished Black males to utilize to become economically independent. The following chapter reviews the literature on self-sufficiency programs, program evaluation results, participants, relation to the self-sufficiency standard, relation to poverty threshold, and policies. Chapter 3 is a description of the process used in this study of FSS program participants who successfully completed the program and live independently. Chapter 4 presents the results from the analysis gleaned from the process. Lastly, chapter 5 summarizes suggestions for implementation, implications of the research, and additional research recommended from the results of this study.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed review of the literature on self-sufficiency programs, program evaluation results, participants, relation to the self-sufficiency standard, and the relation to the poverty threshold and policies. To aid in the focus of this literature review and to provide an organizing framework, the subsequent research questions were addressed: Poverty threshold vs. Self-sufficiency? What was previously published on the topic of self-sufficiency? What are representative characteristics or common traits of persons seeking self-sufficiency? How have welfare reform policies affected self-sufficiency? What effects, if any do anti-poverty government programs have on self-sufficiency? What effects, if any, do anti-poverty government programs have on the poverty rate? Only data-based studies that were published in peer reviewed journals in the English language were included. Articles, theses, dissertations, literature reviews, or abstracts that were not published in peer reviewed journals were omitted.

Literature Review

Key terms were identified and included self-sufficiency, public housing, government subsidy, and poverty rate as they related to self-sufficiency. A detailed search was conducted and 76 studies were identified, but only 25 satisfied the inclusion criteria, and they were utilized in the review.

Poverty threshold versus self-sufficiency? In 1990, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) created programs to encourage employment,

increase incomes, and to reduce reliance on government funds among recipients of housing subsidies. These programs were called Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) programs. The programs were aimed at promoting self-sufficiency and reducing dependency on government subsidies for welfare recipients, especially those that were receiving housing subsidies. Self-sufficiency programs were intended to encourage and support as well as prepare individuals or families living below the poverty line for financial independence. These programs included vocational training, occupational counseling, employment placement, basic skills training, continuing education, language proficiency, work-for-benefits programs, money management, family counseling, internships, and other related services to assist a participant with employment, including drug and alcohol or mental health treatment programs.

With the obsolescence of the poverty threshold, coupled with the new FSS programs, a need arose for a new measurement for poverty that would account for all the variables related to self-sufficiency. In the mid-1990s, Dr. Diana Pearce, Director of the Women and Poverty Project at Wider Opportunities for Women, created the Self-Sufficiency Standard. Initially, this standard was created as a performance measure of “self-sufficiency” in federal job training programs, also known as the Workforce Investment Act program (WIA). In the early 2000s, the WIA experienced significant growth from a major funding increase from the Ford Foundation. Today, the standard can be found in 37 states and the District of Columbia. The measure provided accurate and thorough information on what participants needed to be economically independent (Pearce & Brooks, 2006).

The Self-Sufficiency Standard defines the amount of income necessary to meet basic needs (including taxes) without public subsidies (e.g., public housing, food stamps, Medicaid, or childcare) and without private/informal assistance (e.g., free babysitting by a relative or friend, food provided by churches or local food banks, or shared housing).

The family demographics this standard is utilized for can vary from one adult with no dependents, up to two adults with multiple teenage dependents. This calculation is often 2 or 3 times greater monetarily than the normal poverty indicators (Pearce & Brooks, 2006).

What has been published on the topic of self-sufficiency? Though millions of dollars have been spent on self-sufficiency programs, limited research has been done on their effectiveness. An evaluation done by Robert Fischer (2000) examined a 14-unit transitional housing program that transitioned homeless families from dependence to independent living. The Family Development Center (FDC) in College Park, Georgia, focused on preparing young mothers with one dependent child in their care for independent living and economic independence (Fischer, 2000). The program imposed a 2 year limit on residential service with an additional year of after-care services. The study provided descriptive data on 98 displaced families who entered the facility within the first 5 program years (1991-1995).

At follow-up, the results showed 61% of the participants were employed, and 11% were in school or training. The other 27%, while not employed, were engaged in seeking employment (Fischer, 2000). Additionally, 43% of former residents reported independently renting an unsubsidized apartment, while 84% of the participants did not

have a second child within 1 year of leaving program, and 64% did not have subsequent children up to 4 years after leaving the program (Fischer, 2000).

Long (2001) compared four self-sufficiency program evaluations. The first was Mainstream Rules and Services, which tested 11 programs using a multidimensional experimental research design method. The second post-employment services evaluation used an intensive case management approach to track randomly selected, newly employed welfare recipients for a 1 year period. The third, the Earnings Supplementation Evaluation, was based on rigorous evaluations of four programs: The New York State Child Assistance Program (CAP), the Self-Sufficiency Program of New Brunswick (SSP), the New Hope Program, and the Minnesota Family Assistance Program (MFIP). Lastly, the Education and Training Evaluation was assessed using a program group and a control group. The results of the studies revealed that typical programs assisted in transitioning families from social services to employment, but the work did not compensation enough, nor was it stable enough to make more families economically independent (Long, 2001).

Huston et al. (2001) assessed the impact of New Hope Project Self-Sufficiency Program. The program offered wage supplements that raised household wages higher than the poverty threshold, along with subsidies for childcare and health coverage to adults who were employed full-time. The study was a 3 year demonstration experiment intended to test the efficiency of the work-based antipoverty program; it examined the impact of the program on children's development and family functioning. The study indicated that boys in the New Hope Program families fared better behaviorally and academically than participants in control families.

Anthony (2005) conducted a quantitative study on the Rockford Family Self-Sufficiency program (FSS), established in 1992 by the Rockford Housing Authority, Rockford, Illinois. The research design and methodology evaluated one program in detail, the Rockford Family Self-Sufficiency Program. Two sets of factors were used in the evaluation. Number of participants, program age, and fiduciary context were the first set of factors; the second set of factors was local housing authority size and the definition of successful participation. The study results showed that five categorical factors showed statistical significance: two life-cycle factors, two rational-choice factors, and one program-quality factor. The five factors were age (or .034), marital status (or .039), high school diploma at program entry (or .028), household income at program entry (or .048) and number of skills acquired while in the program (or .000) (Anthony, 2005).

In 2006, the experimental evaluation data from the New Hope Project was used in a study to determine the program's impact on marriage among mothers that had never been married, 5 years post-random assignment (Gassman-Pines & Yoshikawa, 2006). The study also looked for correlations between the program and income, wage growth, and goal efficacy among never-married mothers. The results indicated that among never-married mothers of Latino descent, the New Hope Project significantly improved marriage percentages 5 years post-random assignment; the Latino program group members were twice as likely to wed than the control group members. There was no significant change for the African American program group members. Considering singularly the correlation between work and wage variables and marriage, annual total income had the greatest correlation with marriage (Gassman-Pines & Yoshikawa, 2006).

According to the literature, self-sufficiency programs facilitate some positive changes in the lives of their participants, but these changes are nominal. Furthermore, the evaluations done on family self-sufficiency programs did not definitively prove any direct correlation between the programs and economic independence, as other factors such as family support, cultural background, or intrinsic motivations were not examined. Some of the research revealed that self-sufficiency programs might have positive ancillary effects related to academic and behavioral improvements for participants' children (Huston et al., 2001). These studies have also shown an increase in family unit formation and structure in the form of higher percentages of marriage among unmarried mothers and higher percentages of families living in unsubsidized housing (Gassman-Pines & Yoshikawa, 2006).

The literature presented in this section offers an introduction to the evaluations on family self-sufficiency programs thus far; however, the evaluations did not provide an answer to the question of the practicality of these programs. Family self-sufficiency programs afford some participants opportunities to better their socioeconomic position, but to what degree do these programs contribute to the participant's economic independence? Furthermore, the evaluations concentrated on women and children, excluding all males except as children or partners of never married mothers. Moreover, the limited evaluations on family self-sufficiency programs imply that it is too early and not enough data has been collected to decide the practicality of the programs. Most of the evaluations presented were quantitative, small in number, and consisted of primarily Black and Latino women, lending credence to the need for further research with more diverse groups of participants to better evaluate the practicality of these programs.

What are typical characteristics or common traits of persons seeking self-sufficiency? According to demographic data, the vast majority of participants in self-sufficiency programs and/or seeking self-sufficiency services are unskilled, uneducated, minority females with dependent children. The participants in the Family Development Center (FDC) program evaluation were non-drug addicted, homeless, young, unwed women between the ages of 17 and 26 years old with one dependent child less than 1 year old (Fischer, 2000). Loeb and Corcoran (2000) examined women who never received welfare with both short-term and long-term recipients of welfare. Patterson (2012) examined a sample of 672 single, female-headed families who participated in the food stamp program. Lastly, Gassman-Pines and Yoshikawa (2006) compiled data to conduct their study from interviews with women who were single mothers who had never been married.

Beginning in the mid-1930s after the start of the Great Depression, single, widowed, or abandoned women with children became the fastest growing demographic in the U. S. population seeking economic assistance (Trattner, 1999). By the early 2000s, of the vast majority of adults receiving means-tested government services, more than 90%, were women with children. Less than 7% were two-parent households, while even smaller percentages were headed by men. Of the persons receiving means-tested assistance, Blacks made up about 35%, Hispanics made up 24.5%, and Whites made up about 30% (Hays, 2004). The data is clear that the majority of persons living in poverty seeking assistance are women of color with dependent children.

The limited amount of data on men in means-tested programs is either anecdotal or incidental. Of the original 76 studies identified, men were mentioned only if the study

pertained to mental illness, drug abuse, incarceration, or absent fathers; of the 25 studies that met the inclusion criteria, men were mentioned only as male children (boys). This data implies that men do not engage in means-tested programs unless they are affected by mental illness, drug addiction, or incarceration. The literature did not answer the question of what happens to the boys who grow up in means-tested programs.

How have welfare reform policies affected self-sufficiency? According to the literature, welfare reform policies detrimentally affected self-sufficiency. President Clinton enacted The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), in part as a response to increases in welfare caseloads (Edin & Lein, 1997). After the inception of the welfare reform policies, the Department of Agriculture reported a decline in child hunger and census data indicated that poverty had declined as well. Furthermore, welfare caseloads fell by over 8 million to below 6 million cases, and single mother employment rates increased dramatically (Fang & Keane, 2004).

Though it seemed welfare reform was the answer to the welfare dependency problem, in truth these reductions were mainly due to a healthy economy in the late 1990s (Rodgers, Payne, & Chervachidze, 2006). According to Patterson (2001), the welfare departures were, in part, a response to the strengthening of family economic conditions, not the result of President Clinton's reform policies. Specifically, the sample from Patterson (2001) noted changes in earnings were positive due to better economic circumstances and growth in earnings, which strongly influenced families to exit the welfare system (Patterson, 2001).

Morgen (2001) asserted that devolution and privatization shaped the work of welfare reform. Welfare reform subjected public assistance workers to the effects of

devolution and privatization even as it made them accomplices in promoting reform policies as they worked with and/or compelled clients to attain “self-sufficiency” (Morgen, 2001). The workers embraced the ideology of self-sufficiency even though they recognized that it was unattainable for many and some workers worried that vulnerable members of society would fall through the cracks of the unraveling poverty safety net (Morgen, 2001). Workers and clients were not affected by welfare reform in the same ways; the deepest social concern from workers focused on poor families that lost the entitlement to even minimal economic support and faced time limits on assistance and, often, inflexible programmatic requirements, which could drive many of the neediest recipients further into poverty (Morgen, 2001)

The PRWORA reform policies imposed strict conditions and a 5 year time limit for cash benefits to welfare recipient (Grogger, 2003). The reduction in caseloads conversely did not equate to a sustained reduction in the poverty rates among children or adults (Rodgers et al., 2006). The poverty rate rose again in the early 2000s and peaked in 2010 at 15.1%. Many families, especially single-mother headed households, found themselves in worse financial positions. The “Work First” approach to the welfare reform policy, one of three key initiative of Presidents Clinton’s 1996 Welfare Reform Act, de-emphasized education and job training in favor of job search and rapid job placement (Friedlander & Burtless, 1995). The initiative not only encouraged recipients to join the work force by taking the first available work, it also encouraged them to leave the home, many times to the detriment of the family, especially school-aged children.

The study by Blank (2000) observed a significant and positive association between the economy and poverty in the 1960s and 1970s; however, the association

dissipated dramatically in the 1980s. The estimated effect in the 1980s suggested that reduction in unemployment correlated to an increase in poverty; that is, the regression indicated that a 1 percentage point decline in unemployment in the 1980s was associated with a 0.05 (0.27-0.32) rise in poverty rates (Blank, 2000). This association suggests that persons were not finding employment; they simply were no longer being counted in the unemployment rate because they either stopped looking for work or found part-time, low-wage work. Additionally, Blank (2000) found state TANF programs were mainly intended to perform in markets where employment was plentiful. When employment became limited, states either accepted higher poverty among those to whom they refused services, or they adjusted policies to allow longer-term help to those unable to find work. Lastly, the study showed the bottom quintile of single female headed households were, and still are, a very impoverished demographic, all of whom were below the official poverty line. Thus, the evidence suggested some of the poorest families may have lost ground in the struggle to escape poverty (Blank, 2000).

Martin and Lin (2003) explained that the number of single mothers joining the workforce increased exponentially during the 1990s, but the literature indicated that they were employed in low wage jobs with little or no potential for growth. Furthermore, they and their families continued to have multiple hardships, such as inadequate health services, hunger, and substandard housing. Many of these single mothers faced challenges, such as physical and mental-health problems, inadequate childcare, inadequate occupational skills, lack of transportation, criminal histories, and limited educational abilities as they struggled to become economically independent (Brown & Barbosa, 2001).

Turner, Danziger, and Seefeldt (2006) examined the extent to which women experienced a disconnection from the welfare system for periods of time from both work and cash welfare assistance. The study examined a group of single mothers from 1997 to 2003, and they found most of them experienced a time of being detached at some point during the panel. However, a small percentage was detached for substantial periods of time and experienced numerous spells of disconnection. The study also analyzed what characteristics were associated with becoming chronically detached. The results indicated that there were four barriers to employment and self-sufficiency significantly correlated to becoming chronically disconnected. The barriers were having an intellectual challenge, disclosing a physical limitation, not having access to reliable transportation, and using illegal drugs or alcohol. If a participant had all four of the statistically significant barriers, their probability of being chronically detached increased to 47% (Turner et al., 2006).

