

Chapter 20

African Americans and Planned Resilience: In Search of Ordinary Magic

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study is to examine secondary school factors that predict the performance and persistence of African American students at postsecondary institutions. Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), used as the theoretical framework of this study, suggests that intentions, driven by attitudes and beliefs, can predict behavior. This theory was adapted to include resilience, a theory that focuses on student assets, rather than deficits. This theory focuses on how children overcome risk factors like poverty and poor schools to reach agreed upon measures of success.

BACKGROUND

Often in the education research literature, African American students are referred to as being at-risk. However, the notion of being at-risk in the medical literature or the environmental

toxicology literature often differs from what one finds in the social sciences. For example, a toxic neighborhood that places its residents at-risk of higher cancer rates does not discriminate because the residents are predominately African American or White. Furthermore, once discovered, one remedies the problem of a toxic neighborhood by getting away from it or cleaning it up. However,

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in education, the very places where one would expect safety—schools and postsecondary institutions—the literature repeatedly names as the places where African American students fail and where they are at risk.

Despite many decades of reforms, efforts to improve educational institutions, including the highly touted No Child Left Behind Act, the gap between African American and White students' academic performance still remains wide. This lag is most attributed to African the performance and behavior of American males. In fact, African American males receive lower grades and test scores, are placed in special education classes disproportionately, are disciplined, suspended, expelled more often, are placed in lower academic tracks, dropout more often, and graduate from high school and college at lower rates (Anyon, 1997). They make up about 9% of the school population, but are 60% of all incarcerated youth (Smith, 2005). Many factors appear to be related to the problems of these youth, including family background factors (e.g., socio-economic status (SES), parental involvement), and student factors (e.g., prior achievement, educational attitudes, oppositional cultural framework, peer influence, and tracking), and school factors (school racial composition, and school funding) (Mickelson, 2006).

However, recently the gap has started to close, largely due to the performance of African American girls and women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). While the educational literature has obsessed over African American male pathology, a small but growing trend in the literature is beginning to recognize steady gains made by African American women. Since 1994, African American women's college graduation rate has improved from 36% in 1990 to 46% in 2005 (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2006). Since the mid-1970s, the rate of growth in the overall percentage of African American women college graduates is double that of African American men (National Center for Education

Statistics, 2007). Reynolds and Burge (2008) argue that these changes are the result of the rise of positive expectations in high school girls. These expectations appear to be driven by parental encouragement and greater participation in a more rigorous high school curriculum. Two factors are certain: African American women come from the same family structures, have similar student factors, and identical schools factors as do African American males. Clearly, amid the deficit-oriented pathology, there is great resilience.

In the research literature, the search for correlates to academic success increasingly focuses on psychology, social, and environmental factors (Powell & Arriola, 2003). For example, Wentzel (1989) reported a positive relationship between motivation to succeed and effort to perform well. As the logic goes, motivation springs from goal formation, and the content of the goal (e.g., socially oriented goals or academic oriented goals) is related to outcomes (Wentzel, 2000). In other words, academically oriented goals lead to academically oriented motivation that, in turn leads to achievement.

However, the logic that leads to academic success may not be as linear as one might first think. The literature suggests that powerful social identity beliefs can also affect performance. As conceived by Steele and Aronson (1995), stereotype threat may occur when people feel that their performance in a particular situation may confirm a negative stereotype about a relevant group that they identify. For instance, the negative stereotype that African Americans cannot perform as well as Whites on tasks would threaten the performance of African American students in a math testing situation (Brown & Josephs, 1999). Steele, Spencer, and Aronson (2002), found a self-evaluative threat present in high-stakes performance situations, where anxiety about confirming a negative stereotype in other's eyes produces behavior that confirms the stereotype. This phenomenon seems present across various groups, including ethnic groups and gender. This extra mental pressure or

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