

Perceptions of Poverty and Community Among Middle Class African-Americans  
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***Abstract:*** *The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the extent to which middle-class Black people adhere to the same meta-narrative that is currently used to tell the story of African-Americans. Using a qualitative approach, the author interviewed five middle-class African-Americans to answer the question: How do middle-class Blacks understand themselves, poor Black people, and the Black community? The experiences and beliefs of the participants indicate that the current African-American narrative of victimization needs to be reconceptualized and expanded to include current and variable stories that represent the various class structures of Black people.*

### **Introduction**

Charles Johnson (2008) penned an article that caused a commotion among African-American academics. He claimed, in light of all of the progress of Black people since the civil Rights Movement, it is time for African-Americans to change the Black meta-narrative of victimization. According to Johnson, a meta-narrative is the story that a large group tells about themselves; upon which they base their lives, actions, and judgment. It must also possess “the qualities of coherence, consistency, and completeness” in its application toward African-Americans (p 32). Johnson claimed Black people have embraced a narrative of victimization and grievance that served them well over the past few decades, based upon their history of slavery, injustice, and inequality.

However, forty years after the civil rights era, hundreds of thousands of African-Americans have gained access to some of the most prestigious positions in society. While there are still many problems that are prevalent among Black Americans, Johnson argues the majority of the problems are more related to class than to race (2008). He suggests African-Americans should create a new narrative that should have new stories, ideas, and language that is “not based on the past but on the dangerous, exciting and unexplored present” (p. 42). It is Johnson’s concept for a new Black narrative that sparked my curiosity for this study. The perspectives of the participants in this study reflect in a small way, the evolution and the multiplicity of the next generation of Black Americans.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which middle class African-Americans adhere to the same Black meta-narrative that is currently used to tell the story of Black people. The main question driving the study was: How do middle class Blacks understand themselves, poor Black people, and the Black community? More specifically: (1) How do middle class Black Americans characterize themselves and poor Black Americans? (2) How do they perceive the Black community? (3) How do they position themselves within the Black community? In this paper, I will use the words “Black” and “African-American” synonymously. Additionally, I will also use “poverty” and “poor” interchangeably. While the study specifically refers to issues of poverty, the participants and I have used these words with the same manner. In this study about the perceptions of poverty and community among middle class Black people, I posit the current African-American meta-narrative does not allow the experiences of the middle class.

### **Middle Class Blacks and the Black Community**

The definition of middle class is debatable among scholars and economists. According to the U.S. census report “Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States”, almost sixty-six percent African-Americans made an annual income between the ranges of \$15,000 and \$99,999. Approximately 9.8% of the Black population made over \$100,000. Depending on the definition of poverty, almost three-quarters of the population live above the poverty line. While some may define being middle class purely on the basis of income, others would define it as having particular values and attitudes in addition to education and income. According to Ginwright, there are two distinctions that are common among middle class Black people. First, their jobs, earnings, and education differ from that of Black manual laborers. Secondly, their middle class classification allows for mobility within the socioeconomic scale (2002, p.547).

There is evidence the Black middle class views toward community seem to be evolving. As they have moved into a higher socioeconomic status, some African-Americans choose to separate themselves from poorer Blacks. In a neighborhood study, Gregory (1992) noted African-Americans that lived in the same area divided over class related issues. The middle class Blacks formed an alliance to meet their needs while dismissing the wants other the working class blacks in the area. They were more focused in advancing their individual interests than in advancing the agenda of the Black community.

A study by Gay (2004) gave evidence the quality of housing and neighborhoods in which blacks live play an important role in determining the significance of race in an individual’s life. In other words, “the likelihood of believing that one’s fate is closely linked to the fate of blacks as a group declines, and pessimism about the severity of anti-black discrimination recedes” (p.559). Additionally, her study demonstrated the higher the education level achieved by African-Americans, the more pessimistic they are about racism. However, their beliefs about racism do not make them feel as though they are in the same category of lower class blacks. This is because blacks have a strong history of economic oppression and therefore link material deprivation with racism (Gay, 2004).

Furthermore, Tripp (1987) recorded how one’s social class leads to class mobilization. He stated, as African-Americans move up the social economic ladder, their views and ideologies about helping poor Blacks change (as cited in Ginwright, 2002). For example, the Black middle class would volunteer in after school programs or Black civic organizations that did not necessarily address Black poverty. Likewise, having cultural capital has helped middle class African-Americans to negotiate the system to benefit their community. Ultimately, these varying studies underscore the notion middle class African-Americans possess different outlooks, perceptions and identities concerning themselves which in many ways dramatically separates them from their Black counterparts in other socioeconomic groups. These differences hinder their experiences from being included in the Black Meta-narrative of victimization.