Cherlin, Frogner, Ribar, and Moffitt (2009) examined the experiences of 538 women: Black, Hispanic, and Hispanic of Mexican origin who were exiting welfare in 1999. The study showed that most of the participants left the welfare program by 2005 and about half the participants were employed. The Blacks who left welfare did not fare as well as the Hispanics of Mexican origin. Blacks who left welfare experienced a modest decline in poverty, while Hispanics experienced larger increases in income and larger declines in poverty. Black welfare leavers were far more likely to be living without a spouse or partner than Mexican leavers, which raised the probability that they would be detached from social services, employment, and the spouse's or partner's income in 2005 (Cherlin et al., 2009). The study found a substantial gain in household incomes but a narrowing of the gap between their incomes and the poverty line among all three racial-

ethnic groups, which suggested leaving welfare did not increase the likelihood that these women would become economically independent (Cherlin et al., 2009).

The literature also revealed that not only were welfare reform policies of the Clinton administration unrelated to the declines in the AFDC/TANF (welfare) caseloads, but those policies were racially biased as well. Brock (2009) examined the state lifetime limit policies for the receipt of cash assistance under the 1996 welfare reform law. The study attempted to determine whether a relationship existed between the racial composition of Blacks in a state and lifetime limit policies of PRWORA (Brock, 2009). The results found that those states with lenient policies had a lower percentage of Blacks in their populations. Seven states had a population of more than 20% Black; all but Maryland had policies categorized in the study as *harsh*, *very harsh*, or *most harsh*. Six of the seven states had time limit policies categorized as *most harsh*. Over half of these policies were established in states that had residents of Blacks totaling 11% or more. 60% of the cases with no time limits were in states with Black populations constituting 10% or less of the total population. According to the data, there was support for the presumption that the higher the make-up of Blacks in the state's population, the more probable the state was to impose restrictive policies (Brock, 2009).

What effect do anti-poverty government programs have on self-sufficiency?

Formal anti-poverty government programs have existed since President Roosevelt's New Deal policies laid the foundation for today's welfare system (Jennings, 2002). President Kennedy renewed the federal government's interest in the American poverty debate after reading Harrington's (1962) *The Other America*, a book focused on poverty and grounded in Lewis's (1966) *The Culture of Poverty*. After Kennedy's assassination in

1963, President Johnson began the War on Poverty, the un-official name for legislation designed to reduce poverty rates, which included four initiatives: the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the Food Stamp Act of 1964, the Social Security Act of 1965, and the Elementary & Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Brauer, 1982).

The literature did not identify evidence pointing to government initiatives, such as TANF or the Food Stamp program, demonstrating long-term success alleviating poverty. However, literature did show a correlation between public housing and nominal economic gains for program participants. Newman and Harkness (2002) examined the effect that living in public housing had on children between the ages of 10 and 16 during the period between 1968 and 1982. There were four outcomes measured at adulthood: welfare receipt, individual earnings, household earnings relative to the federal poverty line, and employment. The question arose whether the original intent of safe, affordable housing should continue to be viewed as an end in itself or as a means to self-sufficiency (Newman & Harkness, 2002).

The study of Newman and Harkness (2002) found that living in public housing during childhood increased employment by 7% for every year in public housing; the annual incomes of public housing residents increased by \$1,861 per year during the adult years of 25 to 27. In addition, public housing residency reduced welfare use by .71 years for every year in public housing. The beneficial effects may have been caused by public housing's healthier physical living conditions, a decline in residential transition, or the availability of more disposable income being spent on children's essentials.

In 2002, Mark Shroder conducted a study to determine if housing assistance perversely affected the economic independence of residents. The principal question was

whether housing assistance adversely undermines the economic independence of residents (Shroder, 2002). The study had three major parts: the effects on the short-run labor markets, the impacts on the human capital accumulation, and the association with single household formulation. The results found that housing assistance did not persuasively affect employment. Furthermore, the study's data was conflicting and fragmentary on the question of human capital accumulation; however, the study showed that a strong association with single-adult household formation exists as it relates to public housing (Shroder, 2002).

Ludwig, Duncan, and Pinkston (2005) did a randomized housing-voucher experiment on the economic outcomes of public housing residents. The experiment was to determine if offering families the chance to move to better neighborhoods, combined with counseling assistance and relocation constraints, would influence the family's ability to become self-sufficient. HUD created the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program in 1994 in Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. The experiment assigned low-income families living in public or Section 8, project-based housing within high-poverty neighborhoods into one of three different groups (Ludwig et al., 2005). The experimental group (1) was participants eligible for vouchers that could be utilized in areas with poverty rates below 10%; the section 8 group (2) received private-market housing subsidies with no restrictions on locations; the control group (3) was left to find housing without assistance from the program. (Ludwig, Duncan, & Pinkston, 2005, p. 132)

The results of the experiment showed that a larger proportion of Section 8-only families relocated through the MTO program, compared to the control group (73% versus

58%). In relation to welfare receipt, assignment to the experimental group 1 reduced welfare receipt 16% relative to the control group 3, but assignment to the Section 8-only group 3 had little effect on the receipt of welfare (Duncan & Pinkston, 2005). The experiment determined the MTO program had a positive effect on the family's ability to become self-sufficient.

The literature did not show any correlation between anti-poverty government initiatives and increases in self-sufficiency. Studies support the assertion that anti-poverty government initiatives are utilized as a poverty safety net by participants, rather than a path to self-sufficiency. However, supplemented housing-voucher programs correlate to nominal economic growth among participants. Furthermore, the literature associated the stability of subsidized public housing programs to gains in human capital, which in turn equated to greater opportunities for self-sufficiency.

What effects, if any, do anti-poverty government programs have on the poverty rate? Gwartney and McCaleb (1985) wrote that after World War II, the U. S. economy enjoyed a decline in the poverty rate, record income gains, and steady economic growth. This economic period lasted for nearly 2 decades without government intervention. The U.S. poverty rate dropped from 32% in 1947 to below 14% by 1965. The bullish economy and growing concerns from the middle class emboldened President Johnson to call for a "Marshal Plan II" to end poverty for the next generation with government intervention (Gwartney & McCaleb, 1985).

In 1965, the federal government spent \$105.5 billion on cash transfer programs aimed at eradicating poverty in the United States. After 10 years of fighting the War on Poverty, the amount ballooned to more than \$273 billion annually (U.S. Department of

Commerce, 1984). During that same period, the revenue sent on means-tested in-kind benefits, such as food, health care, and low-income housing, grew from \$4.6 billion to \$30.3 billion annually. In 1968, the poverty rate was at an all-time low of 10%; by 1980 the rate was virtually unchanged at 10.3% (Gwartney & McCaleb, 1985). After 13 years and nearly \$2 trillion spent to fight poverty, the U.S. poverty rate had risen by .3% (Holzer, Whitmore, Schanzenbach, Duncan, & Ludwig, 2008).

Hoynes, Page, and Stevens (2006) documented and quantified the effects of several competing influences to better comprehend poverty trends. The study focused on the question of why the nonelderly poverty rate had failed to decline as the economy had expanded. The factors examined were the increase in the number of women ages 25 to 64 participating in the work force between 1970 and 2000, the average level of education for adults age 25 in the United States between 1970 and 2000, the inconsistent poverty rate as it related to demographics, the rise in the number of female headed households, the increase in income inequality, and the level of and changes in government benefits directed toward the nonelderly (Hoynes et al. 2006).

The study concluded that a 1% rise in the unemployment rate equated to a .5% rise in the poverty rate, an increase of 10% in the median wage reduced the poverty rate approximately 1.5%, additionally an increase of 10% in the 50–20 ratio (approximately the increase that occurred between 1975 and 1985) converted to a 2.5% increase in the poverty rate (Hoynes et al., 2006). The results for the 1980s and 1990s demonstrated the influence of the labor market on poverty lessened over time (Hoynes et al., 2006).

One of the cornerstones of the War on Poverty, community action agencies (CAA) was examined by Nemon (2007). The study assessed three questions; (a) “what

has been the effect of government funding on CAAs, (b) what strategies have CAAs adopted to fight poverty, and (c) to what extent have CAAs been able to engage low-income people in the development and implementation of its anti-poverty strategies”?(Nemon, 2007, p. 2).

The study determined CAAs’ benefit from a certain level of stability; however, the dependence on government funding limited CAA’s independence and ingenuity. In some cases, CAA’s reported that bureaucratic restrictions and cumbersome regulations hindered their ability to deliver services to the neediest participants. In response to the second question, management in the community action network realized that any substantial decrease in poverty required more than self-sufficiency programs (Nemon, 2007). According to CAA’s leadership, a reduction in the poverty rates required a concerted effort by government, the private sector, and the community. As CAA’s leadership encouraged more grassroots participation, economic development, and other innovative approaches, the results did not clearly determine whether CAA would be able to respond accordingly (Nemon, 2007). Lastly, notwithstanding some exceptional CAA examples of grassroots involvement, community action faces significant trials for growing the opportunity and quality of engagement for low-income participants, while meeting all the compliance regulations required by funding sources (Nemon, 2007).

Shobe (2002) examined income- and asset-based initiatives designed to increase the security of impoverished individuals with children. The study explained how income-based, anti-poverty initiatives help economically vulnerable families meet their basic needs. Shobe (2002) determined that the current initiatives had not done enough to help individuals escape poverty. Furthermore, little attention was given to the immediate

needs of low-income children, while Individual Development Account (IDA) policies and programs helped impoverished individuals to build assets. Shobe (2002) suggested a modified asset-based program for children/parents would increase the personal, social, and economic security for them and their communities.

Shobe's (2002) study concluded that 12% of U.S. households had incomes that met or were below the federal poverty guidelines. "In the context of inequality, in 2000, the top 20% of wage earners received 49.4% of all income, while the bottom 20% received only 3.6% of all income" (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Additionally, the average income for White households was \$43,800, while Black households had an average annual income of \$3,700, which converted to 11 times greater income for White households than Black households. Furthermore, children have had the highest poverty rates since 1974, and poverty for children is more harmful to them than other groups, even though anti-poverty initiatives have explicitly focused on this extremely vulnerable demographic (Shobe, 2002).

Rank, Yoon, and Hirschl (2003) considered the structural failing of society to be a cause of poverty in the United States. Their study explored the dynamic of who loses out at the economic game, rather than addressing the fact that the game produces losers in the first place (Rank et al., 2003). The study discussed the possibility of misplaced and misdirected views of individual failings as a cause for poverty. Rank et al. (2003) articulated the argument supporting the theory that U. S. poverty is directly the result of organizational failings at the, political, economic, and social levels.

The study concluded that human capital is positively related to identifying persons most likely to find themselves in poverty, but societal structural factors guarantee

that there will persons in poverty in the first place (Rank et al., 2003). Moreover, during times of economic downturns, such as the Great Depression and the recessions of the 1980s, the poverty rate grew. Conversely, during periods of economic growth such as the 1960s and the late 1990s, the country saw reductions in poverty rates (Rank et al., 2003). The anti-poverty programs that were initiatives in the 1960s generated a modest decline in the poverty rate, only to be erased by the weak economy of the 1970s. Furthermore, the expansion of social security benefits during the 1960s and 1970s caused a significant reduction in the poverty rates for the elderly demographic (Rank et al., 2003). The fact that during their adulthood, 75% of Americans will endure a spell of poverty, or near poverty, is representative of these economic organizational failings (Rank et al., 2003).

Fording and Smith (2012) examined President Barack Obama's leadership on the issue of poverty. The analysis addressed two specific objectives. First, it examined the Obama administration's anti-poverty efforts and their relationship with recent trends in the U. S. poverty rate. Second, it examined President Obama's rhetorical leadership on the issue of poverty, as compared to other recent presidents (Fording & Smith, 2012).

The study concluded that the poverty rate rose during President Obama's first term in office. That rise in poverty could have been significantly higher given the state of the economy. The implementation of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) is credited with saving the economy from further damage. The study found considerable support for claims that President Obama demonstrated good leadership on the issue of poverty, although the frequency with which he highlighted issues related to poverty was not significantly different compared to past presidents (Fording & Smith, 2012). The study also concluded that President Obama would be characterized more as a

“facilitator” rather than a “director” of change due in part to his moderately objective accomplishments in his anti-poverty efforts (Fording & Smith, 2012).

Discussion. The literature thus far indicates that self-sufficiency programs can serve a purpose, but it does not definitively answer the question of whether self-sufficiency programs are effective or if the programs target the primary causes of poverty. The programs did not address the unique culture or the environment of the participants as a cause for poverty, nor were family structure or personal responsibility considered when examining barriers to self-sufficiency. The fact that Black males, the least self-sufficient demographic in the U. S. population, were completely excluded from the literature, except as it pertained to children’s educational achievement, was the most interesting aspect of the literature review. Black males in the US currently have the highest high school drop-out rates, unemployment rates, incarceration rates, second highest poverty rates, and are the least likely demographic to be self-sufficient (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010). These factors alone point to a need to study the self-sufficiency of Black males.

Summary

A review of the literature on family self-sufficiency programs, program evaluation results, participants, relation to the self-sufficiency standard, relation to poverty threshold and policies examined studies published on the topics of self-sufficiency, typical characteristics or common traits of persons seeking self-sufficiency, and how welfare reform policies affected self-sufficiency. Furthermore, the literature review explored the effects of anti-poverty government programs on self-sufficiency and the poverty rate. Lastly, a discussion of the findings from the data was examined and

analyzed, which determined gaps in the literature. The following chapter is a description of the process used in this study of Black male Family Self-Sufficiency program participants who successfully completed the program and live independently. Chapter 4 presents the results from the analysis.

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

This chapter explains the research design and methodology for the phenomenological qualitative study of the experiences of adult Black males who successfully completed a Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program and live economically independent of any “means-tested” government program. This chapter includes the relationship connecting the problem statement, research question, theory and study design; a description of FSS programs from a national perspective, as well as the research context of the FSS program as it exists in Action for a Better Community (ABC); definitions of the research questions and the research gap; the appropriateness of using a phenomenological design for this study; the method utilized to select a purposeful sample of participants; a description of the instruments used and the procedures employed to extract the lived experiences; and the analysis method. The chapter summarizes the research design and methodology employed to examine the lived experiences of Black males who have successfully completed a FSS program and are currently economically independent.

Statement of the Problem Reviewed

Currently, Black males in the United States face a crisis. This demographic has the highest high school drop-out rates, highest unemployment rates, highest incarceration rates, and second highest poverty rates in the US (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The explanations offered for Black males’ educational, economic, and social deficiencies vary

based on two opposing philosophical perspectives (Brown, 2013). Conservative journalist Jason Riley (2016) asserted that Black male deficiencies stem from liberal social programs, ghetto culture, victim mentality, and unwillingness by Black males to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Conversely, liberal sociologist William Julius Wilson (1995) explained the crisis among Black males is fueled by the decline of industrial jobs, as well as the migration of residential populations to the suburbs. Government initiatives, therefore, should be related to the economic status of target populations (Sampson & Wilson, 1995). Wilson (1995) and other liberal thinkers have repeatedly expressed concerns about poverty, racial discrimination, and the need for effective governmental intervention to address these problems.

The economy of the United States is one in which employment for most people should be a reasonable expectation (Ben-Shalom, Moffitt, & Scholz, 2011). However, for Black males, it is more difficult to find and maintain employment than for any other demographic group. According to contemporary thinkers, the causes for Black male disenfranchisement can range from racism and discrimination to self-defeating ghetto habits and cultural legacy. Sowell (2013) asserted that personal tendencies, choices, and cultural customs explain disparities in dropout rates, unemployment rates, poverty rates, and incarceration rates among racial and ethnic groups, rather than racism, discrimination, or the lack of government intervention. But, Ben-Shalom et al. (2011) claimed a concerted national government effort is needed to reduce racial disparities that leave Blacks twice as likely as Whites to be unemployed. Furthermore, the federal government could significantly increase the number of jobs available to Blacks by creating public sector jobs, training, and helping place unemployed persons in jobs and

subsidizing wages (Ben-Shalom et al., 2011). No matter the cause or the cure, the fact remains that Black males have disproportionately high drop-out rates, unemployment rates, poverty rates, and incarceration rates.

Despite irrefutable evidence confirming an economic, educational, and social crisis among Black males, little research has examined initiatives to alleviate challenges experienced by this demographic. This study focuses on Black males who participated in Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) programs, and received assistance from “means-tested” government program (welfare) while in the program and have become economically independent of welfare. These men are of particular interest because they represent one of the most socially and economically disenfranchised groups, yet they achieved some measure of economic success.

Research Context

National Initiative Family Self-Sufficiency Programs. The FSS program is an employment, and in some cases, a savings incentive program for low-income persons who have Section 8 vouchers, live in public housing, or participate in independent programs run by government funded community action agency (CAA) entities (Sard, 2001). The FSS program was established in 1990 by President George H. W. Bush’s administration. It offers case management services to aid participants in the pursuit of employment, as well as other professional goals; in addition, FSS programs run by the public housing agency (PHA) deposit increased rental charges in an escrow account, which the family pays as their earnings rise (Sard, 2001). Residences who complete the FSS program may utilize the money in the escrow accounts for any reason after 5 years.

During the FSS program intake process, each participant is assessed to determine demographics and needs. From the assessment information, participants are paired with a case manager to create an individual plan to aid the participant in achieving personal self-sufficiency. According to Anthony (2005), race, number of children, felony convictions, education level, employment history, access to reliable transportation, and independent living situations are primary determinants of a participant's ability to successfully complete the FSS programs and become economically independent. A participant's probability for success increases exponentially with the number of positive attributes he or she possesses. Participants with a high school diploma or higher, graduated the FSS programs at a ratio of 2 to 1 as compared to those participants with less than a high school diploma (Anthony, 2005).

The ultimate goal of the FSS programs is to aid persons reliant on welfare and housing assistance to achieve self-sufficiency and independent living in the private sector. Often, individuals receiving public assistance are mandated by the Department of Health and Human Services (DSS) to attend an FSS program. Once mandated by DSS to attend an FSS program, the FSS program guidelines establish specific goals for the individual to achieve within a certain time frame depending on the skills of the individual's initial assessment.

Action for a Better Community Family Self-Sufficiency Program. The context for this study was a CAA, referenced throughout the dissertation as Action for a Better Community (ABC). ABC encourages and offers opportunities to low-income persons and families to become economically independent. ABC is one of approximately 1,000 nationwide CAAs created under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 as part of

America's War on Poverty (Donovan, 1980). CAAs aid 98% of America's cities and counties and are a main resource for nearly 39 million impoverished Americans living in both rural and urban areas (ABC, 2016). One of ABC's many programs is the FSS program.

The FSS in the ABC network is a 10-week, year-round program that runs from 9:00 A.M.–3:00 P.M., 5 days per week. The 10 week training session, which includes a 3 week job readiness portion, focuses on removing employment barriers and providing tools for long-term, sustainable economic independence (ABC, 2016). The objectives of the 10 week session are to complete an action plan, attend daily self-sufficiency sessions, work on personal goals, develop life skills, and acquire human capital through internships and volunteer services (ABC, 2016).

Design. A phenomenological design was an appropriate method for the research. Phenomenology is based on the philosophical work of Edmund Husserl and is the study of subjective lived experience as viewed from the perspective of the actors (Soentgen, 2008). The purpose of the phenomenological approach is to shed light on a specific phenomenon and to identify it through how the actors observe a situation (Lester, 1999). This method of research seeks to describe rather than explain and to start from a perspective without preconceptions about the phenomenon (Husserl 1970).

A phenomenological study is conducted by identifying a phenomenon; a phenomenon could be anything from attending trade school to care giving for an elderly person. Next, a purposeful sample of participants was selected. Participants must have direct experience with the phenomenon being studied. Before interviewing, *epoche* must be ensured; *epoche* suspends any of the researcher's preconceived notions or personal

experiences that might influence the participants. Following the selection, participants were interviewed. After the interviews were completed, the researcher searched for patterns and commonalities in the transcripts of the participants. The purpose of phenomenological research was to find the similarities within an experience as seen through the lenses of the participants.

According to Creswell (2009), phenomenological methodology allows the researcher to capture the essence of the human experience. In this dissertation, the phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to examine the phenomenon of Black males who utilized government sponsored, “means-tested” programs and escaped poverty. Though the participants in this study were the primary source from which the researcher derived the key data, the research location and ancillary environment added to the richness of the study. The researcher ensured that personal experiences and biases did not influence the trustworthiness of the study. Berg & Lune (2016) asserted the trustworthiness of a qualitative study could be compromised by the biases of the researcher. The researcher refrained from judging or assuming whether anything exists or can exist as the first step in the phenomenological method (Moustakas, 1994).

The researcher *epoche*. Through data collection, phenomenological interviews, by their structure, position the researcher in the role of the research instrument (DeVos, 2002). In the beginning of the research project, the background of the researcher and the location of the interviews need to be considered, and they should also be taken into account when interpreting the data (Banister, 2011). Understanding *epoche*, which is the act of suspension of judgment about the natural world to instead focus on the analysis of experience, eliminates any bias that arises during interviewing (Husserl, 1970). The

researcher's cultural identity as a Black male from an impoverished urban community was relevant, since this was a study of Black males seeking economic independence. As an economically independent Black male who grew up in public housing, having a firsthand understanding of the complex dynamic associated with this ethnic group lends an authenticity and credibility to the research.

During my 11 year tenure with ABC, I have had multiple opportunities to observe the FSS program. As the agency facilities coordinator, the property management, safety, and life safety responsibilities were under my direction. These responsibilities allow me access to all agency programs; on many occasions, I consult directly with the FSS program director on logistics for outreach, space, and technical program support, as well as training and certifying staff and participants in first aid, CPR, and AED use. This interaction with the program earned me the respect of both staff and participants.

My practiced vocation is limited to the administrative ranks of the agency with no direct relation to the FSS program. Grounded in the administrative technical ranks, I do not have any first hand programmatic experience, which causes preconceived opinions about the program or its processes. The professional distance from the FSS program allowed me to be objective and unbiased regarding the lived experiences of the participants. It was important to remain transparent, open, and honest while conducting qualitative research, and for reliability in the understanding of qualitative data (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002).

Research Participants

The FSS program career developer confirmed study eligibility, which included participants who were at least 18 years of age, had successfully completed the FSS

program, and were currently living independent of any “means-tested” government service program. Next, a deliberate sampling of participants was taken from a pool of participants formally enrolled in the FSS program administered by ABC. The purposeful sampling was used to identify and recruit participants who successfully completed the FSS program (Creswell, Plano, & Morales, 2007). A total of six participants, all Black males, successfully completed the FSS program, and they currently live independently of any “means-tested” government service program. All six Black males spoke English as their native language, were a minority race, resided with or without dependent children, were with or without a high school diploma, and were with or without access to reliable transportation.

The participant pool was initially solicited via telephone by the FSS program career developer. At that time, the potential participants were given an overview of the study. A total of six male participants ($N = 6$) were selected for the study; according to Creswell (2014), phenomenology typically ranges from 3 to 10 participants. Each participant was allowed to select a time and date that was conducive to his schedule to meet for a 2 hour block. Each participant was scheduled a 1 hour block of time before the interview to be given explicit written and verbal instructions defining the intention of the study and the intended use of the data after the completion of the study.

Once participants consented into the study, the demographic form was completed. The formal interview was scheduled for 1 hour with an additional 1 hour tentative overrun time. Overrun times were scheduled in increments far enough apart for participants to exit the interview space without compromising confidentiality. An

additional hour was utilized by the researcher to identify follow-up questions and complete field notes.

Confidentiality. Confidentiality was assured by conducting all interviews in a clean, quiet facility not affiliated with the FSS program. All audio recordings were transcribed by an independent third party to reduce the risk of participant identification and inadvertent recognition of participants. The use of direct quotes, short stories, or excerpts from interviews, field notes, or naturally occurring conversation were utilized for describing themes. Using direct quotes was germane because it allowed the participants voices to be collected and analysed by the researcher. The direct quotes also added credibility to the researcher's claims (Sandelowski, 1994).

Participants were encouraged to use their most relaxed mode of communication and to speak in the vernacular that was most comfortable for them during the interview process to fully capture the essence of the participants lived experiences. Participants' use of slang, colloquial dialects and common vernacular was captured by the audio recordings, giving the researcher an opportunity to re-examine the participants' interviews for nuances that may have been missed during the interview or in the field notes (Groenewald, 2004). The participants' freedom to communicate in their most expressive mode allowed them to convey their experiences clearer and made for a richer dialogue. As a means of member check, the researcher allowed the participants to elaborate on any question in detail, and the researcher rephrased questions to ensure the participants meaning was adequately captured. If a participant thought he had more to offer or wanted to clarify the context of a particular statement, the participant was given an additional opportunity to meet with the researcher.

African American male theory as a basis for interview protocol. This qualitative research relied on oral interviews with participants to collect comprehensive data regarding the phenomenon under investigation. African American male theory (AAMT) informed and guided the interview protocols. The study examined the participants' responses and utilized AAMT to determine in what system the response was situated and how that system connects to other systems to achieve a robust picture of the participant through the AAMT lens.

Instruments Used in Data Collection

The data for this study was triangulated. Triangulation involves substantiating evidence using various sources, methods, researchers, and the AAMT theory (Creswell, 2009). Four different methods of data collection were used in this study include: (a) demographic forms, (b) individual interviews (c) document collections, and (d) field notes.

Demographic form. The demographic form was an intricate part of eligibility criteria. The background of the participants captured, corroborated, and ensured that the prerequisites were met before conducting the interviews. Additionally, the demographic information allowed the researcher a quantitative base from which to categorize the participants. The demographic forms asked the participant's age, race/ethnicity, gender identification, educational level, number of dependent children, services received, and reason for program enrollment. This information gave the researcher a better understanding of the participants involved in the FSS program.

Individual interviews. Prior to conducting the individual interviews, the researcher informed the participants of the purpose of the interview in both verbal and in

written English. The researcher ensured that the participants understood that participation was voluntary and that at any time the participants could withdraw from the study. Prior to conducting individual interviews, participants were consented to the study. Due to the private information contained in the demographic data forms and the personal nature of the participant's experiences in the FSS program, additional precautions were taken to ensure confidentiality, a topic covered in the confidentiality section of this chapter.

Individual interviews captured the perspectives of the participants' experiences and what expectations were realized from the FSS program. Interviews were organized according to an interview guide created by the researcher, which framed distinct themes that were addressed during the interview. Interviews were conducted in a clean, non-threatening environment (Burns & Grove, 2003).

The interviews involved a series of open-ended questions posed to the participants (Creswell, 2014). The questions included a description of the intake process of the FSS program and what the participants' expectations were from the FSS Program from an educational, occupational, and family perspective. Furthermore, participants were asked what they saw as major barriers to their self-sufficiency and how the FSS program aided them in overcoming those barriers. These questions gave the researcher a perspective of the FSS program from the participants' vantage.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Groenewald (2004) asserted recordings contain a richer representation of the interview situation than field notes alone. In addition, the researcher took field notes as a supplement to audio recordings. The collection of audio and field notes ensured an authentic representation of the participants' realities.

Field notes. Field notes refer to the notes recorded by the researcher during and after the individual interviews. The field notes were valuable in this study to ensure accurate understanding of the participants' experiences. The researcher also used field notes to document observations made at the interview, such as body language and nuances not captured by the audio recording. This data was also coded and categorized.

Document collection. The researcher requested program forms, such as blank participant demographic forms, blank participant evaluation forms, blank participant progress forms, brochures, joint-publications, job descriptions, and any other miscellaneous documentation related to the FSS program to add to the richness of the study. These documents gave a full picture of the staff, participants, and the program expectations.

Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

In phenomenological research, data analysis is done through the methodology of reduction, which is the researcher's investigation of all potential meanings of the participants' statements and themes (Creswell, 2014). The researcher approached the transcripts in a reductive manner, without fixed paradigms into which to fit the data. Furthermore, a constant-comparison occurred among and within the transcripts to identify reoccurring words, ideas, and concepts (Bereska, 2003). The researcher extracted codes from the initial reading and the review of the audio recordings. These themes corroborated the perception of the participants in the study.