### **Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is interpretive. According to Geertz (1973), interpretive research essentially focuses on meaning instead of behavior and strives to comprehend social members' explanation of a situation or condition. Interpretive theories help us to understand the social constructions created by society reflecting the complexity of both the culture and the logic of social construction. The very nature of interpretivism is the “cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete” and “essentially contestable” (Geertz, 1973). In this study, I

attempted to make sense of the participants' comments in as I took into consideration their backgrounds and experiences.

### **Methodology**

I chose to use a basic qualitative design to conduct the study because it is a very useful method for gaining insight on the perspectives of my participants. Thematic analysis was employed as a means of deciphering the overarching ideas that connect the narratives. I chose these five people not only because they fit the criteria, but also because they were similar in age (28-32) and had different backgrounds. According to Reissman (2008), the sampling for a narrative analysis should be "purposeful" because the objective of the study is not to take a broad view of middle class Black Americans, but to "interpret the meaning and function" of narratives in the discussions (p. 60).

I interviewed five people for this case study: two friends, their spouses and an acquaintance. I interviewed them using a semi-open set of questions. The interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours and were handwritten and then analyzed for emerging themes. For the purpose of this study, I identified my interviewees as middle-class if they were educated (had a bachelor's degree or higher), lived in above average housing in a predominately White suburb, and/or held a profession. I interviewed each person in his or her home. For the sake of the anonymity, I used pseudonyms in this paper each participant selected for his or herself.

### **Findings**

Using thematic analysis, there were some subjects that emerged in every participant's interview. Although everyone more or less acknowledged the government should play a role in bringing African-Americans out of poverty, the over-arching theme was the issue of personal responsibility and productivity. Each participant stated personal responsibility and hard work was necessary to getting out of poverty.

#### **How Do Middle Class Blacks Characterize Poor Blacks?**

The participants used both economic terms and descriptive characteristics to illustrate the differences between middle class and poor Blacks. Some were able to quickly describe the attributes associated with the poor. When Dakota Rose thought about poor Blacks, the first things that came to mind were "substandard housing, free or reduced lunch, blue collars, single parent, welfare, not the best schools and low test scores". Some of the other characteristics were "ghetto", "loud", and irresponsible.

Interestingly, those who said they could not attach any characteristics of a particular socioeconomic level to a person's race made statements that suggested otherwise. According to Richard and Ray, there was no race distinction in poverty. True to his profession as a banker, Ray described the poor as "anyone who lives below the poverty line" and then proceeded to categorize the middle class into three groups (working class, middle-class, and upper middle-class) according to their income level. Then he claimed he believed being poor was a "state of mind". When asked about how to break the cycle of poverty, Ray said poor African-Americans need to:

Get rid of the sense of entitlement and the idea of having to come together to accomplish stuff and decide to work hard and take care of "me"... then, we wouldn't have these

issues. They have to have the mindset to assimilate and understand that no one will take care of me; I've got to take care of myself.

In a different vein, Richard believed there were only a few differences between the poor and the middle-class because someone who is middle-class could lose their job and instantly become poor. Richard, who made no race distinction made this statement about poor Blacks:

I perceived a few characteristics of the poor. Number one, they have no value of education. Number two, there is a lack of personal responsibility...they blame the white man or their circumstances. Many of them have a strong work ethic. Another thing is the decisions they make. It is mostly prevalent in the lower socioeconomic groups. Like having premarital sex and having babies out of wedlock and more drug use. All classes have the same problems but you see it more in the poor areas. Also, parents don't enforce education and the teachers don't believe in the kids. The ethnic poor see education and personal responsibility as traits for whites. If you have these traits then, you are white or you want to be white."

### **How Do Middle Class Blacks Characterize Themselves?**

When asked about the difference between the struggles of poor and middle-class Blacks, the main difference was middle class Blacks strive for upward mobility and a positive racial identity development while poor Blacks struggled simply to survive. In each of their discussions, the participants' made value statements about how they characterized the middle class in light of poor Black stereotypes.

Dakota Rose: "I don't want to stereotype or generalize but they [middle class Blacks] seem to want the best for their kids...." "...The middle class struggles to raise their credit score, advance their career and fight racial barriers at work. They care about their kids and education, like, where to send their kids to college."

Ray: "Hip-hop has helped to give such a strong image of the "nigga" that one can't help but to see the difference between him and me. White folks see people like me and they think, "Wow, he's educated and talks well, he takes care of his family and since he doesn't have any gold teeth or braids in his head...he must be alright!"

Marie: "The less fortunate are more consumed with material things, possessions, fashion and style. The middle class cares about developing family, education and promoting themselves in preparation for the future; they have more goals and ambitions instead of material day-to-day things. The middle class wants to build a foundation for the future. The poor have kids, teach them nothing and they get stuck in the negative cycle of life, negative achievement, no goals."