For this study, the researcher found Colaizzi (1978) strategy of descriptive phenomenological data analysis to be an appropriate framework. Furthermore, a clear understanding of each participant's experiences emerged through examination of the

transcribed interviews. The participants' interviews also were synthesized through the research questions, placed in groups according to themes, and positioned within the tenets of AAMT. The process of analysis was as follows:

1. The researcher carefully and purposefully read each participant's interview transcript in its entirety, and then multiple times to achieve a clear understanding of the participant's experience of the phenomenon of transitioning from poverty to economic independence. Purposefully examining the participants' accounts of the phenomenon allowed the researcher to gain a sense for their experience and to make sense of their interpretation (Colaizzi, 1978).
2. After carefully reading each participant's interview transcript to acquire a sense of the whole, the researcher extracted all statements that directly pertained to the phenomenon and compiled a list of any significant statements that pertained to the phenomenon (Colaizzi, 1978).
3. From the extracted statements, the researcher assigned meaning to the individual statements to ascertain and clarify meanings concealed in the frameworks of the phenomenon and formulated meanings for the significant statements (Colaizzi, 1978).
4. The meanings were then categorized into clusters of themes that were universal to all participants. The clusters were compared to the transcripts for confirmation and to ensure trustworthiness to the researcher's emerging assumptions and the participants' intended meanings, all while taking care to remain true to the essence of the participants' experiences (Colaizzi, 1978).

The formulated meanings were then organized into themes.

5. The clusters were then combined into descriptions of the phenomenon. The researcher then connected points between data gathered and constructed an account of concepts. The descriptions included coding sections of transcripts for main topics, comparing topics for consistent themes, and bridging themes for their conceptual meanings (Colaizzi, 1978). A theoretical model of the phenomenon was formulated from the descriptions, referred to as collating themes and integrating them into an exhaustive description (Colaizzi, 1978).
6. After completing the model of the phenomenon, the findings were verified by comparing the model with the participant's experiences.
7. The researcher verified the validity of the model for a final description of the essence of the phenomenon (Colaizzi, 1978).

Summary

This chapter provided a description of the research design and methodology for a phenomenological qualitative study of the experiences of adult Black males who have successfully completed a FSS program and live economically independent of any “means-tested” government program. A description of the relationship connecting the problem statement, research question, and theory and study design was explained. Additionally, a description of FSS programs from a national perspective, as well as the research context of the FSS program as it exists in ABC, was outlined.

The design section, the research questions, and the research gap, which is the lack of studies examining the lived experiences of Black males that maintain economic independents after successfully completing FSS programs, were covered. An explanation

of the appropriateness of a phenomenological method and the method utilized to select a purposeful sample of participants were also covered. The Institutional Review Board approved the Expedited Review project, “From Poverty to Economic Independence: An Examination of Factors Contributing to Success and Self-Sufficiency among Black Male Family Self-Sufficiency Program Participants,” and notice was sent by email from Eileen Lynd-Balta, Ph.D., Chair, Institutional Review Board, St. John Fisher College on January 3, 2017, File No: 3643-121516-02. In conclusion, the chapter explained the instruments utilized, procedures employed, analysis method, and means of ensuring credibility and trustworthiness. The following chapter presents the results from the analysis. Chapter 5 outlines suggestions for implementation, implications of the research, and additional research derived from the results of this study.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to acquire information pertaining to the ways gainfully employed Black males experienced the process of transitioning from poverty to economic independence with the help of a means-tested Family Self-Sufficiency program (FSS). The economic, educational, and societal crisis among the Black male demographic is often debated from two opposing perspectives. Cuffee (2009) asserts Black male dysfunction cause and/or exacerbates poverty, while Payne (2005) considers poverty to be the primary cause of the economic, educational, and societal crisis among Black males. Examining the phenomenon of economic transition experienced by this atypical population has the potential to inform educators, community leaders and governmental entities.

Utilizing individual interviews from former FSS participants, data was collected, analyzed, and coded using Colaizzi's (1978) strategy of descriptive phenomenological data analysis. This method was essential in capturing the attitudes, perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, and ideas as they relate to the economic challenges faced by Black males navigating means-tested systems towards economic independence.

Research Questions

The data collected through the interviews aided in answering the research questions: What factors facilitated the participant's ability to become economically

independent from the welfare system? Specifically, the study investigated the following sub-questions:

1. How did participants describe their experience in the welfare system?
2. How did participants in FSS utilize the program, if at all, to create strategies for self-sufficiency, which in turn, countered societal stereotypes?
3. What strategies did participants employ to negotiate the welfare system to gain economic independence?
4. What factors influenced the economic independence of participants?
5. What was unique about their experiences engaging with FSS, given that most participants are women?

In addition, the participants' responses were synthesized through the African American male theory (AAMT) to determine the appropriateness of the theory for this study.

Interviews were utilized to collect qualitative data. These interviews were informal in nature and loosely structured to allow participants to express their uninfluenced perspective of their lived experiences. Interview transcripts were created from digital audio recordings from the six former participants. The transcripts were examined for individual lived experiences, and then analyzed for themes that connected across the phenomenon. Direct quotes from participant transcripts were extracted to support the themes. Atlas.ti data analysis software was used for coding and analyzing the transcripts.

Due to the small population, the term participant and a numeric designation was utilized and are indicated throughout the supporting quotes referenced in this chapter. The reasoning for the participant numeric designation was to insure anonymity for the

participants due to the small number of gainfully employed Black males that had successfully completed the FSS program in the community, and providing individual demographic information for the participants would risk divulging actual participant identities.

According to the field notes, the participants appeared to be uncomfortable and reserved during the initial introduction and data collection portion of the interview. After the introduction, data collection and confidentiality agreements were reviewed and signed the participants appeared to be more relaxed. Through visual observation, in most interviews, the participants' level of comfort grew as the interview progressed. The longer the interview extended, the more comfortable the participants appeared.

Periodically, during the interview, the interviewer (a middle-aged Black male) would encourage the participants to be frank and candid while sharing their perspective and opinions, assuring them that they were in a secure environment and any information provided would remain anonymous and confidential. Collectively, the information attained during the interviews ran contrary to mainstream views about Black males in poverty. The participants acknowledged racism and discrimination as realities but expressed a belief in accountability and personal responsibility as a means to escape poverty.

Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that the economic transitions experienced by the participants were situated within seven interconnected themes:

- Theme 1: resistance and resiliency; the endeavor of Black males actively seeking out and engaging in strategies to improve their economic situation, which is also tenet four of the AAMT

- Theme 2: economic independence, a means to support one's self and family and to provide opportunity for success for the next generation
- Theme 3: the welfare system is a restrictive and humbling autocratic system; marginalizing persons participating in means-tested systems
- Theme 4: gender is unimportant as it relates to poverty; from the Black male perspective, the female gender is not viewed as a barrier to economic independence
- Theme 5: deconstructing the false narrative that all Black males are lazy; understanding negative Black male stereotypes as circumstance or choice
- Theme 6: delegitimizing dysfunction; understanding perceptions of impoverished Black males, while recognizing how Black males are perceived by other demographics and mainstream society
- Theme 7: rights and privileges, pride and humility; discerning the difference between feeling and fact/perceptions and reality. This theme also intersects with tenet two of AAMT; there is something unique about being Black and male.

The interview transcripts revealed strategies and responses utilized by participants to navigate barriers identified in the context of these themes. Information from the participants will be presented to advocates who might aid in negotiating obstacles for other Black males in poverty. Additionally, the data will inform an understanding of the economic landscape which offers complicated challenges to those who are currently seeking economic independence. The interviews also provided understanding of issues

that defined this group's experience as unique and different from other demographic groups due to race and gender.

Data Analysis and Findings

The participants offered a unique perspective into the phenomenon given that most studies are quantitative and focus on women and children (Meyer & Rosenbaum, 2000). Though the participants came from varying backgrounds, their shared experience of being impoverished Black males and transitioning from poverty to economic independence exposed unexpected commonalities. This particular group did not have the same perceptions of barriers to economic independence as other groups, such as women with children (Alfred, 2007). Many of the barriers for this group were attributed to poor personal judgement, lack of motivation, or simply bad luck. Given that participants experienced many of the same problems associated with being impoverished as other groups, this group expressed views of their situation as both temporary and intrinsically solvable.

Theme 1: resistance and resiliency. When asked about the primary attribute that enabled them to successfully transition out of poverty to economic independence, all six participants expressed a belief in personal motivation. Though the participants came to the FSS program for various reasons, some mandated, some voluntary, all pointed to an intrinsic motivation to do better economically as the driver that pushed them to independence.

Participant 5 articulated his drive to succeed was internal by stating:

For the most part, it was just me but now that I say it, it sounds kind of cocky.

Well I would have to say it was definitely me, I wanted better than what I had saw around me growing up as a kid (5:568).

Participant 4 also believed his success was due to self-motivation and resilience.

Personal motivation, without social programs would have made it harder to succeed, let's just say I would have had to hustle harder to do what I did, taking some extra job, I really wouldn't like, like anything else you can do it, it would really, really suck to do it. It's like flipping a burger, if I got to, I will do whatever. (4:234)

Participant 3 expressed that he was not only resilient but also resistant:

You got certain people who are going to look down on you, who are going to say, he don't need no job, he ain't going to work, he ain't going to do nothing, and you still got to keep pushing forward because if you give up you got a lot of other people looking at you, they're going to give up on you. You got to instill in yourself, you still got to get out there and do it. Books can teach you anything, but if you don't instill work ethic in your own mind, the book ain't helping you, you know. Because if you sit back and don't do nothing, nothing is going to come to you. You got to get out there and do something, you got to try, you got to keep that effort, get out there every day. (3:216)

Participant 3 described his belief that societal perceptions exacerbated economic hardships encountered by this group. Furthermore, stereotypes and racial bias diminish opportunities in the job market. Faced with this reality, participant 3 continued to seek employment connecting resilience to success.

The theme of resilience as well as personal responsibility was similarly expressed by participant 6:

Personal motivation, because they can bring you to the water but they can't make you drink. You really have to want something, you really have to do it yourself. You have to really want it and you have to accept the responsibility for the decisions that you make you know, and man up and say okay this is the way I can make it better. I'm going to be part of the solution, I'm not going to be part of the problem. (6:392)

Participant 1, the most soft spoken of the group offered:

I feel my motivation is inside, because I have to do what I have to do to survive and to make a living. I knew I had to get up and go to work every day in order to succeed with the things I needed to succeed. So, if I didn't have welfare, or the social service program, I think I would still be ok. (1:161)

Likewise, participant 2 offered:

It's personal motivation definitely. Just me growing up in the system under welfare. Getting food stamps, being on section 8, and living in low income housing, that right there was the drive for me. Just wanted something different, something better for me and my son, so he doesn't have to go through what I endured as a child. I was just a go getter, so I wanted to go out and find something positive for myself. I'm not sure if that was the motivation that the military gave me or what I had in the upbringing from my mom. I just always had a positive outlook on life. It's all about what you want and what your drive is

really. I believe it's possible for everyone. I believe as long as you got your health you can do anything, anything is possible. (2:167)

According to participant demographic forms all six participants were raised in either single-parent welfare dependent households or dual-parent, working-poor households. In households such as these, economic strife is commonplace, thus requiring a resistant and resilient attitude as a matter of survival. Being that poverty was part of everyday life, resistant and resilience was a necessity, rather than an atypical attribute. Participants' childhoods and teen years' experiences prepared them for the high probability of spells of economic drought. These early experiences in poverty played an intricate role in the participants' ability to persevere through tough times.

Theme 2: economic independence. The ultimate goal of participating in any self-sufficiency program is to become economically independent. The six participants of this program were no different. One commonality all participants shared was the fact that they wanted economic independence not only for themselves but for their children as well. While only two of the participants were in conventional heterosexual marriages during the study, all six participants had biological children. Throughout the interviews the participants expressed strong desires to create better lives for themselves as well as to develop opportunities for their children's future.

As stated in Chapter 1, Black males have for years been burdened with the stigma of stereotypes, such as being unmotivated, proclivities for criminal behavior, anger issues, and intellectual inferiority. One stereotype attributed to Black males is the assumption that Black males abandon their families and leave their children for society to support. This stereotype was not validated by the participants of this study. Conversely,

the study found these men to be very involved, devoted fathers. The participants were extremely concerned with their children's mental and physical well-being, as well as with the perceptions and realities their children held as it related to them as a provider for their families. As expressed by participant 5:

I make sure that my daughters are happy and safe inside the place that they're in. I definitely make it so my girls are not going to want to be like I was, itching to get outside of the house, which basically just led to trouble. So, I'm making it very comfortable. They say home is the state of mind, so I'm making them feel comfortable and they don't have to look to nowhere else. I made the home that I always wanted. I'm just missing that boy so my wife and mother can get off my back. This is the way I've always seen my life being, working, providing, two cars, and a nice home for my family. (5:614)

Participant 4 expressed the same goals:

I wanted better for my daughter, I know that, and I think because the arts I'm into, you just see people who have a life. I want to give my daughter a better life than I have. I did to my daughter, what my dad did to me, had her late in life. I had her later in life because I wanted to be better able to take care of her. It's hard, no one said it was easy or everybody would be doing it, huh. (4:384)

While participant 5 and participant 4 articulated their aspirations for their children, participant 3 articulated the anxiety and stress he experienced while engaged in the welfare system with a family. The interesting detail about participant 3's situation was the fact that he did not abandon his family, rather he stayed and endured the economic uncertainty until he found employment and exited the welfare system:

The food stamps and cash benefits helps, you know. It helps you take care of your family, keeps the family from being completely poor. You're already in poverty but it boosts you a little bit to keep you motivated, make you want to get out and do something instead of just sitting around waiting for them to give you money, which is a terrible thing. You've got to go without a lot of stuff, you know, and that's not good. So, you got to get out and do something to pull your family up. The welfare program helps but it's just not enough to take care of a family, it helps though. (3:48)

Participant 6 recounted his cultural upbringing in reference to his duty to teach his children financial management skills. Moreover, he expressed a desire to insure to leave an inheritance for his family that would last generations:

I have children, and my family is of West Indian descent. For us, you had to be disciplined to put up money, you know what I'm saying. Save your money, so you could live out your dreams and aspirations. Whether it was to buy a house or send your children to college. A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children. So that kind of stuff you know what I'm saying, you're trying to do it the right way now, instead of the wrong way, you know. I try to teach my kids about having money and being financial stability, you know what I'm saying. I want us to be debt free, I don't want to be in debt, the borrower is a slave to the lender. (6:350)

Participant 1 was unmarried and had a son. The son was living with the biological mother apart from the participant. He described his son as making poor choices, ultimately leading him to be incarcerated:

We have choices, we have choices because I can use my son as an example. Me and his mother tried to raise him right but he got in trouble. When he was in juvie they got him a job at McDonalds and I had to sign release papers for him to work, but he chose not to. I mean the job was there in his lap and he chose to stay in juvie. When he got out, he went to sell drugs and got back in trouble. I'm very upset about how he turned out. I hope he can get his life together and do right.

(1:332)

Participant 1 was concerned for his son's future because, as expressed by all six participants, society is much less forgiving of transgressions made by Black males. All six participants, at one point or another during their interview, described the problem of diminishing opportunities. Opportunities exponentially diminish with every transgression committed. Mundane issues, such as bad credit or non-felonious legal problems can disqualify a person from employment; for Black males, issues such as these can be economically devastating.

Participant 2 was the only single father with full custody of his child in the study. Participant 2 grew up in a single mother headed household, which motivated him to be the father to his son that he himself never had:

So, you know, they always say one generation should always do a little better than the last and me not having a dad in the house, I try to do everything for my son just so he has a positive experience in life. (2:117)

In general, the interviews revealed perspectives contrary to stereotypes of impoverished Black males being apathetic or emotionally disconnected from fatherhood. All six participants expressed a deep commitment to fatherhood. Additionally, they

accepted the responsibility to insure their children had opportunities for success. For these fathers, positive involvement with their children was particularly important to encourage success as well as mitigate the negative effects that come with poverty.

Theme 3: a restrictive and humbling autocratic system. When participants were asked about their experience in the welfare system, three of the six explained that they felt it was simply a means to an end. The other three participants expressed negative feelings associated with the experiences, as well as negative personal feelings about themselves. Participant 5 summed up his experience by stating:

It makes you feel like you're doing wrong, it made me feel that way, like you're not man enough when you're getting certain stuff taken care of for you. You're supposed to be able to provide and go out and make money and do stuff for yourself. If you can't do something as simple as buy yourself food and ain't nothing wrong with you. I don't know, it's nothing to be proud of so it definitely wasn't a fit and I got off it as soon as I could. Welfare makes you feel weak.

(5:62)

Participant 4 described the strongest negative experience as it related to his interaction with the welfare system:

. . . My first time applying for it which was humbling, more than I needed to be; not that I wasn't already. It seems like it's closer to being at your lowest of lows if there was such a level. You're going in there and it's just chaotic because you got people there from all races and they have kids and different situations going on. You finally get seen by someone after standing in line, literally like an hour and a half or so because they wrap you around these little poles, back and forth. You get

called only to get back in another line to get seen and you finally get seen by a worker who screams your name out or your number out and you find out after about another 40 minutes that it's going to take about 45 days before they can help you. (4:27)

Participants interacting with the welfare system expressed that they felt Work Experiences Programs (WEP), a program which welfare participants are required to work at preapproved sites in exchange for their benefits, were a waste of time and counterproductive to their ultimate goal of permanent employment and economic independence. PARTICIPANT 3 complained:

The welfare system has its pluses and its minuses, you know. The minuses are they only give you a certain amount of money, and they send you off for a WEP assignment which is a Work Experiences Program, but you're only getting half of what you put into it, you know. They give you like \$400-\$500 per month and you're doing like 25-35 hours a week and you're only getting that! The other half just goes back to the government or just free work, you know. (3:34)

Participant 1 explained, "it was a step for me to get to where I needed to go, while I was unemployed." "I needed to feed myself, I needed rehab and I needed medical insurance, besides needing other supports to get on my feet" (1:50). Participant 2 described his experience by stating "I received food stamps and Medicaid for insurance when I came back from the military, when I came home from service it was like starting all over again, it was like being a new born" (2:61). Participant 6, like participant 1, utilized welfare minimally due to his reentrance into society from a 10 year sentence in

federal prison. P Participant 6 commented, “I stayed at the halfway house, so I couldn’t get any services. I was only able to get Medicaid” (6:82).

Two of the three participants that explained welfare was a means to an end were returning from situations, prison or the military, which are more restrictive than the welfare system (participant 6 and participant 2). The third participant was struggling with addiction issues and in desperate need of rehabilitation services, which begs the question of tolerance. Are persons more willing to tolerate the restrictions and bureaucracy associated with the welfare system if they came from a more restrictive situation or are in desperate need of immediate help? For these participants, the answer was yes. Their needs outweighed the restrictive bureaucratic challenges associated with negotiating the welfare system.

Theme 4: gender is unimportant as it relates to poverty. Discussions of gender as it related to self-sufficiency and poverty yielded responses contrary to mainstream opinions (Alfred, 2007). When participants were asked to describe if they felt bias existed in the welfare system since statistically most participants were women, five of the six participants expressed that they experienced little or no gender difference in treatment, as well as the feeling that poverty and the concept of self-sufficiency did not discriminate according to gender. Participant 5, offered:

I don’t think being a man or woman makes any difference on a person’s ability to do well in life. I used a lot of the same programs the women did, Food Stamps, Medicaid and the FSS program. So, when I’m asked if I felt if I was treated any differently in the welfare system, I would have to say, not really. We were all down there for the same reason, to get some help. (5:490)

Participant 3 shared much of the same sentiments as PARTICIPANT 5.

Participant 3 stated:

The ladies were treated the same, I didn't see no discrepancy, they didn't show me no differences. They didn't give women more attention or services just because it was a woman. They treated us all the same basically. (3:192)

Five out of the six participants agreed that women were treated no differently from the men, and the participants did not see being female as a barrier to self-sufficiency. Participant 6 explained; "I did not see no difference between men and women in the system, I did see more women with children with them at the welfare office, but I have four children myself" (6:384). Though the participants did not express a belief that female participants were less capable of achieving self-sufficiency or received preferential treatment in the welfare system, one participant described child support as being a barrier to self-sufficiency for males. (6:384)

Participant 1 explained: "No, I think I was treated pretty equal. My only problem was child support don't care if you got a job or not, they still want they money, I don't think women have to deal with that trouble" (1:153).

Participant 2 expressed his view that female participants were just as motivated as their male counterparts and had all the same opportunities as well:

No different treatment, of course there was maybe more women in the program but as far as it being an equal opportunity, that was there so there was no lesser of the evils of the two. Everybody was treated the same and fairly. I met a lot of women that were motivated, kind of in the same predicament that I was. They were single parents, but they were motivated. Just like me, they came to a point I

guess in their life that they wanted to go ahead and make a positive change.

(2:155)

Participant 4 was the only participant to perceive that the females were given preferential treatment while engaging in the welfare system. Participant 4 shared:

From what they [female participants] had to hand in, put it like this, whatever they were lacking they didn't have enough jobs recorded in the journal, came late to classes, just found it difficult in general, it was excused. How can you expect someone to be treated and looked at as an equal when you get a handicap all the time? You can't be seen as an equal if you want a handicap or you're a victim.

(4:145)

As stated above, five out of the six participants believed females were treated the same as the males. Furthermore, the male participants did not see being female as an added barrier to self-sufficiency. Conversely, one participant felt the burden of child support was, in fact, an additional barrier female participants did not have to endure. Overall, the participants expressed a belief that females had the same opportunities as well the same abilities to make choices to better their lives.

Theme 5: I can call my kid lazy, but you can't. While participants were very clear on their views of personal responsibilities, they were also clear in their belief that all persons have the ability to create their own destiny. Participants used the term lazy to describe Black males time and time again, underpinning the assumption that one's choices have a direct relation to one's circumstances. At the same time, these Black males attributed dysfunctional behavior to the injustices of White America. Though participants admitted observing Black males perpetuating negative stereotypes, all

expressed the belief that discrimination is a legitimate problem which can hinder one's opportunities for employment.

None of the participants negated the realities of racism, classism, or implicit bias. Moreover, all participants acknowledged unique difficulties associated with being a Black male in America, speaking to tenet two of AAMT and explaining distinctive experiences of Black males, particularly in White mainstream society. Participants described police harassment, job discrimination, irrationally paranoid responses from persons outside of their race, as well as discriminatory microaggressions as daily encounters. Although participants acknowledged covert and sometimes overt discrimination they refused to allow it to consume them. Participant 5 explained:

I think there's a lot of lazy people out here and they blame shit on shit that ain't touched or affected them personally at all. They want to complain about shit, like I was explaining before, people just being flat out lazy. I got a homeboy, he got a job at Family Dollar. Shit it makes money, got there his first week was working out fine everything seemed cool, next thing I know, go to his house and he's just sitting there. He quits the job because he didn't want to take out the trash. I'm like your dumb ass walked out of a paying job to come back to your fucking grandma house and take the garbage out for free. There's a bunch of people that I see who do fit that stereotype to the T, they were lazy, they were abusive, they were over populating the world. I know shit can get bad. So what, the boss is a racist dick head. That don't mean its ok to do dumb shit. (5:659)

Participant 4 felt the deficiencies in the Black family stemmed from deficient Black mothers. Participant 4 explained:

Single Black mothers are a detriment to their families, and their community. You grow up to be a decent human being or a jackass. You grow up to be a decent human being who becomes an athlete, or who becomes a doctor, lawyer and it's a single mom, who gets the credit? The mother! But if you grow up to be a thug or a murderer. You kill someone, the lack of a father is blamed for that. Most times, in the end it was her choices that made her a single mother, it comes down to personal choices. When it comes to the Black male that grew up to be a jackass, he probably had no support but then again, you're going to like what you like. Everybody has challenges, but Black males who never grow up, that is a choice, not circumstance or bad luck, it's poor choices. (4:284)

Participant 3 had the strongest opinion relating to Black males perpetuating negative stereotypical behaviors. His views were surprisingly harsh, unabashed, and unapologetic. Many of the terms he used could be construed as racist, if he were not a Black male:

I know you can't have everything, sooner or later you're going to have some letdowns, sometimes you're not going to get out like you're supposed to and that hurts. But I think Blacks are not really motivated, we're not going out there and going for it. We aren't doing what we got to do. We're not motivated to get out there and do what we're supposed to do as Black men, as low income Black men in poverty. Up here in New York, a lot of people are stuck in the system. They see that somebody is getting something for free and they say well I'm going to take that free stuff too. Because as Black men we're not doing enough. We're not self-sufficient, we're not helping ourselves. We're looking for a handout and

that's the wrong way to do things. You got to get out there and get a job, learn how to take care of your family, learn how to do this and do that. When I first moved to New York, I filled out about 80 applications, and just one person called. One person. The job was way out in Fairport, I don't even know where Fairport was at, you know, so I told them, thank you for giving me an opportunity. (3:290)

Participant 6 had more moderate views; he qualified negative behavior attributed to Black males by stating:

Wow, I'm more moderate, I belong to both the conservative and liberal schools. I belong to both because of the history of this country that plays a role in White people getting a 400-year head start with employment. But when we do get money we become consumers, come on, we're consumers, why are we steady consuming. I believe in creating your own wealth, I believe you can start small, that little idea that's in the back of your mind and grow it to realize your dreams. So, I would say it's about consuming, and no sacrifice. We can be lazy, we sometimes think everything is supposed to be handed to us. You know the old cliché is like my mother taught me, you know you got to work 10 times harder than them, you know. I don't want to fall under the victim mentality, I want to be the victor, you know what I'm saying. (6:507)

Participant 1 supported the opinions of the rest of the participants with his own explanation of Black males perpetuating negative stereotypes. He asserted that the problems with Black males stemmed more from poor parenting than from systematic discrimination. He explained:

I don't want to use the word lazy but I have to use the word lazy. Some Black males are lazy, some of them. The reason is that maybe they wasn't taught by their family to be independent. Sometimes it's rough for all of us but you can't give up. I'm more conservative, I think you have to do it by yourself, do it on your own. (1:182)

The term lazy was used by every participant except Participant 2, the most moderate of the participants, which was unexpected due to the fact Participant 2 is a United States Army veteran. While many veteran's philosophical perspectives lean to the conservative side, Participant 2 offered:

I am definitely liberal. I also believe you have to get to a point that you have to do it on your own. If you need a help then you need help, and I think we, as a society should provide assistance. As far as people being lazy, I don't want to say people are lazy. I'd say me personally, I would set a goal and try to take care of myself at some point. I wouldn't want people to take advantage of the system but you should be allowed to use it as long as you need it. I believe that goes it all back to the person themselves, it's about what they want and what their drive is and what their goals in life are, but as far as people being lazy I don't think like that.

(2:105)

Participants expressed strong views about Black males that perpetuate negative stereotypes as well as offering reasoning for those views. While some participants attributed negative behaviors exhibited by Black males to parental influence and others to social oppression, all participants converged on some form of personal choice. Whether the personal choice was influenced by outside factors or not, the ultimate responsibility

belonged to the individual. According to participants, with responsibility comes accountability; poor personal choices usually resulted in poor personal outcomes.

Theme 6: delegitimizing dysfunction. Participants articulated realizations about behavior they considered normal or cultural in nature. They discovered behaviors accepted as usual and ordinary in their culture that were considered dysfunctional or even offensive in mainstream society. The participants in this study found themselves isolated when they decided to delegitimize dysfunction. Participant 5 recalled meeting an associate of his fathers while incarcerated and explaining how the associate was cordial but distant. Another participant, participant 6, recalled being told by other inmates to keep to himself while incarcerated to avoid trouble. For the participants, they had to exchange relationships with dysfunctional persons and situations for economic opportunities, which often left them isolated. This isolation coupled with delegitimizing dysfunction created opportunities for upward mobility.