### **How Do Middle Class Blacks Perceive the Black Community?**

In this study, none of the participants agreed upon the definition of the Black community. While Dakota Rose and Richard claimed all African-Americans belonged to the Black community, John stated there were multiple communities within a larger community that were separated by class lines. On the contrary, Marie thought it was only comprised of "less fortunate Black folk" even more contrary was Richard's belief the Black community did not exist. He emphasized his point by stating. "To say there is [a Black community], is to say that we're all

sheep, we all think alike and have the same values... We are not all similar. You assimilate into the environment you're in, which is very diverse. There is just as much a Black community as there is a white community."

### **How Do Middle Class Blacks Position Themselves within the Black Community?**

The term "giving back to the community" is a common phrase used among African-Americans. This phrase has multiple meanings, as evidenced by the responses of the participants, but in general, it refers to helping other Blacks when one becomes successful. When asked what it means to "give back" the answers ranged from giving money to Black charities, to supporting Black businesses, to hiring Black employees. Although all of the participants stated giving back was a good and important thing to do, none of them were actively involved in the "Black community" as they understood the phrase. Additionally, none of them felt obligated to contribute to the welfare of other African-Americans.

Both Ray and Richard, although growing up poor, felt no responsibility towards other Black people. While they both agreed it is a good gesture, neither of them thought it was their duty to support the Black community, Ray stated, "...I don't owe them nothing. My grandfather worked, my dad worked hard, I work hard and my kids will be better than me." Perhaps Ray and Richard felt less of an obligation because they grew up with great exposure to poor Black people. If they have a negative image of Black people, it is from their experiences and is confirmed by the media. Neither of them believed help from external resources such as government programs, would help the poor achieve upward economic mobility. Ray and Richards' views about personal responsibility seemed to be linked to their personal sense of duty to the Black community. However, Dakota Rose felt more of a link to the Black community because she grew up in a predominately White community and felt disconnected from her race. In contradiction to Dakota Rose, Marie felt less of a connection for the same reasons.

Perhaps the differences in the sense of obligation depend on how one defines the Black community and what it means to "give back". All of them recognized that all African-Americans comprise the "Black community". However, Richard stated this is only a perception because it assumes homogeneity; in reality, there is no Black community. By this statement, he meant African-Americans are too heterogeneous to have the same beliefs, goals, and value systems. Therefore, no one can truly represent the entire Black community. This may be another explanation why Richard does not feel a duty to support Black people specifically, but society as a whole. "When I served in the Army, it was for my country, not just Black Americans. When I serve on my school board it's for every child not just the Black ones. I serve my community as a whole." Richard as well as some of the other participants preferred to view themselves as individuals or simply as a member of the human race than seeing themselves as primarily Black.

### **Conclusion**

Many people may read these participants' comments and be offended by their interpretation of poor African-Americans and the Black community. Many people will think the interviewees denied their association with the Black community and therefore discarded their own Blackness. Many people will wholeheartedly agree their perceptions. Many people will agree on some points but not on others. Regardless of whether these views are right or wrong or true or false, I would argue based upon the findings (and perhaps the reactions to them), these African-Americans demonstrate a new Black narrative is necessary. The old narrative of total victimization and grievance no longer has coherence and saliency in light of the economic

positions of some middle class Blacks. It is difficult to accept a narrative of victimization when one sits in the seat of privilege. The data suggests there are different perspectives and worldviews based on one's social class within a racial group. While there may be some shared values and experiences within the Black middle-class, there is a great variation of differences.

I am not suggesting middle class Black Americans have nothing in common with other African-Americans. However, African-American scholars need to develop a new narrative that is inclusive and reflects the diversity of the Black population. Certainly racism, victimization and injustice continue to have a place in the narrative and are still relevant in African-American history. Indeed, African-Americans still face institutionalized racism and other difficulties. A new narrative should consist of having divergent experiences, values, and attitudes that originated from a shared history. Redefining the Black narrative also brings into question the definition of Blackness. Along with an understanding that the culture is changing, there should come an understanding that what is considered "Black" is also evolving. As more Blacks move up the social ladder, they will adopt more mainstream views and lean more towards individualism as illustrated in the comments of the people in this study.

### **Implications for Further Study**

This study has many implications for adult educators. First, educators need to take into account the class of their African-American students. As indicated by these participants, it would be inaccurate to assume middle-class Black Americans all share of the same interests and beliefs as lower class Blacks. I suggest adult educators with middle class Black students should incorporate the study of power and hegemony in the classroom to cause them to question the influences of their beliefs and the power of privilege. Additionally, adult educators should encourage Black students to share their narratives and challenge them to incorporate them into a new Black Meta narrative. As adult educators, we have an obligation to pose critical and thought-provoking questions that will cause our students to examine how social inequalities impact their life experiences in communities, relationships, and workplaces.

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