Participant 5 explained that he was unaware of the perception others had about his attire until it was brought to his attention: “Paul, my counselor, helped me start to change like small stuff about myself. The first thing he told me was to change yourself you need to change the way you look. I wore boots, jeans, and hoodies, I looked like a thug, ain’t nobody going to look at me when I came in dressed looking like that” (5:97).

Participant 5 went on to explain his perception of using a welfare benefits card in public. He expressed a feeling of embarrassment, but because it was a common occurrence in his neighborhood, he accepted it as normal. He explained:

I mean it's kind of embarrassing having to pull out that card in front of other people and stuff like that, but for the most part you see people everywhere using it, so it seemed like it's no big deal. (5:66)

This realization was corroborated by participant 6 who offered:

I believed the stereotypes about me, like basically he will reacidify, he's going to catch a new charge or he's going to violate on probation. I thought oh, everybody just knows I'm a failure, everybody waiting for me to fail, I might as well go do something ignorant now. I thought it was ok to be late all the time, like colored folk time. The FSS program, helped me to understand, if you were 15 minutes early, you was on time, on time was late, and being late was not acceptable. I didn't really understand that late was a big deal, can't hold a job if you late all the time. The program gave me moral support, you know, people that been there who show you and encourage you. (6:109)

Participant 3 explained his understanding of "normal" or "cultural" was not only dysfunctional but illegal as well. He explained:

Back when I was coming up everybody was selling drugs, nobody wants to get out and get a job, it ain't that the jobs aren't out there, I wasn't motivated to do it, you know, somebody's giving me something easy and if you get something easy, you get lazy. As I got older, I thought, what's going to happen when I get 60 and I never worked, where's my money coming from, I can't sell drugs all my life, eventually I was going to get killed or go to jail. That's when I realize, hey you got to get out and put your foot out here and walk the pavement and get a job you

know, learn how to talk to people, how to sell yourself, you know, the tools you're going to need to get out there. (3:306)

Participant 1 had his epiphany in Narcotics Anonymous (NA); he stated:

I thought using drugs was normal, almost acceptable, until I couldn't stop. NA taught me things that I didn't know about myself, I thought I knew about myself, it gave me confidence of what I needed to know and how I needed to know it. And if I could stop using drugs I could reclaim and maintain my life. (1:113)

Participant 2 recounted his realization came when he enlisted in the military, expressing:

I did great in the military; I did 4years, no issues. It was a different route for me, me coming from an impoverished neighborhood; it was like a stepping stone. I got to travel, I got to meet different people, I got to see different things and learn different things. I realized everybody didn't live like we did. (2:131)

Participant 4 described his epiphany as a more gradual experience, explaining:

You realize, it's like a time capsule of information, a learning curve that opens, you don't know when it's going to open, when it does are you still young enough, or are you up in your 40s, 50s when it hits you, and you think, hey I should have done things a different way. I'd be much better off. (4:364)

All six participants came to an understanding that cultural norms do not always line up with mainstream norms. Furthermore, the misalignment of social norms can critically impede one's ability to gain economic independence. Culturally accepted behavior, such as habitual tardiness, urban attire in a professional environment, an aversion to legitimate employment, and illicit activities were accepted as norms by the

participants. Once the participants delegitimized these behaviors, they were able to create opportunities to better their economic situations.

Theme 7: rights and privileges, pride and humility. All six participants had very similar views on law enforcement. Two participants described instances of police harassment. One of the two recounted an incident when he was detained, simply because law enforcement believed he fit the description of another Black male, that later turned out to look nothing like him. Stories of harassment and microaggressions from law enforcement are common for Black males. These participants have developed coping mechanisms to deal with these encounters. This theme also encompassed tenet two of AAMT asserting that there is something unique about being Black and male.

Participant 5 discussed his perspective on the relationship between Black males and law enforcement. He offered:

I feel a lot of that shit could have been avoided and that is just the way that I see it. If you don't want to get body slammed, when the police say put your hands behind your back while you sitting there refusing and saying I ain't doing nothing. That is doing something, you're resisting right there so you're basically giving them a free pass to beat your ass. Some of this shit like the Trayvon Martin thing, I know that was real bullshit that was some racial shit that just was fucked up. But as far as a lot of this stuff that people be crying about police brutality, that's just another one of those, oh they out to get me. I think people just like do shit and not take ownership of the shit they were doing wrong. Just shut the fuck up and do what you are told. Many times, I was seeing people just fucking up and it's

like dude stop fucking resisting just put your hands behind your back cause you are just making it worse. (5:838)

Participant 4 explained how he had been harassed by law enforcement; still he offered much the same advice as the other participants by stating:

You can't ask someone else to respect you if you don't respect yourself. You're taught to respect life, especially other Black lives, it starts from home. If there's a disagreement with a policeman, and he is disrespectful and breaking the law, let him arrest you, shut the fuck up, you don't have court in the street, you'll get your ass shot. I have been harassed but I kept my mouth shut and complied, like any decent law-abiding citizen does. You be cool, you do what they're asking, keep your mouth shut, and answer his questions. That's why you got a lawyer, that's your mouth piece. Let the cop rough you up if he's going to rough you up, you just don't say shit. First rule as a cop, he is taught to come home at the end of his shift, you as a Black man, same thing, come home. Come home safe. (4:526)

Participant 3 explained when he is dealing with the police; he is humble and complies with the law enforcement's request. He offered:

Some of it I could say is self-imposed, we did it to our own. The police didn't walk up to you and just shoot, if that's the case they'd be killing a lot of people. You had to do something for that man to even pull his gun out. Some cases now the cops go too far. If a man did something wrong the cops should just lock him up, the police shouldn't be killing people for no reason. Now people feel they can't trust the police. If the police start bothering you, you should be as humble as you could. What's going to happen is going to happen, but be as humble as you

can because all this outrage ain't going to get you nowhere. He's the law, it may not seem like it, but that means don't step out of line, do what you got to do and you won't have no problem. (3:605)

Participant 6 explained how he would conduct himself if he were to have contact with law enforcement. He explained:

If I encountered a policeman, I'd listen, but I would ask why am I being pulled over? I would comply with the officers' instructions. I would get my lawyer is on the phone and let him know the conversation is being recorded, and my lawyer is on the phone listening. (6:637)

Participant 1 described his interaction with law enforcement and how he has first-hand knowledge of harassment, detainment, and the lack of empathy from law enforcement when he was vindicated later. Participant 1 recounted:

I'm a victim of police harassment. At the time, I was minding my business, not doing nothing wrong, so I can relate to what some of those guys who are victims of police brutality are going through. I was walking through the neighborhood on my way to work and there were some police in the neighborhood at the time. When the cops saw me, they stopped me and put me in the car. I was held in custody with the police until they found the guy they were looking for. They told me I was the first Black guy that they saw and later I saw the guy they were looking for and he didn't look nothing like me. They didn't even apologize, I would tell any Black guy, if you meet the police, you should comply, because that police might be looking for a reason to harm you, so don't give him any reason. (1:207)

Participant 2, the most liberal of the group, offered his perspective that Black males are intimidating to law enforcement, thus giving voice to tenet two of AAMT. Participant 2 believes that there is an unsubstantiated perception held by law enforcement associated with Black male aggression that often led to unwarranted overreactions in routine situations. He explained:

I think the Black Lives Matter Movement is important, I believe that it speaks for my people. It gives us a voice about what's going on in the world as far as unfair perceptions, politics and police brutality. I don't know, I think a lot of these cops out here now days are scared, scared for no reason. They think all Black men are criminals or are up to no good. But then again, I think there's a lot of Black men out here that are more apt to take risk and go against the law. I might have a little something to say to a police officer that I thought was out of line. I don't think I would want my son to react in that way. If my son was to be confronted by the police, I would want him to respect the police officer in the aspect that if he stopped him that he stopped him for a reason and not just because he targeted him for being Black or looking suspicious. So, I guess I would teach my son to comply with the police officer and just do what he's asked to do. If he's in the wrong, then we'll sort that out later. (2:226)

The coping mechanisms of complicity and humility were reiterated throughout the interviews, which seemed to be applicable for all situations involving law enforcement. When the question of inappropriate behavior by law enforcement was raised, the participants still insisted on complying with police instructions as the best way to address the situation.

There is a distinct difference between a right and a privilege. A right is undeniable, inalienable, and permanent; a privilege is deniable, mutable and impermanent. For self-preservation purposes, it would appear these Black males exchanged their rights for privileges. Likewise, a sacrifice of pride for humility was exchanged to protect not only their lives but the lives of their male children. Consistent with tenet two of AAMT, there is a uniqueness associated with being Black and male.

Collective Summary of Themes

The collective themes that encompass the phenomenon of transitioning from poverty to economic independence revealed specific responses participants used to overcome social challenges and economic barriers. The participants employed responses that were appropriate and necessary to negotiate challenges and barriers that hindered their quests for economic independence. The seven responses derived from the themes are perseverance, diligence, humility, egalitarianism, persistence, self-reflection, and dignity. These responses were not validated by tenet one of AAMT, which is Black males are best studied utilizing an ecological systems model. The responses were not tied to any particular system, but were related to situational challenges and barriers.

As challenges arose, participants responded accordingly. When participants were faced with generational poverty, they responded with perseverance. To guard against passing generational poverty onto their children, the participants responded with diligence. When participants suffered the shame and embarrassment imposed by the welfare system, they responded with humility. When participants were confronted with gender inequities, they responded with egalitarianism. When participants endured racism and discrimination, they responded with determination and persistence. When

participants were challenged with their own dysfunction, they responded with self-reflection. And when participants were demeaned and harassed by law enforcement, they responded with dignified complicity.

For these participants, it was not the system that posed problems. Instead, it was a particular situation within the systems that posed problems. The welfare system, in and of itself, was not a problem for the participants. The problem was the apathy and disrespect encountered from actors within the system. The participants could have responded in many ways, but the best response was to ignore the apathy and disrespect to get through the process to continue the journey towards economic independence. Systems, in and of themselves, were not barriers to economic independence, but inappropriate responses to situations can be.

Theory

As stated in Chapter 1, AAMT is composed of six tenets and assumptions. The first tenet is, “African American boys' and men's lives are best analyzed using an ecological systems approach (Bush & Bush, 2013). The ecological systems theory offers a context to study relationships with individuals' communities and the wider society. According to this study, the participants did not describe any relationships with interconnected systems supporting their endeavors. The participants seemed very isolated on their journey out of poverty. Only one of the six participants made reference to a support system, and that system was Narcotic Anonymous (NA). The rest of the participants made no mention of connections to systems, except the welfare system or the criminal justice system. This study did not find it necessary to analyze Black males utilizing an ecological systems approach.

The second tenet of AAMT is, “There is something unique about being male and of African descent” (Bush & Bush, 2013, p. 10). This study did find a uniqueness about being male and Black. The study, as well as the literature, corroborated this tenet of AAMT. The participants were unanimous in their belief that they were treated differently by society, especially law enforcement, due to the fact that they are Black and male.

The third tenet of AAMT is, “There is a continuity and continuation of African culture, consciousness, and biology that influence the experiences of African American boys and men” (Bush & Bush, 2013, p. 10). This study did not find this tenet to be present according to the participants’ interviews. None of the participants discussed or described any continuity or continuation of African culture, consciousness, or biology during the interviews. Specifically, there was no mention of Africa at all at any time during any of the participant interviews.

The fourth tenet of AAMT is, “African American boys and men are resilient and resistant” (Bush & Bush, 2013, p. 10). This study did find this tenet to be present during the participant interviews. This tenet was so prevalent that it was incorporated into the themes of the phenomenon. All six participants recounted particular instances of resilient and resistant behavior. Future studies should incorporate The resiliency theory in its analysis of Black males.

The fifth tenet is, “Race and racism coupled with classism and sexism have a profound impact on every aspect of the lives of African American boys and men” (Bush & Bush, 2013, p. 11). This study did find tenets of race and racism in the experiences of the participants. However, this study found only ancillary mention or tenets of classism or sexism. The participants made no mention of classism and mentioned sexism in

reference to their maleness, which was covered in tenet two: “There is something unique about being male and of African descent” (Bush & Bush, 2013, p. 10).

The sixth tenet of AAMT is, “The focus and purpose of study and programs concerning African American boys and men is for the pursuit of social justice” (Bush & Bush, 2013, p. 12). The pursuit of social justice should be germane to any phenomenological study. The just and equitable treatment of all persons without prejudice regardless of ethnic origin, gender, possessions, race, or religion must be the goal of all studies which add to the body of research concerning the human experience. This study is no different.

Summary of Results

Through diligence and industry, this group of Black males succeeded in their quest for economic independence. All six participants understood the ultimate goal was self-sufficiency, although some found the journey to be more arduous than others. Regardless, the motivation, the ability to persevere and persist to self-sufficiency appeared to have challenges unique to this particular demographic. A belief that individual choice is the ultimate determinant of a one’s ability to escape poverty was the most germane commonality that drove this group to success.

In a country where adult Black males are twice as likely as White males to experience extended spells of unemployment, it is important to understand the magnitude of this accomplishment. Navigating a system littered with injustices, stereotypes, and micro-aggressions, these participants endured to not only to become self-sufficient for themselves but also for their families. With the changing economic landscape, more competition for a dwindling numbers of manufacturing jobs and a demand for higher

skilled technical workers the quest for economic independence can only become more difficult for this demographic.

This study focused on the transition of Black males who successfully completed a self-sufficiency program and went on to become economically independent. The primary purpose of the study was to determine tools utilized to facilitate successful transition from poverty to economic independence, as well as barriers encountered during the transition. A secondary purpose of the study was to generate information to aid present and future impoverished Black males to successfully navigate past obstacles in pursuit of economic independence. This chapter presented the results of a phenomenological analysis of the interview text.

This study revealed perceptions that were contrary to popular mainstream beliefs about impoverished Black males. Some participants reported the transition process as challenging but reasonable, while other participants described their experiences as disheartening and, at times, humiliating. Furthermore, the participants reported preconceived stereotypes of dysfunction only exacerbated the immensely difficult condition of poverty. Family and an intrinsic motivation to succeed were echoed by the participants as the driver that led them to economic independence. Participants invested time and energy negotiating barriers that are not obstructions to achievement for other demographic groups. While negotiating these obstacles, a trail of information was left to lead other Black males to economic independence.

Chapter 5 will contextualize these findings through discussion of literature relevant to the research questions and the theoretical framework. Furthermore, the last

chapter will consider how the findings will inform the field of study as it relates to supporting, assisting, and creating program to mentor this unique population.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

As outlined in Chapter 1, Black males have the highest high school drop-out rates, unemployment rates, incarceration rates, and the second highest poverty rates in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Despite this discouraging data, scholars have shown very little interest in studying successful cases from programs and/or initiatives aimed at improving opportunities for this population. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of gainfully employed Black males who had transitioned from poverty to economic independence with the help of a means-tested Family Self-Sufficiency program (FSS). The research method utilized for this study was Colaizzi's (1978) strategy of descriptive phenomenological data analysis.

The phenomenon was examined by conducting semi-structured interviews which consisted of nine questions designed to stimulate discussion on transitioning from poverty to economic independence. Through the exhaustive examination of the transcribed interviews, themes were developed and synthesized through the tenets of African American male theory (AAMT). This inquiry revealed the beliefs, thoughts, perceptions, and attitudes of this understudied population.

Chapter 4 provided a comprehensive examination of the results of the study. There were seven emergent themes discovered while examining the interview transcripts. The themes embody the perceptions, opinions, attitudes, and experiences of the Black

male's journey transitioning from poverty to economic independence. This chapter will provide a review of the research study questions, the implications of the findings, recommendations for interventions, limitations of the study, recommendations for further research on the phenomenon, and provide an overview of the dissertation conclusion.

Implication of Findings

This study of gainfully employed Black males that transitioned from poverty to economic independence was guided by one major research question and five sub questions. The research question and sub questions were the foundation for the inquiry, as well as the underpinning and support for the findings. The responses to the questions posed during the interviews provided comprehensive and detailed information utilized to generate the findings.

The major research question of the study was this: What factors facilitated the participant's ability to become economically independent from the welfare system? This question was the crux of the discussion on Black male economic independence. Through the examination of the information gained from the interviews, the factors were placed into two categories: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivations were personal choices, such as the desire to take care of one's personal needs and one's family. Extrinsic motivations were influences, such as conditions of parole, or conditions of probation, and/or restrictions and time limits imposed by the welfare system itself.

The role of intrinsic motivation in this study corroborated previous work. Long (2001) found that traditional voluntary job placement programs had greater impact on moving individuals from poverty to self-sufficiency than mandated welfare to work programs. Moreover, activities requiring personal commitment, such as education and

training programs, showed the greatest potential for welfare recipients to reach self-sufficiency (2001). When individuals engaged in voluntary activities, such as job placement programs, occupational training programs, or continuing education programs to better their economic circumstances, they did so because of intrinsic motivations and were more likely to be successful. Conversely, when individuals were mandated and threatened with punitive consequences, such as conditions of parole, conditions of probation, or welfare to work programs, they were less likely to be successful.

Intrinsic motivations found in this study, such as family and fatherhood, were supported by research literature. Stewart (1990) examined family life satisfaction among Black males and found that family closeness and general life satisfaction were positively related to family life satisfaction. Additionally, Taylor, Leashore, and Tolliver (1988) examined the provider role as perceived by Black males, which showed 53% of 771 participant's surveyed found satisfaction in providing for their families. These two studies support the finding that Black males are intrinsically motivated by family and the need to provide for their offspring. Moreover, Black males enjoyed a greater satisfaction with life in general when fulfilling the role of provider (Taylor et al., 1988). For these participants, extrinsic motivations were viewed more as a gateway to economic independence, rather than a primary factor influencing self-sufficiency.

There have been many studies done on extrinsic motivations, and evidence suggests that extrinsic motivation (reward/punishment) can adversely affect intrinsic motivation (a person's desire to complete a task by choice) (Benabou & Tirole, 2003). The participants in this study explained that they believed extrinsic factors did not facilitate their economic independence. Moreover, intrinsic motivation enables three vital

needs: the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy. These needs seem to be critical for facilitating optimum effectiveness of the natural tendencies for development; additionally, these needs enable the constructive social development and personal well-being. Optimum effectiveness, social growth and personal wellbeing facilitate an array of beneficial emotions like happiness, activeness, determinism, and enthusiasm (Basu & Bano, 2016). Conversely, one participant described court-mandated child support as a punitive extrinsic factor, which is often a barrier to economic independence for many Black males.

The first research sub question was: How did participants describe their experience in the welfare system? Participants were nearly unanimous in their descriptions of their experience in the welfare system. All but one participant stated they were treated fairly, and they felt the system was not difficult to navigate. Interestingly, the participants conveyed negative personal feelings of inadequacy or weakness about themselves, rather than negative feelings about the stigma associated the welfare system.

These findings raised questions about the literature on recipient experiences in the welfare system. Seccombe's (2007) study on misperceptions of welfare recipients reported recipients had difficulty navigating the bureaucracy of the welfare system, as well as recipients accounting instances of microaggressions and blatant discrimination. The literature also spoke to systematic institutional bias in a study by Brock (2009), which found that there was evidence for the suggestion that the greater the composition of Black persons in the state's population, the more likely the state was to adopt restrictive policies and impose harsh time limits on recipients. Moreover, those states with less restrictive welfare policies had a lower percentage of Black persons in their

populations. The literature described a cumbersome system of bureaucracy and discrimination against Black recipients, while five of the six participants in this study described the welfare system as a non-bias manageable bureaucracy.

The discrepancies between the literature and the study are qualified by the findings. The results suggest that the participants do not find the welfare system difficult to manage due in part to their willingness to comply with bureaucracies more restrictive than the welfare system. Of the six participants, three participants were formerly in the penal system, one participant spent 4 years in the U.S. Army, while another participant was a recovering drug addict and was mandated to an inpatient drug and alcohol treatment center. Only one of the six participants did not have any experience in a more restrictive bureaucracy. Interestingly, he was the only participant to express feelings of mistreatment and discrimination while engaging the welfare system.

The second research sub question was: How did participants in FSS utilize the program, if at all, to create strategies for self-sufficiency, which in turn, countered societal stereotypes? The participants utilized the FSS program to varying degrees to aid them in moving to economic independence. They determined on a personal basis what types of services were necessary for them to reach their goals, which led to an array of responses to this question. Moreover, participants came to the program from various situations, therefore requiring services to be tailored according to their individual needs and making it difficult to compose a specific list of services that were common to participants. Thus, personalization and active selection of management of services were the norm among these successful participants.

In reference to countering societal stereotypes, the participants reported that the mere act of engaging in the FSS program was viewed as counter to stereotypical behavior for Black males. The participants explained that their peers outside the program regarded their FSS participation as a positive endeavor. Furthermore, participants conveyed that they received encouragement from peer group members due to their FSS engagement.

The study corroborates the literature on the importance of a variety of services. The study by Smith, DeTardo-Bora, and Durbin (2001) determined that no specific services led to greater success rates for participants. However, the study did confirm that there was a higher probability to transition from government assistance to independent living for those FSS participants who were goal driven and motivated. Moreover, the study found, that those participants that came to the FSS program with goals and a plan for economic independence were more likely to achieve independence, further supporting the finding of intrinsic motivation as a primary factor for success. The literature did not speak to the question of countering stereotypical behaviors associated with FSS programs. Thus, this study made a contribution to the body of research by identifying that it is counter to stereotypical behaviors for Black males to be engaged in an FSS program.

The third research sub question was: What strategies did participants employ to negotiate the welfare system to gain economic independence? Participants did not employ any special strategies to negotiate the welfare system. They simply applied, provided supporting documentation, and were granted services. The fact that these participants had minimal difficulties navigating the welfare system speaks to intrinsic motivation and a willingness to conform to a structure. The participants complied with the rules and regulations and negotiated the welfare system with little resistance.

The literature in general did not speak to the question of strategies employed by recipients in negotiating the welfare system. It is important to note that the difficulty in quantifying intrinsic motivations may directly relate to an absence of studies on strategies employed by welfare recipients negotiating the system. Much of the literature surrounding welfare recipients pertained to barriers to self-sufficiency or characteristics of participants. Thus, this study opened a new area of research.

The fourth research sub question was this: What factors influenced the economic independence of participants? All six participants possessed a high school diploma and/or some college or trade school. During the interviews, all six participants expressed a belief that intrinsic motivation was the primary factor that influenced their ability to become economically independent. Additionally, participants explained intrinsic motivation coupled with a desire to overcome social or personal barriers to independence, such as drug and alcohol addictions or criminal history was germane to achieving self-sufficiency. Though all six participants faced barriers to independence, they insisted that even without the welfare system they would have been able to find employment and gain economic independence. They found welfare assistance helpful but not necessary.

The findings for this question were supported by the literature. Cheng (2010) found those welfare recipients possessing occupational skills, a high school diploma, or having some college education were more likely to achieve self-sufficiency. Not surprisingly, White recipients had a higher probability of achieving self-sufficiency than non-Whites when other attributes were equal. This study corroborated the literature; it also supported the feelings expressed by the participants about the existence of racial bias

and the belief that non-Whites must work harder than Whites to achieve the same level of success.

The fifth and final research sub question was this: What was unique about Black male experiences engaging with FSS, given that most FSS participants are women? For the participants, maleness was not unique in the FSS program. Participant 2 was the only one to describe the FSS program as a gender-neutral resource for economic independence. Furthermore, participants did not view gender as a direct barrier to self-sufficiency. Participants expressed a belief that both males and females in the program were afforded the same opportunities.

The study's findings for gender equality among Black males and Black females questioned existing literature. A study done by Cazenave (1983) surveyed, through questionnaires, 155 middle-class Black males to obtain data on their perceptions of problems affecting Black male-Black female relationships. Most respondents reported that they felt Black females received favor not afforded to Black males. Furthermore, the respondents expressed feelings that Black females contribute to the low social status imposed on Black males. The study results showed that relevant matters affecting Black male-Black female relationships varied according to socioeconomic status, political and ideological orientations (1983). Astonishingly, since this study was done, there has been very little scholarly research on Black males' perceptions of Black females.

There were four key findings garnered from the research questions. The first key finding was that intrinsic motivation grounded in personal choice was the primary factor participants utilized to gain economic independence. The second key finding was that individuals possessing certain attributes, such as occupational skills, a high school

diploma, or having some college education, were more likely to achieve economic independence. The third key finding was that participants saw racism and implicit bias as a reality of life that could impact an individual's ability to become economically independent. The fourth key finding was that participants did not view gender as a direct barrier to self-sufficiency and expressed a belief that both males and females were afforded the same opportunities. Collectively, the findings from the research questions formulated the basis for the implications from the study.

Implications from the Study

The body of research on FSS program participants is small and primarily focused on women and children (Anthony, 2005). This study is the first research focused solely on male participation in an FSS program. Moreover, this study is the first to focus on adult Black males that have exited the welfare system and have achieved economic independence. Implications associated with this study illuminate the field of research and contradict prior assertions about Black males as well as generate debate and discussion among scholars.

Originally, this study examined differing views explaining the detachment of millions of Black males from their families as well as the United States' economic mainstream (Western & Wildeman, 2009). Cuffee (2009) asserted Black male dysfunction causes and/or exacerbates poverty, while Payne (2005) considered poverty to be the primary cause of Black male dysfunction. A third consideration, Sowell (2013) asserted that personal tendencies, choices, cultural customs, and ghetto habits, rather than racism or discrimination, explained the disproportionately high number of dysfunctional Black males. These assertions portray Black males as intellectually deficient, lacking

determination, as well as morally bankrupt. The findings of this study corroborated one aspect of Sowell's (2013) assertion, while negating both Cuffee's (2009) and Payne's (2005) findings. This study found choice to be the primary factor that determined the fate of Black males (Sowell, 2013). Additionally, that choice was driven by an intrinsic motivation to take care of oneself as well as one's family, which is contrary to mainstream societal myths about Black males.

The themes section of Chapter 4 identified two major social barriers that affect Black males that do not affect other demographics. Theme 5 culminated with the assertion that discrimination is a legitimate problem which can hinder one's opportunities for employment and upward mobility. Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991) surveyed 185 Chicago-area firms and concluded that they engaged in either overt or covert discrimination against Blacks and workers in the inner city. In addition, the study found employers held negative attitudes towards Black male employees and intentionally recruited in areas outside the inner city with lower Black populations. A study done by Coleman (2003) examined employers' competitive performance rating systems and found that wages for Black males were significantly lower than other employees, even when employees were given identical performance appraisal ratings.

This study, supported by the literature and participant interviews, concluded that Black males believed that they must work harder and compromise their self-worth when engaging with others outside of their demographic group. One participant explained that he accepted an employment opportunity that was 20 miles away from his residence, and with no personal transportation, he had to catch a bus both ways because he felt he could not afford to pass on any opportunity for employment. Moreover, this study confirmed

Black males believe that they are victims of systematic discrimination. Another participant explained that he believed that supervisors sometimes discriminate against employees, but that discrimination did not justify a negative response.

The second major social barrier as discussed in theme 7 of Chapter 4 asserts that Black males believe they are viewed as threatening and dangerous, especially when interacting with law enforcement. Wilson, Hugenberg, and Rule (2017) found that society perceives Black males to be threatening and, as a result, are disproportionately targeted by law enforcement. The study found that perceptions of Black males' physical size were many times exaggerated by observers (2017). Moreover, Mustard (2001) examined 77,236 federal offenders sentenced under the Sentencing Reform Act of 1984 and determined that Blacks, males, less-educated, and low-income offenders receive significantly longer sentences. The more aforementioned attributes an offender possessed, the longer the sentence imposed. Furthermore, sentencing disparities departed from standard guidelines when related to Black male offenders (Mustard, 2001). The study also found consistent disparities in sentencing across offenses when Black males were directly compared with White males; the largest differences were for drug offenses (2001).

The societal perception of being viewed as more threatening and dangerous than other demographics and the reality of systemic discrimination leaves little room for error. Black males do not have the luxury of making poor choices. For Black males, poor choices can reduce the already limited number of opportunities that are available to them, especially for scarce resources such as jobs. The participants in this study transitioned from poverty to economic independence by choice. Moreover, they achieved economic

independence with the full understanding that racism against them is an immutable fact. This study found that despite racial bias, successful Black males believe that they are in control of their own destiny.

The last implication of this study directly correlates with Black males believing that they are in control of their own destiny. Interestingly, the participants in this study were conservative in their ideological perspective. Historically, Black Americans have been politically Democratic and ideologically liberal (Sowell, 2013). The political affiliation of these participants was Democrat, but ideologically their views were very conservative as outlined in appendix c. Participants openly identified with conservative principles, such as faith, family, low taxes, individualism, no free lunches, etc. Surprisingly, the most liberal of the group was the former military participant, which is atypical for service members, as most are politically Republican and ideologically conservative.

The findings of the study provided an understanding of the thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of Black males to determine what factors facilitated their ability to become economically independent. These Black males did not express any significant differences in thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, or perceptions as they related to one another. All of them, regardless of circumstances, expressed a belief that intrinsic drive in the context of widespread racism was the primary factor that led them to economic independence for themselves as well as their families. The implications of this study were utilized to generate recommendations for services, interventions, and programs aimed at addressing the disproportionately high number of Black males socially disenfranchised.

This study found six tenets of successful Black males that transitioned from poverty to economic independence.

1. Recognizing trouble: all participants described the need to recognize and avoid trouble, such as inappropriate associates or unlawful activities.
2. Recognizing dysfunction: all participants gave examples of counterproductive dysfunctional behaviors that posed a barrier to their success, such as lack of accountability, drug/alcohol use, or poor financial stewardship.
3. Recognizing, respecting, and submitting to authority: all participants acknowledged at some point in their life they had to submit to some form of authority: the military, the criminal justice system, or the welfare system.
4. Dressing appropriately for appropriate situations: all but the youngest participant conveyed an understanding of the necessity of appropriate dress before they entered the FSS program.
5. Choice matters: all the participants expressed a belief that personal choices dictate their success or failure.
6. Knowing what is and what is not acceptable behavior: participants explained in some cases that they believed that cultural dysfunction was acceptable behavior, such as out-of-wedlock fatherhood or unlawful activities.

These 6 tenets were derived from the interview transcripts and were noted in all study participants.

Recommendations for Interventions

The first recommendation is an urban charter school based intervention developed for impoverished adolescent Black males grounded in the aforementioned tenets. This

intervention would be funded through the charter school and would be a voluntary part of the curriculum. The adolescents would be paired with a successful adult Black male with a similar background of poverty, establishing a commonality between the mentors and the mentees. The mentors would work to create a supportive, nurturing, organic relationship that complements the educational process. Reciprocal respect should be established and maintained between mentors and mentees to validate and honor the uniqueness of Black maleness. Mentors will assist with teaching mentees accountability for their behavior, as well as academic responsibility. Additionally, mentors will assist mentees in making positive choices instead of negative choices, which will, in turn, promote self-respect. Furthermore, mentors will support mentees in building personal and professional networks with other successful Black males to assist mentees in researching potential careers.

This intervention is intended to address two findings in the study. The first is that intrinsic motivation grounded in personal choice is a primary factor utilized to gain economic independence. The second is that individuals possessing academic or trade-skill attributes are more likely to achieve economic independence. The combination of modeling behavior by the mentors will demonstrate positive choice for the mentees and encouraging academic responsibility will increase mentees' opportunity for success. The application of the tenets will give the mentees an advantage that was not afforded to the participants in this study, which are necessary tools to assist young Black males in the transition from poverty to economic independence.

A second recommendation is to develop a community based intervention to facilitate Black male positive interactions with law enforcement. The intervention should

be neighborhood based and consist of community leaders, legal representation, street level police officers, as well as senior police officials that are assigned to that neighborhood and Black males of all ages. This intervention will address multiple purposes. The first purpose will be to introduce local law enforcement to the neighborhood and people they serve and protect. The second purpose will allow Black males an opportunity to interact with law enforcement on a personal, unofficial level. The third purpose will be to conduct roundtable discussions with Black males and law enforcement officials on topics, such as how to conduct oneself when interacting with law enforcement, citizens' rights, police brutality, and an array of other topics. The fourth purpose would be to empower Black males to know their rights and exercise those rights in a lawful manor to avoid police-citizen conflict. The final and most important purpose will be to provide legal representation for Black males in the event of a police-citizen incident. This intervention is intended to create a better understanding of Black males by law enforcement and encourage reciprocal, respectful treatment.

The final recommendation is for Action for a Better Community's FSS Program. The FSS is currently utilizing a successful model of providing services relevant to participant needs. The FSS program is a year-round, 5 days-per-week program that runs from 9:00 A.M. - 3:00 P.M. At present, the FSS program provides a 3 week job readiness session, which concentrates on eliminating employment barriers, such as resume writing, acquisition of a driver's license, as well as counseling for other support services. The FSS program provides an array of services, from General Education Diploma (GED) preparation to assistance with professional certifications.

According to the FSS program director, participants are tracked for 90 days after they successfully complete the program for reporting purposes. Beyond the 90-day period, the FSS program is neither required to track nor report on former participants. This study found two recommendations that could better serve the participants. The first recommendation is to track the participants for a longer period than 90 days. The successful participants could be a networking tool for the FSS program by referring other successful participants for available employment opportunities within the organizations of the successful former participants.

As a second recommendation, ABC's FSS program would be to provide mentorship to current participants, as well as former participants, in the form of support groups. Support groups would provide networking opportunities as well provide encouragement to struggling current and former participants. This intervention would also address the issue of isolation. Though the participants spoke briefly on the topic of isolation, they did not mention any type of support systems for Black males transitioning out of poverty. The only support systems that were mentioned were mandatory, such as parole, probation, mandated FSS, or mandated Department of Social Services (DSS). There were no voluntary support systems specifically for Black male transitioning out of poverty.

The findings of the study did not indicate Black males lack the ability to be responsible productive members of society. In fact, the study found the contrary. When Black males are empowered with the understanding that their choices dictate their future, they adapt to circumstances and excel. While the study did reveal personal choice and intrinsic motivation were germane to achieving economic independence, it did not reveal

why some Black males are able to rise from poverty, while others do not. Additional inquiry should be done to expand the body of knowledge in this area and remove the inconclusiveness.

Limitations of the Study

The qualitative study to explore the lived experiences of Black males that transitioned from poverty to economic independence was not without limitations. The limitation of the study was the number of participants interviewed for the research. Due to the small number of gainfully employed Black male former FSS participants that transitioned from poverty to economic independence, the sample size was limited. Given that sample size in phenomenological research is generally small, there is a potential impact in inferring participant experiences are typical, yet the study reached saturation. Though sample size in phenomenological qualitative research is less relevant, further larger studies are recommended to confirm and generalize these results. In so much as the findings of this research study informed discussions concerning Black males, there remains information yet to be discovered. Therefore, further research is recommended to fully comprehend the complexities of this topic.

Recommendations for Further Research

Further research to explore the lived experiences of gainfully employed Black males that transitioned from poverty to economic independence is recommended. The purpose of the future study will be to acquire more information pertaining to the motivations and methods utilized by this unique population to achieve economic independence. Additional research would generate data to inform governmental and

private entities seeking to assist Black males in achieving economic independence, as well as expanding the body of scholarly literature on this topic.

Qualitative and quantitative research studies are recommended for further research of this topic. The qualitative and quantitative study recommended would add to the body of knowledge regarding the transition from poverty to economic independence. Additionally, further study could validate or negate the belief that Black males have a more difficult journey out of poverty than other races in similar socioeconomic situations. In the event there is no significant difference in socioeconomic status and no significant difference in barriers encountered or actions taken to overcome those barriers, the inference of bias could be put to rest. Conversely, if the results show significant differences in socioeconomic status or barriers encountered by any particular group, government and social service organizations would have cause to evaluate the ways in which that particular group is served. Additionally, studies would support the need to invest in initiatives and/or programs targeted specifically to address any discrimination faced by the particular group.

Conclusion

Black males have the highest unemployment rates, mortality rates, and incarceration rates of all racial and ethnic groups in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The data is clear, Black males are facing both an economic and social crisis. These challenges faced by Black males provoke two questions: Why are Black males disenfranchised, and what can Black males do to help themselves? The answer to the first question is this: Black males must be resilient and resistant to implicit bias and racism. The answer to the second question is less obvious and more complicated.

The participants in this study expressed a belief that racism is a reality. Yet, they did not allow it to deter them from their ultimate goal of economic independence for themselves as well as their families. It may seem disheartening to accept racism and discrimination as a part of everyday life, but it would be unwise to ignore the facts. The participants acknowledged racism and discrimination, but more importantly they acknowledged personal responsibility and accountability, as well as the role they play in their own success. The participants in the study countered the stereotypical, intellectually deficient, morally bankrupt perception of Black males that is often associated with poverty. Moreover, these Black males are no different from any other person experiencing financial hardships.

Poverty and economic hardships are common to all races and ethnicities. Though Black males face different challenges than other demographics, the reality is this is a Black male problem and no one else is going to fix it for them. The simple fact is that Black males cannot wait for society to save them; they must save themselves. American society has not solved the problem of racism in the last 50 years since the Civil Rights Movement, and it does not look like it will be solved in the next 50 years.

The Civil Rights Movement was founded on the principles of non-violent civil disobedience, with the ultimate goal of Black Americans being granted the same rights as any other citizens of this country. For Black males to be accepted as full citizens, they must utilize the same tactics as the civil rights activist of the 1960s: the lawful pursuit of justice. Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Thurgood Marshall all believed in civil rights through legal means. Black males must comply with the laws of the land and

when their rights are violated they must respond in a lawful manner that holds accountable those persons responsible for the violation.

The answer to the second question is provocative and controversial. For Black males to have better opportunity for social and economic success in a system that is implicitly biased, they must refrain from making poor choices. Despite first-hand knowledge of institutional racism, some Black males persist in making poor choices. Poor choices in school create a lack of opportunity for the future. Poor choices in relationships create unplanned parental obligations. The poor choice to engage in criminal activity leads to incarceration and limited employment opportunities upon release. The price of poor choices for Black males is far reaching and long lasting. In short, dysfunctional behavior perpetuates poverty. For Black males, implicit bias and discrimination can no longer be an excuse to continue in counterproductive activities that cause and/or exacerbate economic and social hardships.

Racism is a variable that Black males cannot control. The variable that Black males can control is choice: the choice to attend school regularly and work diligently to make excellent grades; the choice to refrain or abstain from unprotected sex until financially able to accept the responsibility of parental obligations; the choice to avoid criminal activity and disassociate with persons that do engage in criminal activity the choice to abstain from drugs, alcohol, and gambling; the choice to be a good financial steward; the choice to go to work on time, every day, and complete all tasks in a professional manner; and, most importantly, the choice to think and reflect before acting. To some, this may seem unreasonable or unfair, but for Black males to be successful they must work harder and be better citizens, as demonstrated by the participants in this study.

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Appendix A

Guiding Individual Interview Questions for Participants

1. Please describe your experience in the Welfare system?
2. What strategies did you employ to negotiate the welfare system, which helped you gain economically independence?
3. Please describe your experience in the FSS program?
4. Please tell me about any aspects of the FSS program, that counter societal stereotypes, i.e. (Black dysfunction, etc.)?
5. What, if any, FSS program factors influenced your economic independence?
6. What, if any personal, i.e. (family, religious, support group, etc.) factors influenced your economic independence?
7. Was there anything unique about your experiences engaging with FSS, given that most participants are women?
8. Do you feel your economic independence is due to extrinsic or intrinsic factors, i.e. (social programs or personal motivation)?
9. There are two philosophical perspectives explaining Black males' educational, economic and social deficiencies, one view is, Black male deficits come from Liberal social programs, ghetto culture, victim mentality and, an unwillingness to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. The opposing view is the crisis among Black males is caused by the loss of jobs, the relocation of populations to the suburbs, and a lack of government initiatives aimed at helping people in poverty, what are your thoughts?

Appendix B

Definitions of Terms

The following is a list of key terms that were used throughout the study:

Black Males: an American male of African or Afro-Caribbean decent living in the United States.

Poverty: general scarcity, the state of one who lacks a certain amount of material possessions or money. It is a multifaceted and includes social, economic, and political elements.

Conservative Right: refers to conservatives Republicans who favor a small limited government with little power and little control over the people, with most of the power residing within the local state governments. For the purpose of this study, Conservative Right referred to persons that believe Black culture and Black Male dysfunction cause not only problems in the Black Community but also cause other social and economic problems in the United States.

Liberal Left: refers to liberals Democrats who favor a large powerful federal government with power and control over the people, with limited power residing within the local state governments, representing minorities and the common people. For the purpose of this study, Liberal Left referred to persons who believe institutional racism, discrimination and the lack of Governmental intervention causes problems in the Black Community such as poverty, low graduation rates, and high incarceration rates.

Criminalization: the act of making something criminal, or making it against the law, stigmatizing a race or gender, that their very existence is criminal.

Welfare: government-provided support for those unable to support themselves. The best known of which are Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) renamed Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) in 1996 and the food stamps program renamed Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

War on Poverty: the unofficial name for legislation first introduced by United States President Lyndon B. Johnson during his State of the Union address on January 8, 1964.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996

(PRWORA): The United States federal law considered to be a major welfare reform.

Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC): the federal anti-poverty tax credit that is designed to supplement the earnings of low income workers by reducing or eliminating their taxes.

The EITC is administered by the Internal Revenue Service.

The Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program (TANF): one of the United States of America's federal assistance programs. It began on July 1, 1997, and succeeded the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, providing cash assistance to needy American families with dependent children.

Appendix C

Profiles of FSS Study Participants

*FSS Identity

Category	Study Participants					
	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6
Age	49	43	56	46	28	45
Occupation	Auto Mechanic	Water Technician	Home Health Caretaker	Security Guard	Crew Leader	Medical Transportation Driver
Household	Single	Single	Married	Single	Married	Single
Dependents	1 Male	1 Male	1 Male 1 Female	1 Female	2 Females	2 males 2 Females
Political Identification	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat	Independent	Democrat	Democrat
Political Ideology	Conservative	Conservative	Conservative	Conservative	Conservative	Conservative